

What Is The Novel? The Fundamental Concepts of a Literary Phenomenon

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In every story there is a silence,
some sight concealed, some word
unspoken, I believe. Till we have
spoken the unspoken we have not
come to the heart of the story.

— J.M. Coetzee, *Foe*¹

Yes, oh dear yes, the novel tells a
story.

— E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the
Novel*²

What do we talk about when we talk about the novel? The history of the field of inquiry which calls itself “the theory of the novel” — a field in which, curiously, the novel is less often an object of theory in its own right

than it is an occasion to explore all manner of cultural phenomena, social and historical transformations, philosophical propositions, habits and practices of living, aesthetic movements — suggests that when we talk about the novel we are in fact traversing it on the way to the domains of human activity that surround it. Or we undertake the same adventure in reverse, reading culture and history into the novel. To talk “about” the novel often means talking around it, through it, alongside it; the theory of the novel is theory *with* the novel, the theorization of history, culture, politics, economics, aesthetics, and so on, according to how these domains — their conditions of possibility, ramifications, limitations, their very structures — can be differently illuminated by their refraction through the variety of lenses the novel provides. While this testifies to the power of the novel to push beyond the apparent and the given, to reveal truths irreducible to empirical fact, to expose the organizing principles governing institutions and ideologies, to challenge our understanding of the world in all manner of important ways — does all this not beg the question: *What is it?* Does literary criticism not have a responsibility, an intellectual and ethical obligation, to clarify the concept of the novel prior to its use as a theoretical instrument? Otherwise, does this instrumentality not risk depriving the novel of its status as *literature*?

Given its conceptual slipperiness and resistance to circumscription, it is no surprise that most endeavors to resolve the question of the novel make extensive use of non-literary discourses and disciplines, as if these secondary subjects can provide the ground upon which to prop and anchor the primary matter of the novel, which is so shifty that otherwise it, thus its study and criticism, would be groundless. For all these reasons and more, and despite the fact that the theory of the novel has existed at least in an inchoate form since the turn of the nineteenth century,³ we have yet to settle on anything like a consensus concerning what, if anything, the novel *is*. And because the condition of any criticism is that it be proper to the field of inquiry to which it is addressed, the novel's conceptual indeterminacy confronts the practice and, indeed, the whole idea of literary criticism — its strategies and tactics, its desire authoritatively to pronounce truths about its proper object, and its ethical orientation — with special challenges.

Such as this: Does the novel even exist? Or are there only novels, some similar and all unique, such that the general category of the novel must be hopelessly incoherent or, at best, an empty signifier to which this or that work can be assigned according to any number of (ultimately arbitrary) criteria? At best, can we say that what distinguishes the novel from every other literary genre is its categorical refusal precisely to be distinguished from them? We know that a novel can be epistolary, as was its most popular form in the first half of the eighteenth century (decades before Richardson's *Pamela* or *Clarissa*, Montesquieu's *Les Lettres Persanes* was an especially big hit; one contemporary variation on this is novels written in text-messages and email exchanges); or they can be written in verse; novels have been encoded in hypertext (an early example is Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*) or have simulated that encoding in print form (most famously, Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*); they can be graphic, or historically factual, or dramatic and dialogical; they can run to thousands of pages or limit themselves to just a few thousand words; they can be cinematic, as in those scenes from Cormac McCarthy's novels that read like tracking shots on a film set; at least since Laurence Sterne we have known that novels are usually but not always narratively driven, or can be non-linear in narrative design; and we know from Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* to Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* to emergent digital platforms for serial publication that they need not be contained within the covers of a single book.

This open-ended diversity has precipitated a variety of critical containment strategies. One popular strategy involves constructing synecdoches to show that the form and history of the genre are mutually generated and articulated through some especially momentous cultural development, such as the rise of the penitentiary or the development of modern historiography or the emergence of modern domesticity.⁴ This would mean that the novel can be constituted as a group according to the origin all these disparate examples share. But in addition to disputes over the merit of any given synecdoche, this reliance on the notion of origins raises still more complications. History (as many of the synecdochal theorists well know) is discontinuous and fragmentary and every supposed origin therefore is an effect of reading, a result of the

critic's epistemic predispositions, a product of a particular way of seeing history, and not a matter of fact. In addition, since any synecdochal hypothesis hinges upon some definition of the novel's formal determinants and the origins of those determinants, this approach validates a host of other endeavors to discover a common ground that lead anywhere but toward critical consensus: the origin of the novel can be located in the sixteenth-century Spanish *picaresque*, or slightly later in *Don Quixote*, or perhaps in Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, or Aphra Behn's long-form fictions, or as early as Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, or even, with Erich Auerbach, the Bible.⁵ All plausible hypotheses, depending upon whether the critic holds that the novel's generic particularity is its foregrounding of plot, irony, history, psychological interiority, quotidian mediocrity, verisimilitude, or interpretability along a self-contained temporal continuum, or whether the novel's origin is a matter of aesthetic influence, a result of cultural cross-pollination, an economic epiphenomenon....

But if it is anything other and more than a vector, even an especially powerful vector, of cultural transmission, if in addition to its historical function, theoretical usefulness, ideological orientation, political potential, or philosophical interest, the novel also names a modality of the literary, then it is the task of literary criticism to respond to the question of the novel before the concept of the novel is put to use.

In the following essay I aim to clarify this task, first, by situating (or resituating) the novel according to its importance to the development of the concept of literature, and second, by situating the theoretical history of the novel with respect to this concept. To make this second move, I divide the theory of the novel into two distinct yet related critical tendencies, the *taxonomic* and the *phenomenological*, and consider the degree to which each tendency departs from or remains true to the concept of literature the novel helped generate. This reduction may seem like a gross simplification of the vast and diverse work that has been and continues to be done on this notoriously complex subject. That may be, and certainly there are a variety of exceptions to these two tendencies, but I make no claim to offering a comprehensive survey of the field of novel studies. This would be a Sisyphean effort rather like counting the

trees in an ever-growing forest, while the forest itself remains obscure. My purpose in asserting this dualism therefore is a heuristic one: it permits us to draw into relief the epistemic and philosophical underpinnings of the theory of the novel in order to show how its dominant critical sensibilities can complement one another not despite but because of their divergence. In this way, through this complementarity, we can clarify the fundamental concepts at stake in the novel and its theorization; we can open theory to a new way of asking *What is the novel?*, a question as basic as it is resistant to any final response. And we can see how the theory of the novel is grounded upon, rather than against, just this resistance.

I. *Taxonomy and Phenomenology*

An object of theory does not precede its theorization. The discovery or invention of this fact in the domains of literature and literary criticism is also the realization of “literature” as such, as a discrete conceptual category and field of endeavor. This realization, moreover, is a matter of historical record; it belongs at least initially to the early German romantics for whom, as Walter Benjamin makes clear, criticism is the constitution at once of its object and of the apparatus which theorizes it. Such work is far from arbitrary, but nor is it determined in advance of its operations. It entails the discovery of “an immanent structure specific to the work itself,”⁶ an immanence the specificity of which is redoubled by the singularity of the critic’s engagement with the text, and for this reason is not discovered so much as constructed by this critical engagement. The task of criticism therefore is to dis-appropriate the text from itself: to show what is most proper to it, to illuminate its immanent and radically specific structure, through the critical refraction by which this very structure is produced. The structure is an effect of its own structuration. In this way, criticism is both analytical and creative, or better, it occupies and animates the undecidable limit between analysis and creativity.

Following Benjamin, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy note that the concept of *literature* around which this notion of criticism coalesces — despite the fragmentation and wide dispersion of

schools and strategies of literary criticism since the end of the eighteenth century, despite romanticism's relegation to its own small corner of literary history by the twinned forces of scholarly periodization and disciplinary specialization — remains the basis of literary theory and the unifying organizing principle behind our modern critical diversity.⁷ This is obviously true, we should add, since if modern literary criticism is expansive and diverse, if its possible permutations are functionally infinite, and if it is also, nevertheless, a discrete mode of textual engagement in relation to other ways or experiences of reading, this is because such variety unfolds from the unifying fundamental concept which animates every variation: the romantic concept of literature, the concept of “the literary absolute” according to which theory and its object are wrapped in an infinitely reflective and co-creative embrace.

Strangely, then, the subtending unity of the fundamental concept of literature is what enables critical experimentation and innovation; the absence of such a concept, on the other hand, would leave the work of literature no autonomy from criteria of judgment wholly external to the work itself, confining the critic to serve these external criteria and inhibiting the critical/creative mediation, the dynamic interface between reader and text, without which the singular specificity of the work must remain obscure. No criticism without literature, to be sure, but also no literature without criticism. If this were not so, if literature did not have its own fundamental concept, then modern criticism might be limited to the sort that preceded the romantics' insurrection, that aimed to establish rules of composition and judge the aesthetic or moral value of a text according to the degree to which it adhered to or deviated from these rules.⁸

Nowhere is this fact that a literary theory and its object are co-constituted more apparent than in the theory of the novel, not least because even for the romantics the novel was, in Friedrich Schlegel's words, “simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry,”⁹ the aesthetic form in which the literary absolute could best be actualized. By designating it poetry, Schlegel emphasized that the idea of the novel is irreducible to pedestrian or colloquial distinctions between poetry and prose because the language out of which it is constructed is no more

determined by its referents, by things in the world, than are the words and images that populate, say, *Paradise Lost* or *The Faerie Queene*. As poetry, the novel is literature. As the poetry of poetry, the novel performs the work of literature, the work of the literary absolute, by engaging its own history, reflecting and refracting and undoing its inherently unstable generic parameters, interminably. The novel, in short, is an ongoing aesthetic experiment. Small wonder, then, that the genre has from the beginning defied rigid classification; in its ascendance to the peak of the modern literary marketplace, moreover, it has called into question the validity or even the feasibility of any taxonomy of form with respect to itself and every other genre.

And yet, the history of the theory of the novel is largely a history of just such a taxonomy. Or better, it is the history of a taxonomic operation, in at least two senses: first, the theory of the novel either presupposes or aims to establish that, while it is literature, the novel is generically distinct from the other forms which occupy this conceptual category, and therefore should be situated both within the field of literature and beyond or at the limit of the other elements of this field; the theoretical question, in this regard, concerns the properties of the form permitting this critical differentiation and the articulation of this limit. Whence the synecdochal approach or the search for a common origin detailed above. The second form of taxonomicity involves imposing the taxonomic operation upon the novel itself, so that while the theory of the novel accepts the wide and ever-widening variety of examples or instances of its object it nevertheless retains a faith in the power of resemblance that justifies the grouping of such variety according to a categorical uniformity or subtending consistency.

In fact, both species of taxonomicity are the same. Whether from literature to the novel or from the novel to this or that sort of novel, the theoretical operation consists in the construction of a relation between sameness and difference — in other words, the construction of a system of resemblances that are not equivalences, a system which situates the differences among its constituent elements relationally, in a manner that permits comparison — since in this way the particularity of the genre or of any of its examples can be made to shine forth and reveal something

about the universality (in the first place, literature as such; in the second, the novel as such) to which it belongs. Criticism thus moves dialectically from instance to essence and back again, deriving something of the essential from the instancial and then imbuing the instance with some share of that essentiality that would remain obscure without this critical mediation.¹⁰

A key example of the first variation on what we may call the taxonomic principle is Ian Watt's enduring claim that the early novel's defining property is its "formal realism," a concept he distills from associations between the rise of empiricism in the eighteenth century, the attendant rise of individualism, and the literary representational strategies pioneered most powerfully by Defoe, Fielding and Richardson.¹¹ By emphasizing form over other attributes and naming those authors deserving of canonical representation according to their conformity to realist formal innovation, Watt aimed to establish an objective, critically rigorous criterion with which to determine the difference between the novel and any other sort of prose fiction that superficially might resemble it in terms of its length, themes, subject-matter, and so on. Criticism of Watt's position, which always takes issue with the limitations of his taxonomy but not with the taxonomic principle itself, is well known — as a stylistic designation, formal realism is exceedingly nebulous; with its emphasis on the novel's contribution to the rise of individualism, it too easily marginalizes important subgeneric texts and experiments, including especially those written by women; as an exercise in historical correlation, realism to empiricism, it simplistically imposes too neat a historical continuity that cannot account for the discontinuous reality of its emergence and diversification.¹² But despite, or rather because of, the nuance and complexity these criticisms bring to Watt's thesis, they extend the taxonomic principle and its application. They do not refute but redraw the tables in which texts are sorted and their relations or differences articulated.

This critical tendency is neither arbitrary nor accidental. It is consistent with the epistemic shift Michel Foucault locates in the break between an older, Renaissance investment in *interpretation*, which presumes some final meaning to which all signs eventually point and in

which they merge, and the modern/contemporary concern for *classification*. According to Foucault, the former involves the discovery of a truth intrinsic but irreducible to appearances, therefore the operative assumption that a cosmic order exists and only wants to be uncovered; the modern position, on the other hand, of which the development of taxonomy by natural historians like Carl Linnaeus is the greatest emblem, constructs such an order through the elaboration of self-contained systems of representation whose elements refer not to some presumed hidden truth but to one another, thus together not to any external reality but only to the systems in which they inhere. The field of vision it produces therefore both reveals and conceals: by building a relational structure of knowledge, it also excludes or erases any phenomenon that is not amenable to the system's constitutive representational matrix.

Tellingly, Foucault begins his account of this epistemic rupture and reconfiguration not by way of philosophy or natural history or economics — all of which are indeed central to his thesis — but with what he designates “the first modern work of literature,” *Don Quixote*. With its ironic reversal of romance and reality, with its hero's refusal or inability to see his world as anything other than a reflection of the tales of knight errantry through which his desire passes on its way to action, Cervantes' novel is the epitome of the endless play of signification at stake in the taxonomic principle. “Don Quixote reads the world in order to prove his books,” in order “to transform reality into a sign,” so that here “language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, as literature,” as the domain in which is made “endless sport of signs and similitudes.”¹³ If the move from interpretation to classification marks a shift in the order of knowledge from a moment at which words were the signs of things to one in which words are the signs of other words, other signs, interminably and indefinitely, always within a hermetic and self-referential system, it is the novel which announces or even precipitates this epistemic rupture and emergence of a new logic of signs according to which reality is an effect of its representations, and not the other way around.

Yet the theory of the novel, with its stated or covert reliance on taxonomicity, with its belonging to a modality of thought that establishes rather than uncovers the order of things according to its self-wrought systems of organization and classification, seems to have forgotten that an inaugural instance of its object of concern, *Don Quixote*, was and remains a vituperative mockery of any system of thought that would differentiate and grid its elements according to its own epistemic conceits and then present this grid as anything other than a reflection of the system operator's own desire. *Don Quixote* is simultaneously the emblem of the new era of taxonomicity and the sympathetic subversion of this very emblem; in this way, it does not yearn nostalgically for the epoch of interpretation it supplants but opens an abyss of signification, an "endless sport of signs and similitudes," a game in which there are no winners and losers, no rights and wrongs, no truth and falsity — only fiction, to which even reality itself now belongs. Every iteration of the theory of the novel, insofar as its procedures can be traced to the taxonomic principle, thus repeats and reifies Quixote's fallacy, which, from Cervantes' pen, is both charming and ridiculous.

Because theory and its object are co-constituted, and because the immanent structure specific to the novel is this ironic doubling and redoubling, this playful self-subversion, such critical reification may seem unavoidable. But there is another trajectory of the theory of the novel, one that historicism old or new makes appear quaint or imprecise because this other direction is not primarily taxonomic, not concerned with the problem of classification. This other, phenomenological branch of theory asks the question of the novel in order to reveal *within the question itself* something fundamental about human experience and its historical reconfiguration along an axis of ontological displacement.

To understand what is here meant by phenomenology we should begin with one of the most significant contributors to the phenomenological question of the novel: Mikhail Bakhtin. Although his importance to the history of novelistic *taxinomia* is indisputable, consider that before Bakhtin enumerated the properties of novelistic form or the theory of the carnivalesque he first considered the peculiarity of the novel with regard to all prior existing genres, its inherent instability, thus its

defiance of any rigid critical apparatus or conceptual frame, as well as the profound effect the novel has had on every other literary genre — all in terms that do not reference but nevertheless harmonize with Friedrich Schlegel's conception of the novel as a site of unending aesthetic reinvention. Schlegel famously asserted that literature "should forever be becoming and never be perfected"; Bakhtin dubbed the novel "the genre of becoming," emphasizing that it "is the only genre that was born and nourished in a new era of world history and therefore it is deeply akin to that era, whereas the other major genres entered that era as already fixed forms, as an inheritance."¹⁴ The novel's deep kinship with the modern era, moreover, is the source of its power to re-open these prior existing forms by inviting, even demanding, aesthetic and generic experimentation. This methodological consideration — How should we regard the novel? — is at its core a phenomenological one because Bakhtin recognizes that the structure of the question must be organized in light of the modern predicament in which we, all of us, not just the critics, find ourselves: from this vantage, the predicament of perpetual becoming.

Perpetual becoming does not imply rootlessness but unrootedness. It means waywardness without telos, exile without return, in juxtaposition with a prior, more purposive and determined form of being. Against the critical movement from instance to essence and back — against the taxonomic principle — Bakhtin imposes a paradoxical truth: the essence of the novel is its very inessentiality, and it is this essential inessentiality which is the strange core of its historical and, we should add, ontological significance.

Why ontological? The novel is the modern genre, the genre of modernity, not only because its deep kinship to its historical context entails a constant aesthetic reinvention according to the dynamics of that history, not only because its infinitely variable permutations track and reflect wider transformations in language, thought, social order, popular sensibility, and so on. The novel is not merely history's mirror. It is also and more profoundly the aesthetic medium which announces the groundlessness of modernity; it is the imaginary inauguration of a new kind of history *as such*, a history which has come unmoored from the

static sureties of myth and religion. The novel's dynamism, its constant *becoming*, is the literary correlate of the new mode of human being that emerges with modernity, the modern subjectivity which is fatally disconnected from any final guarantor of meaning or predetermined destiny, which forges its own meaning through the destiny it creates rather than discovers.

Georg Lukács was the first to sense the full stakes of this disconnection: that the novel marks a break with the era of the epic and therefore is a primary indicator of a general, ontological shift toward a precarious modernity.¹⁵ Following from this, Benjamin offers the clearest and most moving characterization of the lived consequences of this ontological shift, that is, of the radical difference the novel introduces into quotidian human experience. For Benjamin, the rise of the novel marks the decline of the storyteller, of storytelling, which is no trivial matter. It entails the collapse of “something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions [...]: the ability to exchange experiences.”¹⁶ This is so, according to Benjamin, for patently material reasons. However inessential the novel form may be, it is distinguished from the story (and the epic) by its “essential dependence on the book,”¹⁷ a dependence upon the advance of printing technologies and their facilitation of emergent literacies among the burgeoning middle class. The novel is the literary variation of art in the era of technological reproducibility.

“The birthplace of the novel,” Benjamin further notes, “is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns,” the individual isolated in his own experience and increasingly incapable of communicating that experience with others. This is more than an effect of the individuation of the narrative subject — of the break with the allegorical and the theological, the birth of the novelistic character, the centralization of narrative around “particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places” that Watt situated within the epistemological shift toward empiricism.¹⁸ Beyond the emergence of early novelistic form and its complementary relation to the Enlightenment ideology of individualism, Benjamin notes what the novel's essential

dependence upon technological reproducibility and its material supports means for the experience of reading. Whereas storytelling is an oral exercise and therefore requires to be shared among a community of speakers and listeners — the epic, of course, is in print form only the inheritance or textual translation of an oral tradition — novels are read in solitude and silence. They individualize the experience of narrative on a conceptual, formal, epistemological, but finally experiential level.¹⁹ This is why the novel fractures the human community, alienates us from what had seemed inalienable, disappropriates the human of what had seemed most proper to it.

So when we ask the question of the novel phenomenologically, we are in effect asking after the methodologically proper means of revealing and situating the novel's close connection to the existential waywardness characteristic of the modern human condition, especially if the novel is bound to the problematics of technological reproducibility. To think this connection, the theory of the novel therefore cannot be confined to a technical (taxonomic, teleological, historicist, materialist) apparatus, but must persistently interrogate and reinvent its own methods — not simply because the novel is always moving, always changing, and therefore demands a theoretical and conceptual nimbleness that can keep pace, but also because its persistent dynamism, its essential inessentiality, radically transforms the experience of literature, thus also the relation between literature and experience in ways that promote but also can defy or subvert technical thinking. This transformation deserves to be called *ontological*, moreover, and ought to be approached phenomenologically because it announces and provokes a radical change in what it means to be a human in the world, thus also what “world” means, thus also what “being” means.

Considering the novel's importance to the romantic conception of the “work of literature” as a verb rather than a noun, a dynamic interplay of reader and text, criticism and creation, the phenomenological trajectory of the theory of the novel is no mere alternative to the hegemony of the taxonomic principle. Like *Don Quixote*, it takes off from and subverts that principle; in identifying a phenomenon called the novel, it stands upon the ground prepared by the taxonomic tendency, but it

does so in order to push itself toward the existential groundlessness proper to its area of concern, and in this way requires theory to confront its own persistent impropriety with respect to the phenomenon it engages. The phenomenological question of the novel acknowledges but also defers the question of the novel's generic essence, and calls into question any such effort toward essentiality. If the taxonomic iteration of the question, *What is the novel?*, presupposes in its very grammar the existence of a questioning subject and an object in question, this second iteration foregrounds the "is" which joins and separates subject and object, binding them in a mutually constitutive articulation which is also the hinge of the literary absolute. Prior to positing the question itself, then, we have to consider more exhaustively the structure of the question beyond and before its theoretical deployment, to which structure we now turn.

II. *Structure and its Other*

To investigate the structure of the question is not to reject but to take off from the taxonomic principle. Without the seemingly endless proliferation of critical outcomes it informs, even and especially if they result from a technical apparatus of thought, we could not see the task before us, which thus follows chronologically but is yet *logically* prior to the various and prolific attempts by theorists of the novel to anatomize the genre. We begin with a mass of observations, attempts at conceptual or historical synthesis, complementary or conflicting interpretations, and so on, because all this discloses the novel as a problem to be thought. But to remain at this level, to devise taxonomies of novelistic tendencies and types, to build a definition of the concept of the novel by way of a set of commonalities among existing examples (which, of course, produces their very exemplarity through their collection and deployment), to delimit the concept according to what novels have in common despite or beneath their differences, to march along with the procession of theories of the novel—this is a necessary but ultimately preliminary, propaedeutic endeavor. If we want to examine the fundamental structure of the question which directs the theory of the novel, has always directed it despite the vagueness and uncertainty of its articulation, we have to

proceed in reverse, as it were, moving from existent theories of the novel backward to their reason, ratio, and ground. What we need is a formulation of the *fundamental concepts* that orient and animate the question of the novel.

On the trail of the structure of the question, our first (still propaedeutic) stop should be Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, particularly Saussure's early remark that the study of languages can only take us so far toward understanding language as such, because languages are dynamic and unstable and bound to the ever-shifting realities of their social and historical contexts. One cannot move from structure to practice without affording logical priority to the construction and analysis of structure — here, the structure of the question, "What is language?" What are we asking about when we are asking about language, and how does our orientation toward the problem effect or condition our possible results and our understanding of linguistic practice? Whence semiology, the fabricated structure, the new science of signs.

So, too, with the theory of the novel. And yet, the novel's intimate relation to the modern human experience, with all its existential homelessness, waywardness, open-endedness and uncertainty; the novel's historical contingency and concomitant generic fluidity; its reliance upon technological reproducibility — all this demands a structuration that exceeds the methodological parameters of semiology, for at least two reasons. First, and most obviously, because language and the novel are related but finally distinct phenomena. Semiology bears upon the structure of language; the theory of the novel bears upon the structure of the relation between the art of language — what is called literature — and the unstable historicity of the human. This is to say, the theory of the novel concerns the particularly modern mode of aesthetic mediation by which human experience is narratively organized and made potentially meaningful. Following from this, yet more basically, Saussure's brand of structuralism is insufficient to our task because the specific historicity of the novel, the shift it performs in literature and culture from the transcendental (timeless, fixed) to the immanent, from the poetic to the prosaic, from the eternal to the historical, disqualifies

even the provisional establishment of the sort of metalanguage at stake in Saussure.

This, of course, is already true of language, as well, which is why Saussure's inaugural semiology required its appreciative complication concerning its tendencies toward the transcendental, toward the development of a metalanguage, as in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* or, in a different register, Lacan's axiom that there is no Other of the Other. Like language, then, "the novel" cannot name an atemporal, transcendental abstraction that would limit its existent manifestations; the concept of the novel instead must be grounded in the ascertainment of its immanence, according to the *experience* of the novel which necessarily precedes its conceptualization.

Following the intellectual tradition in which appear the vital correctives introduced into Saussure's thought by the likes of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, the best precedent to our task is that other key to the so-called "linguistic turn" in humanistic inquiry, Martin Heidegger. From the beginning, Heidegger's effort to salvage the question of being from the history of metaphysics in order to revitalize fundamental ontology requires a delimitation of the fundamental concepts which orient the question, concepts which, for him, have been so thoroughly forgotten that we have forgotten their very forgetting. Of course, the question of the being of the novel is decidedly not the question of the forgetting of being, but on the path to such fundamentality Heidegger introduces an early hiatus into the problem of being in order to consider the structure of the question — that is, of "the formal structure of the question as such" regardless of what it questions, of the orientation toward phenomena that posits them as invitations to thought as well as the form such thinking takes. This hiatus thus affords us a convenient escape from the dubious terrain of analogy, from the temptation to overlay fundamental ontology upon the theory of the novel and thereby once again to subordinate literature to an extrinsic field of concern that denies its specificity in the work of the literary absolute. In other words, we are not here "applying" Heidegger to the theory of the novel, but taking a cue from the first pages of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger makes clear that the structure of the question is a general phenomenological problem

in that it realigns the question away from the “what” of its object of concern and toward the prior “how” through which its research proceeds.

Heidegger’s first insight in this regard is that “The totality of beings can, with respect to its various domains, become the field where particular areas of knowledge are exposed and delimited,” and that these areas of knowledge therefore are constituted as responses to the “prescientific experience and interpretation” of a given domain. It is this prior experience which provides every science, every area of knowledge, with its fundamental structures [*Grundstrukturen*], the configuration of limitations that demarcate a field of knowledge, constrain its operations to within that configuration, and enable the positive (scientific) elaboration of the objects of knowledge appropriate to it.²⁰ Heidegger continues:

Fundamental concepts [*Grundbegriffe*] are determinations in which the area of knowledge underlying all the thematic objects of a science attain an understanding that precedes and guides all positive investigation. Accordingly these concepts first receive their genuine evidence and “grounding” only in a correspondingly preliminary research into the area of knowledge itself. But since each of these areas arises from the domain of beings themselves, this preliminary research that creates the fundamental concepts amounts to nothing else than interpreting these beings in terms of the basic constitution of their being. [...] Such laying of foundations is productive logic in the sense that it leaps ahead, so to speak, into a particular realm of being, discloses it for the first time in its constitutive being, and makes the acquired structures available to the positive sciences as lucid directives for inquiry.²¹

The core insight for our purposes is that an object of knowledge is not synonymous with a realm of experience, that such an object thus does not precede the process of partitioning and interpreting experience; rather, knowledge is the result of an experience mediated through a certain way of knowing. Phenomenology therefore is not (or no longer) the philosophical domain in which the conditions of subjective engagement with a world are delimited, but the name for an effort of

thinking that traces the elaboration of these very conditions back to the experience they mean to treat, and to the attendant fundamental concepts that structure the treatment.

The other of a structure is its foundation, its ground, that upon which it is built, without which it could not stand, its ownmost condition of possibility, which is thus inseparable from but irreducible to the elements overlaid upon it. To see how we can return all this to the theory of the novel, it is worthwhile to take one more detour through the best exportation of Heidegger's insight in this regard, Lacan's eleventh seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, which in its very title invokes (if obliquely) the above passages from *Being and Time*. Early in the seminar Lacan notes Heidegger's "propaedeutic" significance to his teaching,²² by which we should understand that he is not here applying Heidegger to psychoanalysis so much as *repeating* the phenomenological gesture, symptomatically as it were, through its displaced expression in another domain of inquiry and, more importantly, another domain of human experience, called the unconscious. At the core of this displacement is a localized repetition of Heidegger's operative claim that the history of metaphysics is a history of the forgetting of the question of being and a forgetting of this forgetting. Lacan's return to Freud posits just such a problem among his contemporaries, who called themselves Freudians even as they betrayed the ethical foundation of the Freudian discovery and reduced psychoanalysis to a technical apparatus devoid of the conceptual malleability required by its object of concern. In short, for Lacan psychoanalysis has forgotten Freud and, with him, the fundamental concepts that guided the practical elaboration of the unconscious; by nevertheless retaining Freud's name, psychoanalysis, like metaphysics *qua* Heidegger, has forgotten this very forgetting.

It was because of this predicament that Lacan sought the fundamental concepts — the unconscious, repetition, the transference, and the drive — that could correct the wrong turn in psychoanalysis. By naming them, Lacan meant to push psychoanalysis back to its infancy, just as Freud had done with the Enlightenment, not in order to establish a proper origin to which fidelity was owed like an arbitrary allegiance but to

reveal what the history of psychoanalysis after Freud has repressed, how that repression continues to haunt psychoanalytic praxis, and why a structure that disregards its foundation cannot stand. Simply put, if psychoanalysis is not a theory but a practice and an experience, if it is less science than phenomenology, this means its fundamental concepts are *originary*, not original; they develop out of an encounter with the phenomena psychoanalysis means to address, phenomena that in fact call the position of the analyst into being, even though it is from this position that the articulation of its fundamental concepts proceeds. As originary, they are both cause and destination of the desire of the analyst.

So, what is at stake here is a reconfiguration of the analyst's desire. Is the object of such a desire to ensconce psychoanalytic discourse within the dubious domain of the transcendental, to make of it a dogma or an authoritative metalanguage with respect to the experience into which it inquires? To master the unconscious? The Lacanian answer, definitively, is no. The analyst is not a subject but a logical position within a certain structure of experience, a hole in discourse into which the unconscious is invited to disclose itself. Before its object, analysis is always and forever a student, not least because the dynamics of the unconscious render any conceptual rigidity, any taxonomic classification, practically and ethically bankrupt.

With both Heidegger and Lacan, we therefore can see that the structure of the question is not, or not only, important for analytic exactitude — and it is, insofar as a domain of inquiry that strays from its own fundamental concepts can result in a self-referential analytic enclosure that, as Foucault has already taught us, validates itself and its own representational procedures while forgetting that its objects of knowledge are an effect of their representational mediation and not the truth of the things it purports to represent. Following from yet again logically prior to this, the phenomenological realignment of the question is an ethical concern, a matter of theoretical and practical responsibility.

What Heidegger and his differential repetition in Lacan teaches the theory of the novel is that the latter needs to articulate its fundamental concepts in order to inhibit the overlaying of its conclusions upon its area of inquiry, the erasure of this overlay, the attendant faith in the truth of

these illusory conclusions, and finally the effacement of the experiential motivation, the very humanity, behind the question of the novel. Following Foucault, Heidegger, and Lacan — not only following, but repeating them symptomatically, dis-placing them in another field of inquiry and another domain of experience — the theory of the novel must begin to ask the question prior to the wild variety of responses the question of the novel has already provoked. Before we can determine what we talk about when we talk about the novel, we must consider: What do we ask about when we ask the question of the novel?

III. *Propositions: The Situation, Singularity, Community, Desire*

The following enumeration of what I hold to be four fundamental concepts of the theory of the novel in no way constitutes an exhaustive or authoritative pronouncement. These are propositions suggesting some possible avenues along which the question of the theory of the novel might proceed beyond the impasses between the taxonomic and the phenomenological, between history and form, politics and aesthetics, and so on. My aim with these formulations is to ask: from what particular domain of being does the theory of the novel, as a “lucid directive of inquiry,” emerge? What sort of experience does the theory of the novel treat? And to what extent is this treatment consonant or dissonant with its own fundamental concepts? More emphatically, what of the novel has been forgotten, repressed, by its own theorization, and how does this repressed return, as all repressions do?

1. The situation

The novel treats the enigma of the situation withdrawn from the certitudes of a purposively driven universe, whether such purposiveness is defined theologically, structurally, or historically. Abandoned upon the shore of modernity; exiled from the community bound by myth, epic, or the shared experience of storytelling; trapped within the ever-shifting dynamics of becoming — in the face of such a predicament, such perennial uncertainty, such unsituatedness, it is only human to ask: if I am not at home in being, then where am I? How did I get here and what is happening and where am I going? *What is the situation?* It is this

existential question to which the novel responds, always in a historically specific way. This manner of response is why the novel's historicity is inseparable from its intelligibility and why, as such, its paradoxical essence is its dynamism, its open-endedness, its inessentiality.

The problem of the situation therefore reveals why the novel can be neither withdrawn from nor circumscribed by its moment. It is both history and literature. As history, it presents a narrative tableau or snapshot in which are posed a variety of elements, however abstract or figurative, which organize the structure of the text's situation, inviting critical apprehension and historiographic description of both its local situation and the situation's aesthetic organization. As literature, the novel withholds its final meaning and ensures that every quest for such finality will end in failure — even if that quest proceeds under the heading of “totalization,” that is, even if the historicist methodology concedes that totality is a logical rather than a practical conclusion to its inquiry. It does so not only because, as Foucault makes clear with *Don Quixote*, the language of literature is language at play, operating according to the semantic rules and cultural conventions which circulate around and beyond the words on the page but in ways that creatively exploit and manipulate those rules.²³ In addition to this, we must note that Foucault's or any theoretical assessment is also historically situated, and that the critical practices theory brings to bear on a text or genre are animated by the experience of reading — in short, there is no metalanguage, no other of the other; no experience takes place in a vacuum. Readers, whether critical or casual, cannot but twist and shift the novel's possibilities toward their own moment. And this is good and right since it is why novels endure, why the novel as such endures and resists final historical enclosure. As both literature and history, the novel is the opening in history within which the existential question of the situation takes place and repeats itself interminably.

2. Singularity

This opening announces a new regard for the excess of the human over and against the variety of historical/discursive enclosures

which attempt to contain and control it, also a new demand that criticism address itself toward this excess.

At the beginning of this inquiry we noted that an object of theory does not precede its theorization, and that this is foundational for both literature and literary criticism. One important consequence of this is that with literature, with the experience of literature, the distinction between subject and object, so operative for the theory of the novel since its earliest days and for literary criticism before it, is undone. In lieu of a critical subjectivity acting upon its object, the literary absolute instantiates a *singularity* of experience. Singularity is not subjectivity by another name. The subject is a metaphysical conceit, while singularity is the bit of the human that persists beyond its metaphysical overlay, therefore against every effort to transcendentalize it. Singularity is the mark of the limit of every modality of the subject, also of every theory of the subject. The subject always exists within and through a historically specific discourse — novelistic discourse, for instance, which from the start was concerned with representing the (modern, individualized) subject formally and thematically — and therefore is structured by that discourse and can exist only within its limits. Singularity, however, names a dimension of the human that resists generalization or is this very resistance. It operates at the limits of representation, pushes against these limits, therefore *defines* its limits always in its own way, and in so doing reveals the radical peculiarity of every instance of the human. Every effort at its articulation inevitably results in an intransigent remainder of language and sense, and it is this remainder that demands to be read and ensures the possibilities of reading are inexhaustible.²⁴

The novel marks the realization of this demand, in a double sense: historically, the novel is the aesthetic category through which the Jena romantics discovered the workings of the literary absolute before and beyond the latter's intellectual formulation; it is the literary mode, "the poetry of poetry," in which the co-constitutive relation between creativity and critical reflection is made real. The second meaning of realization here involves the reification of this discovery through a romantic practice of reading and writing that foregrounds an experience resistant to discursive translation or assignation. The novel thus joins the situation

with the singularity it informs but can never exhaust, or shows the singularity at stake in every situation and every attempt to mediate it through the work of literature.

3. Community

The situation and the singularity of literature obviously are not unique to the novel, but we are here designating them fundamental concepts animating the novel's theorization because they are means of designating the novel as an event in the history of representation, an event that perpetually renews itself in every novel, but not only there.²⁵ It influences other aesthetic modes (poetry, drama, cinema, even the plastic arts) so profoundly that insofar as our concepts are applicable to these other modes it is to the extent that they operate novelistically. We have already seen with the novel's history of experimentation and formal diversity, and from the perpetual crisis it invokes within the terrain of taxonomicity, that the same is true in reverse, as well: that the novel is a highly suggestible medium. We also know that the problem with any effort to install the extreme meandering of the novel upon a common ground by way of a common, even if fragmentary, origin is that every origin is a myth, reified as an after-effect of reading, and not a matter of empirical historical fact. Even the opposition between the epic and the novel that initially animated the phenomenological approach risks committing this fallacy of the origin.

The theory of the novel, then, designates what Jean-Luc Nancy calls an inoperative community, both because of the uniqueness of each of its objects of concern and because the experience of reading which animates that concern is a testament to the singularity of the critic's inherently creative engagement. It is indeed a community, but not one in which each of its constituent elements — critics and texts, schools and subjects, origins and conclusions — can be fused into the homogeneity of a common being. Instead, the theory of the novel addresses a “being-in-common,” the common uncommonness of every singularity. Here, “the totality of community [...] is a whole of articulated singularities” in which articulation “does not mean organization.” On the trail toward what this

announces for literature, for what Nancy calls “literary communism,” he continues:

By itself, articulation is only a juncture, or more exactly the play of the juncture: what takes place where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other — exactly at its limit — where these singular and distinct pieces fold or stiffen, flex or tense themselves together and through one another, unto one another, without this mutual *play* — which always remains, at the same time, a play *between* them — ever forming into the substance or the higher power of the Whole. Here *the totality is itself the play* of the articulations. This is why a whole of singularities, which is indeed a whole, does not close in around the singularities to elevate them to its power: this whole is essentially the opening of singularities in their articulations, the tracing and the pulse of their limits.²⁶

The novel interrupts the myth of its own origin and refuses to be fused into a closed, coherent totality. More than this, the novel imposes upon us the intellectual bankruptcy of generic classification because it is recalcitrant to all *genera*, because it categorically denies the priority of the law of genre, because it fatally compromises any effort to reduce the infinite disparity of its examples to a series of common types. What every novel *fundamentally* has in common with every other is that they are all radically unique, and this radical uniqueness is renewed each time the novel or its history or, indeed, its theory are picked up and read. This is why there are as many theories as there are theorists of the novel, why the field remains open, why it is as undetermined and interminable as its supposed object. This literary communism, where its constitutive articulations play upon and against their own limits interminably and incalculably, is the horizon which for the theory of the novel demands and remains to be thought.

We have long known that genres are inherently unstable, that they are hegemonic rather than fixed, that they are historically and ideologically contingent. And yet, even with the novel's profound challenge to its critical usefulness, genre remains an operative concept

for the theory of the novel. It is the aesthetic correlate of the common being against which Nancy's notion of inoperativity is directed, and perpetuates the urge to communal fusion literary communism disrupts. Genre is a disciplinary concept that inhibits the play of articulations or our discernment of that play, to the detriment of the singularity of literature. Consider, does Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, whose eponymous character's temperament is as contingent and malleable as his/her gender, who ages just twenty years throughout the four-hundred year history her biography spans, deserve to be considered a fantasy novel? What is to be gained or lost by such generic assignation? Is Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, which takes place one million years in the future, when humans have evolved into sleek-pelted seal-like creatures, a science fiction novel, considering Vonnegut's explicit disdain for that subgenre and its fans? Or, since its narrator is the disembodied spirit of a man who has been dead for a million years, is *Galapagos* rather a ghost story? Is Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, one of the most celebrated examples of the novel, truly a novel at all, or is it a pseudo-novelistic extension of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography? Is *Gulliver's Travels* a novel despite its formal deviation from the other long-form narratives surrounding it, or is it a satirical work of political propaganda, or both? Are *The Trial* or *The Castle* or *Amerika* novels, even though Kafka never completed them and, since he did not imagine they would ever be known beyond his small circle of confidantes, were never definitively organized by Kafka himself? Or does this raise the question whether every novel, in its own way, is unfinished? Is *Finnegan's Wake* a novel, and if so, would this force us to consider how Vico's *La Scienza Nuova*, which Samuel Beckett considers the blueprint for Joyce's text, is also a novel or should be read novelistically? Similarly, does Naguib Mafouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* belong to the older folk tradition from which the text takes its inspiration, or does it perhaps retroactively reconstitute the *1001 Nights*, from Antoine Galland's first translation and publication in 1704 to its contemporary variations, as a novel and not, or not only, an Orientalist compendium?

While it would be instructive to venture an answer to any of these questions, the point for our purposes is that the fact they can be posited

at all severs the *cordon sanitaire* between the novel and other aesthetic modalities, between this or that subspecies of the novel, between literature and philosophy, or finally between fiction and truth. The community which is oriented-but-not-organized by the question of the theory of the novel is an inoperative one because it concerns a community of texts defined not by what each of its elements has in common, not by the features of a text that permit its being positioned here or there, but by every text's common uncommonness. This is redoubled within the community of readers, lay or critical, by the irreducible experience of reading that instantiates them as community. And this means that the question of the theory of the novel also asks where literature itself begins or ends, asks the question of the undecidable limit between the work of literature and the wider human experience. The *is* in the question, *What is the novel?*, the copula which joins and separates the novel's whatness with its thatness, is the site of the (non-)relation among singularities out of which community emerges. The question is not a call for definition but an opening that perpetually resists critical certitude or is this very resistance. Let us say, finally, that the theory of the novel is the theorization of literature's resistance to its own theorization.

4. *The desire of the critic*

When we are confronted with a dynamic resistance that perpetually invites theorization but refuses totalization, an interminable resistance, we hear an echo of the unconscious and particularly of the structure of unconscious fantasy. According to psychoanalysis, the purpose of investigating desire is not to arrive at its final determination, but to assume an ethics of the question that relinquishes every ambition toward theoretical mastery. Such an ethics begins with the axiom that a fantasmatically motivated quest for totality, for mastery, is driven by and sustains an anxiety of incompleteness. In other words, it is because we are constitutively split along the pole of desire that we seek to close that split, to find a satisfaction that would put an end to desire, and it is for the same reason that this quest for satisfaction is at bottom a questing after death. In Nancy's more politicized language, "Immanence, communal

fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it."²⁷ To combine these two discourses: community exists only insofar as it is inoperative, only if its elements cannot be put to work in service to some unifying enterprise, only if it is animated by an ethics of desire that forestalls its enclosure within a rigid totality.

Repeating this symptomatically within the theory of the novel, we can say that the desire to answer the question of the novel is a desire to put an end to it, to arrest the anxiety it invokes. Yet, the history of the theory of the novel, when abstracted from its individual instances and taken as a whole, reveals that this has never been the desire at stake in this domain of inquiry, whether taxonomically or phenomenologically oriented. *What is the novel?* is a question that remains to be asked despite the ever-growing panoply of responses because every answer is a trace of the literary absolute, a critical and — because of its necessary indelibility, because every singularity refuses discursive designation — creative mark of the experience of reading. Every such trace therefore succeeds in articulating (*pace* Nancy) something of this experience by failing to arrive at what it seeks. The desire of the critic, on this view, is not the desire for a final answer to the question of the novel, but the desire to go on desiring, to ask the question again and anew, to repeat the question in diverse contexts, or with regard to underexamined cultural phenomena, or according to particular ideological or moral dispositions, or with as yet unforeseeable critical tactics.

By variously forgetting its indebtedness to the literary absolute, foreclosing the singular experience of reading, or operating tautologically in search of novelistic essence, the theory of the novel has repressed this fact of its own desire. If theorizing the novel is the theorization of literature's resistance to its own theorization, then the desire of the critic is the desire to be resisted, the desire to fail to arrive at one's final destination, to go on questing and questioning without the satisfaction of a response. And this is as it should be, lest theory commit suicide by its own success.

IV. *Conclusion: Join the Resistance*

Novels exist because the novel does not exist — because it is as yet incomplete and because its perpetual becoming incompletes every instance of its being. Its inexistence is what prompts and makes possible the proliferation of its examples. It is not an object to be grasped historically or theoretically but a hole in the order of taxonomic knowledge, the name for an *absence* around which literary history and theory swirl, by which they are oriented, but which they cannot contain.

What does all this imply, finally, for theoretical praxis? In the first place, it means that the concept of genre has outlived its use, that sorting and sifting novels according to generic criteria, or even separating the novel from other genres, imposes an unproductive constraint upon our considerations of what a novel is or can be. The taxonomic principle has illuminated this fact by giving rise to ever more nuanced but ultimately insufficient characterizations of the novel's formal complexities and historical permutations. In its perpetual and self-perpetuating move from instance to essence and back, taxonomic criticism reveals the novel's withdrawal from essentiality; every approximation of its essence produces not more truth but more, and more inventive, resistance to the taxonomic search for truth. In this regard, the taxonomic principle generates a negativized map of the novel's resistance to theorization. If it is to work toward the development of a specific structure immanent to the work itself, the work of literature, the work of the novel, it should be deployed in service to this resistance, so that rather than putting novels *to work* toward some extrinsic theoretical end it can elaborate how the novel *unworks* every attempt at its instrumentalization.

The phenomenological approach, meanwhile, foregrounds the novel's intimate relation to the human experience and the open-ended incalculability of that experience. It thus clarifies the experiential stakes of the question of the novel according to its fundamental concepts: the situation which is both historically bound and radically unique; the persistence of singularity and its irreducibility to subjectivity, to the ideological mechanisms by which the subject is made and to which it is subjected; the literary communism, the indefinite play of articulations, this does not portend so much as announce; and the desire of the critic

which succeeds precisely where it fails to attain what it seeks. To assume the challenge of the phenomenological — which, again, would be unthinkable without its taxonomic complement — requires an ethical realignment of literary criticism away from the false certitudes of literary history — not an abandonment of history, but a revision of its critical function — and toward the perennial uncertainty and waywardness to which the novel is addressed and before which it is a reply. An ethics of criticism, then, that examines what can be known or produces knowledge in order to trace the limits of the knowable, that reads the novel's inscrutability not in order to contain but rather to care for it, that concerns the inscrutable in its very inscrutability.

"Yes, oh dear yes," E.M. Forster nearly laments, "the novel tells a story." But as J.M. Coetzee's narrator reminds us in his re-writing of *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of the woman who never appears in Defoe's story, the feminine voice who is everywhere in the original text but nowhere present in the words on the page, "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story." It is this still-beating heart we talk about when we talk about the novel, and we talk about it because it is a destination always on the horizon, to which we have not yet and perhaps never can arrive. The theory of the novel is the living monument to this failure to arrive, the trace of the novel's withdrawal from presence and from each instance of its presencing, and the response to the seduction of its ever becoming and never being. The question of the novel, the fact that we still ask this question, is no scandal. *What is the novel?* is incontrovertible proof that the novel *is* because it does not exist.

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 141.

² E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 25.

³ See, for instance, Anne Toner, "Anna Barbauld on Fictional Form in *The British Novelists* (1810)," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter 2011-12), 170-193.

⁴ Relevant examples include: John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1987); Ruth Mack, *Literary Historicity: Literature and Historical Experience in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁵ On the picaresque as the origin of the modern novel, see *The Picaresque Novel in Western Literature: From the Sixteenth Century to the Neopicaresque*, ed. J.A. Garrido Ardila (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); on Aphra Behn and the origin of the novel, see Judith Kegan Gardiner, "The First English Novel: Aphra Behn's Love Letters, the Canon, and Women's Tastes," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Autumn, 1989), 201-222; on Heliodorus as the ancient model of the novel, as well as a case for the priority of the sort of subjective interiority characteristic of Lafayette's novels, see Silvie Thorel-Cailleteau, "The Poetry of Mediocrity," *The Novel: Volume 2, Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 64-94; on the Bible as the foundation of literary representation, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), esp. 3-23.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 155.

⁷ According to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, "literature, as its own infinite questioning and as the perpetual positing of its own question, dates from romanticism and as romanticism. [...] This is why romanticism, which is actually a moment (the moment of its question) will always have been more than a mere 'epoch,' or else will never cease, right up to the present, to incomplete the epoch it inaugurated" (*The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester [Albany: SUNY Press, 1998], 83).

⁸ For a comprehensive history of early (pre-romantic) literary criticism, see Lee Morrissey, *The Constitution of Literature: Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 51.

¹⁰ A vital instance of this dialectical ambition is Michael McKeon's massive anthology, *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), which according to McKeon is constructed to reveal a continuity among the discontinuous or dispersed history of the novel's theorization, and in this way to arrive dialectically at a generically coherent definition of the novel that disputes what he sees as an over-emphasis (in Foucauldian criticism, for example) on discontinuity (xiv, xvii-xviii). At the extreme end of this effort of totalization is Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

1981). Jameson's (in)famous opening imperative, "Always historicize!," remains deeply influential in studies of the novel; but by insisting that this imperative "can follow two distinct paths [...]: the path of the object and the path of the subject" (9), he confines the question of literature to within a paradigm of thought that, as Benjamin, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy make clear in their reading of romanticism, is at odds with the very concept of literature.

¹¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). Emphasizing the matter of form, Watt clarifies, "the term realism does not here refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself" (ibid., 32). On the significance of Watt's departure from and dispute with F.R. Leavis and the older model of moralizing literary criticism, see Maximillian E. Novak, "Starting Out with Defoe in the 1950s," *Digital Defoe*, vol. 1, no. 1 (spring 2009), <https://english.illinoisstate.edu/digitaldefoe/archive/spring09/features/novak.pdf> [accessed November, 2018].

¹² For a fine summary of these objections, also a useful compendium of citations, see Robert Folkenflik, "The Heirs of Ian Watt," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Winter, 1991-1992), 203-217. To observe how these criticisms, all useful and valid, nevertheless leave the taxonomic principle unchallenged and indeed reify it, we need only cite the most capacious complication of Watt's position, Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). McKeon problematizes Watt's criterion by partitioning the genre according to whether a given novel primarily evinces a "naïve empiricism" or an "extreme skepticism" with regard to both its historical context and the other works of fiction surrounding it. For McKeon, these terms describe the literary aspect of the historical predicament in which a fading aristocracy was confronted with an emergent middle class. In this way, he affords another, materialist and Marxian framework of classification, which thickens rather than erodes the taxonomic bedrock on which he stands.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 48-49, 47.

¹⁴ Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 32; M.M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 4.

¹⁵ "Thus the first great novel of world literature," which here is also *Don Quixote*, "stands at the beginning of the time when the Christian God began to forsake the world; when man became lonely and could find meaning and substance only in his own soul, whose home was nowhere; when the world, released from its paradoxical anchorage in a beyond that is truly present, was abandoned to its immanent meaninglessness" (Georg

Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971], 103).

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87. The late addition of digital or hypertext novels in no way contradicts, but rather confirms, Benjamin's argument concerning the novel's dependence on its technological mediation, whether by way of the printing press or the computer screen.

¹⁸ Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 31.

¹⁹ Nancy Armstrong offers a more recent examination of the novel's contribution not only to the imaginary foundations of individualism but to the manufacture of individuals through the interpellation it imposes upon the experience of reading (*How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], esp. 1-52).

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 18.

²³ In this double regard, history and literature, the novel could be assessed according to Michel de Certeau's distinction between *strategies*, which always issue from an institutional position and attempt to promote its institution's interests, and *tactics*, which appropriate and redeploy the tools and materials of the institution in which they operate in creative ways that cannot be foreseen and with incalculable effects. "As indexes of particulars — the poetic or tragic murmurings of the everyday — ways of operating enter massively into the novel or the short story, most notably in the nineteenth-century realistic novel. They find there a new representational space, that of fiction, populated by everyday virtuositities that science doesn't know what to do with and which become the signatures, easily recognized by readers, of everyone's micro-stories. *Literature* is transformed into a repertory of these practices that have no technological copyright" (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 70; emphasis in original; on the distinction between strategies and tactics, see 38-39).

²⁴ This is the core concern of Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*; the 2017 edition of this book includes in its preface a passage Attridge edited out of its original 2004 publication, which pointedly asks, "what if the most important reason for our high valuation of literary works, that which has kept literature alive for so long and against

such odds, is something we *can't* talk about, or at least that none of our readily available conceptual tools — whether those of informal discussion or those of the traditions of philosophy and aesthetic criticism — is able to handle? What if the immense scholarly and critical resources we are now able to draw on in our debates about literary works obscure the nature of the object being discussed as much as they illuminate it?" (London: Routledge Classics, 2017, xvii).

²⁵ In another, more deconstructive vein, Mario Ortiz Robles examines the eventual quality of the novel according to its performative effects upon language and the socio-historical order it structures (*The Novel as Event* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010]).

²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 76; emphasis in original.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.