History of the Novel, Theory of the Novel

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There are many ways of talking about the theory of the novel, and mine will consist in posing three questions: Why are novels in prose? Why are they so often stories of adventures? Why was there a European but not a Chinese rise of the novel in the course of the eighteenth century? Disparate as they may sound, the questions have a common source in the guiding idea of the collection *The Novel*: "to make the literary field longer, larger, and deeper"—historically longer, geographically larger, and morphologically deeper than those few classics of nineteenth-century Western European "realism" that have dominated the recent theory of the novel (and my own work). What the questions have in common, then, is that they all point to processes that loom large in the history of the novel but not in its theory. Here I reflect on this discrepancy and suggest a few possible alternatives.

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Prose. Nowadays so ubiquitous in novels that we tend to forget that it wasn't inevitable: ancient novels were certainly in prose, but the *Satyricon*, for instance, has many long passages in verse; the *Tale of Genji* has even more (and they are crucial, as hundreds of *tanka* poems stylize sadness and longing throughout the story); French medieval romances had a prodigious early peak in verse with Chrétien de Troyes; half of the old *Arcadia* is eclogues; and Chinese classic novels use poetry in a variety of ways. Why did prose eventually prevail so thoroughly, then, and what did this mean for the form of the novel?

   Let me begin from the opposite side, with verse. Verse, *versus*: there is a pattern that turns around and comes back; there is a symmetry, and symmetry always suggests permanence; that's why monuments are symmetrical. But prose is not symmetrical, and this immediately creates a sense of impermanence and irreversibility: prose, *pro-vorsa*: forward looking or front facing, as in the Roman *Dea Provorsa*, goddess of easy childbirth. The text has an orientation, it leans forward, its meaning "depends on what lies ahead (the end of a sentence; the next event in the plot)," as Michal Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea have put it (245). "The knight was defending himself *so bravely that his assailers could not prevail*"; "Let's withdraw a little, *so that they will not recognize me*"; "I don't know that knight, but he is *so brave that I would gladly give him my love*." I found these passages in a half page of the prose *Lancelot*. I found them easily, because consecutive and final constructions, where meaning depends so much on what lies ahead that a sentence literally falls

into the following one—these forward-looking arrangements are everywhere in prose and allow it its typical acceleration of narrative rhythm. And it's not that verse ignores the consecutive nexus while prose is nothing *but* that, of course; these are just their "lines of least resistance," to use Roman Jakobson's metaphor; it is not a matter of essence, but of relative frequency—but style is always a matter of relative frequency, and consecutiveness is a good starting point for a stylistics of prose.

But there is a second possible starting point, which leads not toward narrativity but toward complexity. It's a point often made by studies of *dérimage*, the thirteenth-century prosification of courtly romances that was one of the great moments of decision, so to speak, between verse and prose, and where one thing that kept happening, in the transfer from one into the other, was that the number of subordinate clauses increased (cf. Godzich and Kittay 34). Which makes sense: a line of verse can to a certain extent stand alone, so it encourages independent clauses; prose is continuous, it's more of a construction. I don't think it's an accident that the myth of "inspiration" is so seldom evoked for prose; inspiration is too instantaneous to make sense there, too much like a gift. Prose is not a gift; it's work: "productivity of the spirit," Lukács called it in *Theory of the Novel*, and it's the right expression: hypotaxis is not only laborious—it requires foresight, memory, adequation of means to ends—but truly productive: the outcome is usually more than the sum of its parts because subordination establishes a hierarchy among clauses, meaning becomes articulated, aspects emerge that didn't exist before. That's how complexity comes into being.

The acceleration of narrativity, the construction of complexity: both real and totally at odds with each other. What did prose mean for the novel? It allowed it to play on two completely different tables—popular and cultivated—and this made it a uniquely adaptable and successful form. But it also made it an extremely *polarized* form. The theory of the novel should have greater morphological depth, I said earlier, but depth is an understatement: what we have here are stylistic extremes that in the course of two thousand years drift farther and farther away from each other and actually turn against each other: the style of complexity, with its hypothetical, concessive, and conditional clauses, making forward-looking narrative seem hopelessly simpleminded and plebeian; and popular forms, for their part, mutilating complexity wherever they find it—paragraph, sentence, syntax, dialogue, everywhere.

A form divided between narrativity and complexity, with narrativity dominating its history and complexity its theory. And I understand why that would happen: why someone would rather study sentence structure in *The Ambassadors* than in its contemporary *Dashing Diamond Dick*. The problem is not the value judgment, it's that when a value judgment becomes the basis for concepts, it doesn't determine just what is valued or not but what is *thinkable* or not. In this case, what becomes unthinkable is, first, the vast majority of the novelistic field and, second, its very shape: polarization disappears if you look only at one of the extremes, whereas it shouldn't, because it's the sign of how the novel came to terms with social inequality and duplicated it into cultural inequality. A theory of the novel should account for this. But to do so, we need a new starting point. "Veblen explains culture in

terms of kitsch, not vice-versa," writes Theodor Adorno in *Prisms*, disapprovingly; but it's such a tempting idea (79). Taking the style of dime novels as the basic object of study and explaining Henry James's as an unlikely by-product: that's how a theory of prose should proceed because that's how *history* has proceeded. Not the other way around.

Looking at prose style from below: with digital databases, this is now easy to imagine: a few years, and we'll be able to search just about all novels that have ever been published and look for patterns among billions of sentences. Personally, I am fascinated by this encounter of the formal and the quantitative. Let me give an example: we all analyze stylistic structures—free indirect style, stream of consciousness, melodramatic excess, whatever. But it's striking how little we actually know about the genesis of these forms. Once they're there, we know what to do; but how did they get there in the first place? How does what Michel Vovelle calls the "confused thought" of *mentalité*, which is the substratum for almost all that happens in a culture, how does messiness crystallize into the elegance of free indirect style? Concretely: what are the steps? No one really knows. By sifting through thousands of variations and permutations and approximations, a quantitative stylistics of the digital archive may find some answers. It will be difficult, no doubt, because one cannot work with large archives in the same way as one works with texts: texts are designed to "speak" to us, so, provided we know how to listen, they always end up telling us something; but archives are *not* messages that were meant to address us, so they say absolutely nothing until one asks the right question. We literary scholars are not good at that; we are trained to listen, not to ask questions. In some ways, asking questions is the very opposite of listening; it turns criticism into an experiment of sorts: "questions put to nature" is how experiments are often described, and what I'm imagining here are questions put to culture. Difficult, but too interesting not to give it a try. All this lies in the future.

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My second point lies in the past. Novels are long; or rather, they span a very wide range of lengths—from the 20,000 words of *Daphnis and Chloe* to the 40,000 of Chrétien, 100,000 of Austen, 400,000 of *Don Quixote*, and over 800,000 of *The Story of the Stone*—and one day it will be interesting to analyze the consequences of this spectrum. But for now let's just accept the simple notion that they are long. The question is: how did they get to be that way? There are of course several answers, but if I had to choose a single mechanism I would say: adventures. Adventures expand novels by opening them to the world: a call for help comes—the knight goes. Usually without asking questions, which is typical of adventure; the unknown is not a threat here, it's an opportunity, or more precisely: there is no longer any distinction between threats and opportunities. "Who leaves the dangerous path for the safe," says Galessin, one of the knights of the Round Table, "is not a knight, is a merchant." True, capital doesn't like danger for its own sake, but a knight does. He has to: he can't accumulate glory, but must renew it all the time, so he needs this perpetual motion machine of adventure—perpetual, especially when a border is in sight: across the bridge, into the forest, up the mountain, through the castle gate,

at sea. Adventures make novels long because they make them wide; they are the great explorers of the fictional world: battlefields, oceans, castles, sewers, prairies, islands, slums, jungles, galaxies. Practically all great popular chronotopes have arisen when the adventure plot has moved into a new geography and activated its narrative potential. Just as prose multiplies styles, then, adventure multiplies stories, and forward-looking prose is perfect for adventure, syntax and plot moving in unison. I'm not sure there is a main branch in the family of forms we call the novel, but if there is, then it's this: we'd still recognize the history of the novel without modernism, or even without realism, but without adventures in prose, no.

Here, too, the novelistic field is profoundly polarized between adventures and the everyday; and here, too, the theory of the novel has shown very little interest for the popular side of the field. But rather than repeating that aspect of the argument, I will turn instead to the odd *narrowness* that—in spite of all its plasticity—seems typical of adventure. A social narrowness, fundamentally. The whole idea had been "a creation of the petty nobility of penniless knights" for whom "'*aventure*' was a way to survive—and possibly to marry an heiress," writes Erich Köhler, who was the great sociologist of this convention ("Sistema" 329–30; my translation). But if knights needed adventures, for other social classes the notion remained opaque. "I am, as you see, a knight seeking what I cannot find," says Calogrenant to a peasant at the beginning of *Yvain*. "'And what do you want to find?' 'Adventure, to test my courage and my strength. Now I pray and beseech you to advise me, if you know, of any adventure or wonder.' 'I know nothing of adventure, nor have I ever heard about it'" (ll. 356–67). What a reply; only a few years earlier, in the *chanson de geste*, the nature of knightly action was clear to everybody, but not any more. Chivalric ethos has become "absolute . . . both in its ideal realization and in the absence of any earthly and practical purpose," writes Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*: "no political function . . . no practical reality at all" (134). And yet, he goes on, this unreal ethos "attained acceptance and validity in the real world" of Western culture for centuries to come (136; cf. Köhler, "Quelques observations"). How could it be?

For Köhler, the reason was that adventure became "stylized and moralized" in the much wider ideal—launched by the Crusades and sublimated by the Grail—of "the Christian redemption of the warrior" ("Sistema" 326). Which sounds right, but in its turn opens another problem: how could these starkly feudal coordinates of adventure not only survive into the bourgeois age but also inspire all of its most popular genres?

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Before I attempt an answer, some thoughts on the question of the Chinese-European comparison. Until well into the nineteenth century, almost the end in fact, East Asian and West European novels developed in independence of each other, which is great; it's like an experiment history has run for us, the same form in two laboratories. It's perfect for comparative morphology because it allows us to look at formal features not as givens, as we inevitably tend to do, but as *choices*: and choices that eventually add up to alternative structures. We might begin, for

instance, with how often the protagonists of Chinese novels are not individuals but groups: the household in the *Jin Ping Mei* and *The Story of the Stone* (or *Dream of the Red Chamber*); the outlaws in *The Water Margin*; the literati in *The Scholars*. Titles are already a clue here: what would European titles do without proper names, but here there is not even one. These are not just random novels, but four of the six "great masterpieces" of the Chinese canon; their titles (and their heroes) matter.

So, groups. Large, and with even larger character systems around them: Chinese critics have identified over 600 characters in *The Scholars*, 800 in *The Water Margin* and the *Jin Ping Mei*, 975 in *The Story of the Stone*. And since size is seldom *just* size—a story with a thousand characters is not like a story with fifty characters, only twenty times bigger, but it's a different story—all this ends up generating a structure that is very unlike the one we are used to in Europe. With so many variables, one would expect it to be more unpredictable, but the opposite is actually more often the case: a great attempt at reducing unpredictability and re-balancing the narrative system. Let me give you an example from *The Story of the Stone*: after six or seven hundred pages, the two young undeclared lovers, Bao-yu and Dai-yu, have one of their many fights; Dai-yu leaves, and Bao-yu, left alone, falls into a sort of trance; his maid Aroma arrives, but he doesn't notice her, and in his dreamlike state he proceeds to express for the first time his love for Dai-yu; then he "awakes," sees Aroma, is bewildered, and runs away. One can imagine all sorts of sequels here: Aroma has been sleeping with Bao-yu for some time and could feel wounded; or she could side with Dai-yu and tell her what Bao-yu has just said; or she could betray her to the other young woman who is in love with Bao-yu. There are many ways of making the episode generate narrative (after all, we've been waiting for this declaration of love for hundreds of pages). Instead, what Aroma immediately wonders is "how she could arrange matters so as to prevent any scandal developing from those words" (Xueqin 2: 135). *Preventing* developments: that's the key. Minimizing narrativity. *The Story of the Stone* is often described as a Chinese *Buddenbrooks*, and they are certainly both stories of the decline of a great family. But *Buddenbrooks* covers a half century in five hundred pages and *Stone* a dozen years in two thousand pages. It's not just a difference of rhythm (although that is obviously also the case) but of the hierarchy between synchrony and diachrony. *Stone* has a "horizontal" dominant, where what really matters is not what lies "ahead" of a given event, as in "forward-looking" European prose, but what lies "to the side" of it: all the vibrations that ripple across this immense narrative system and all the counter-vibrations that try to keep it stable. I mentioned earlier how the breakdown of symmetry allowed European prose to intensify irreversibility. Irreversibility is also present in Chinese novels, of course. Instead of intensifying it, they often try to *contain* it, so symmetry regains its centrality: chapters are announced by couplets that neatly divide them into two halves; many important passages are couched in the wonderfully named "parallel prose" ("Every evening devoted to the pursuit of pleasure; Every morning an occasion for deluded dalliance"). In the novel's overall architecture, there are blocks of ten, twenty, even fifty chapters that mirror each other across hundreds of pages. It's really an alternative tradition.

Alternative, but comparable: up to the eighteenth century, the Chinese novel was arguably greater in both quantity and quality than any in Europe, with the

possible exception of France. "The Chinese have novels by the thousand, and already had them when our ancestors were living in the forests," said Goethe to Eckermann in 1827, on the day he coined the concept of *Weltliteratur* while reading a Chinese novel (Eckermann, 94). But the figures are wrong: by 1827 novels by the thousand existed in France, or Britain, or indeed in Germany—but not in China.

    Why?

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When we discuss the destinies of eighteenth-century core areas, writes Kenneth Pomeranz in *The Great Divergence*, "we should make our comparisons . . . truly reciprocal . . . that is, look for absences, accidents, and obstacles that diverted England from a path that might have made it more like the Yangzi Delta or Gujarat, along with the more usual exercise of looking for blockages that kept non-European areas from reproducing implicitly normalized European paths" and "view both sides of the comparison as 'deviations' when seen through the expectations of the other, rather than leaving one as always the norm" (7–8). The European rise of the novel as a deviation from the Chinese path: as soon as you start thinking in these terms, it immediately becomes apparent how much more seriously the novel was taken in China. Despite all the attacks by the Confucian literati, by the early seventeenth century China already had a novelistic canon; Europe wasn't even thinking about it. For the epic or tragedy it had one, as the lyric, but not for the novel. And the canon is just the tip of the iceberg: there was in China an immense investment of intellectual energies in the edition, revision, continuation, and especially commentary of novels. These were already very long books: *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, 600,000 words; the inter-lineal commentary made it almost a million— but it added so much "to the enjoyment . . . of the novel," writes David Rolston, "that editions without commentary . . . went out of circulation" (4).

    "The novel has less need of . . . commentary than other genres," writes Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, and for Europe he's right (30). But Chinese novels needed them, because they were seen as art. Since at least the *Jin Ping Mei*, around 1600, "Chinese *xiaoshuo* went through an . . . extended aesthetic turn," writes Ming Dong Gu, "a self-conscious emulation and competition with the dominant literary genres . . . a poeticization" (71). If we look for absences that diverted the European novel from the Chinese path, here is one: the aesthetic turn of the European novel occurred in the late nineteenth century, with a delay of almost three hundred years.

    Why?

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For Pomeranz, one reason for the great divergence was that in eighteenth-century Europe "the wheels of fashion were spinning faster" (161), stimulating consumption and through it the economy as a whole; while in China, after the consolidation of the Qing dynasty, consumption "as a motor of change" came to a halt for over a century and did not trigger the "consumer revolution" that John Brewer,

Neil McKendrick, and John Plumb have written about. Revolution is a big word, and many have questioned the extent of consumption before the mid-nineteenth century. Still, no one really doubts that "superfluous things," to use a Chinese expression, multiplied during the eighteenth century, from interior decoration to mirrors, clocks, china, silverware, jewelry—and concerts, journeys, and books. "In any consideration of leisure," writes Plumb, "it would be quite wrong not to put cultural pursuits in the foreground" (265–66). So what did "the birth of a consumer society" mean for the European novel?

First of all, a giant quantitative leap. From the first to the last decade of the century, new titles increased seven times in France (even though in the 1790s the French had more to do than write novels), fourteen in Britain, and about thirty in the German territories. Also, by the end of the eighteenth century print runs had become a little larger, especially for reprints; many novels not included in the standard bibliographies were published in magazines (some of which had a very wide audience). The strengthening of family ties encouraged reading aloud at home (providing the training ground for Dr. Bowdler's vocation). Finally, and most significantly, the diffusion of lending libraries made novels circulate much more efficiently than before (eventually leading to the imposition of the three-decker to writers and publishers alike, in order to lend each novel to three readers at once). Hard though it is to quantify all this, if all these factors combined increased the circulation of novels between two and three times (a conservative estimate), the presence of novels in Western Europe would have gone up between thirty and sixty times in the course of the eighteenth century. For McKendrick, that consumption of tea rose fifteenfold in a hundred years is a great success story of the consumer revolution. Novels increased more than tea.

Why? The answer used to be, because readers did. But the current consensus—which is slippery, like all that has to do with literacy, but has been stable for a few decades now—is that between 1700 and 1800 readers doubled; a little less than that in France, a little more in England, but that's the horizon. They doubled, but they didn't increase fifty times. They were, however, reading *differently*. "Extensive" reading, Rolf Engelsing has called it: reading a lot more than in the past, avidly, at times passionately, but probably more often than not also superficially, quickly, even a little erratically; quite different from the "intensive" reading and re-reading of the same few books—usually devotional ones—that had been the norm until then (182). Engelsing's thesis has often been criticized, but with novels multiplying so much more quickly than readers, and readers behaving like the famous John Latimer, of Warwick, who from mid-January to mid-February 1771 borrowed a volume a day from Clay's circulating library, it is hard to imagine how the whole process could have worked without a major increase in—let's call it distraction.

Let's call it that because, even though Engelsing never mentions Walter Benjamin, extensive reading looks very much like an early version of that "perception in a state of distraction" described at the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Distraction in that essay is *Zerstreuung*—absent-mindedness, and entertainment: the perfect mix for novel reading—and for Benjamin, the attitude that becomes necessary at those "historical turning points" when the "tasks" facing "the human apparatus of perception" are so overwhelm-

ing that they can't be "mastered" by way of concentrated attention (119). Distraction emerges as the best way to cope with the new situation—to keep up with those "faster-spinning wheels of fashion" that have so dramatically widened the market for novels.

What did the birth of a consumer society mean for the European novel? More novels, and less attention. Dime novels, not James, setting the tone of the new way of reading. Jan Fergus, who knows more about lending libraries' records than anyone else, calls it "desultory" reading: borrowing the second volume of *Gulliver's Travels* but not the first or the fourth out of five of *The Fool of Quality* (108–16). Fergus hails this behavior as "readers' agency, their power of choice" (117)—but frankly the choice here seems to be a matter of giving up all consistency in order to be always somehow in touch with what the market has to offer. Leaving the TV on all day long and watching it every now and then—that's not agency.

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Why was there no rise of the Chinese novel in the eighteenth century and no European aesthetic turn? The answers mirror each other: taking the novel seriously as an aesthetic object slowed down consumption, while a quickened market for novels discouraged aesthetic concentration. "When reading the first chapter, the good reader has already cast his eyes towards the last," says a commentary to *Jin Ping Mei* (which is two thousand pages long); "when reading the last chapter, he is already recalling the first" (Rolston 126). This is what intensive reading is like: the only true reading is *re*reading, or even a series of rereadings, as some commentators seem to assume. "If you don't put your pen into action, it cannot really be considered reading," as Mao put it (Rolston 2). Study; not one-volume-per-day consumption. In Europe, only Modernism made people study novels. Had they read with pen and commentary in the eighteenth century, there would have been no rise of the European novel.

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Typically the great theories of the novel have been theories of modernity, and my insistence on the market is a particularly brutal version thereof. But with a complication, suggested by another research project I'm currently engaged in on the figure of the bourgeois, in the course of which I have often been surprised by how limited the diffusion of bourgeois values seems to have actually been. Capitalism has spread everywhere, no doubt about that, but the values that—according to Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart, Sigmund Freud, Joseph Schumpeter, Albert Hirschmann, and others—are supposed to be most congruous with it have not. This has made me look at the novel with different eyes, no longer as the "natural" form of bourgeois modernity but rather as that through which the pre-modern imaginary continues to pervade the capitalist world. Whence adventure. The anti-type of the spirit of modern capitalism for *The Protestant Ethic*; a slap in the face of realism, as Auerbach saw so clearly in *Mimesis*. What is adventure doing in the modern world? Margaret Cohen, from whom I have learned a lot on

this, sees it as a trope of expansion: capitalism on the offensive, planetary, cross-ing the oceans. I think she's right, and would add only that the reason adventure works so well within this context is that it's so good at imagining war. Enamored of physical strength, which it moralizes as the rescue of the weak from all sorts of abuses, adventure is the perfect blend of might and right to accompany capitalist expansions. That's why Köhler's Christian warrior has not only survived in our culture—in novels, films, videogames—but has dwarfed any comparable bour-geois figure. Schumpeter put it crudely and clearly: "The bourgeois class . . . needs a master" (138).

It needs a master to help it rule. In finding distortion after distortion of core bourgeois values, my first reaction was always to wonder at the loss of class iden-tity that this entailed; which is true, but from another perspective completely irrel-evant, because hegemony doesn't need purity—it needs plasticity, camouflage, col-lusion between the old and the new. Under this different constellation, the novel returns to be central to our understanding of modernity: not despite, but because of its premodern traits, which are not archaic residues but functional articulations of ideological needs. To decipher the geological strata of consensus in the capitalist world—here is a worthy challenge, for the history and the theory of the novel.

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