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The Novel as Genre

What is a novel? Perhaps the better question is what *isn't* a novel? Henry James' "large loose baggy monster" is, and indeed may always have been, the portmanteau of genres. The novel's cannibal capacity to ingest a wide range of literary genres, modes, and forms makes of this generic monster a veritable Polyphemus, a one-eyed giant towering over literary studies, a law unto itself, strong-arming everything before it into its formal maw. As with the genre, so with its theorists – or so charge critics for whom the privileging of the novel over other genres amounts to critical myopia. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's trenchant phrasing, critiquing Franco Moretti's novel-based theory of world literature, "why should the (novel in the) whole world be the task of every comparativist?"¹ Earlier, Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) asserted that the "novel-centered view of prose fiction is a Ptolemaic perspective, which is now too complicated to be any longer workable, and some more relative and Copernican view must take its place."² Polyphemused, or Ptolemaic, critical theory that takes the novel as its ever-expanding center risks turning a single genre into a universal model. With this caution in mind, I nonetheless undertake here to excavate a theory of genre from a close consideration of the critical history of the novel. Theorists of the novel loom larger in what follows than novelists, despite the fact that whatever the theory of the novel is, it is certainly the direct consequence of novels themselves, those sociological, ideological, political, cultural, and aesthetic experiments in the representation of everyday life; historical sensibility; human subjectivity; gendered, sexualized, raced, classed, and national identity; and the engines of society. There are quite possibly as many versions of what the novel is as there are novelists and novel theorists. There is something in the novel for Marxists, feminists, historicists, queer theorists, deconstructionists, postcolonialists, psychoanalytic critics, and eighteenth-, nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-centuryists, even classicists.

Beginning with Ian Watt and finding admirably complex reiteration with Michael McKeon, the novel has often been described as the product of a historical tension between fact and fiction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, something attested to by the frontispieces of early novels, with their claims to be “the veritable story of _____.”³ But the novel is so much more than fact or fiction, so much more than the story of their contest. The hallmark of the novel may well be its relative newness – *novel*, an unheard of wonder, a piece of unknown information, a report back from a world elsewhere, like the New World territories of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) or Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), or a world within, like the emergent interiority of bourgeois subjects reflected in the eighteenth-century epistolary novels of Samuel Richardson and Choderlos de Laclos or the nineteenth century’s fateful mix of self, society, property, and passion as chronicled by Austen, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, Eliot, Zola, James, and many more. But the novel, despite a newness retrospectively inflected with the rise of modernity, colonialism, capitalism, nationalism, individualism, and secularism, also spans a surprisingly long history, stretching back through the ancient Hellenistic proto-novels that follow *The Odyssey* (that most novelistic of epics), including Xenophon’s biographical *Cyropaedia*, *The Alexander Romance* falsely attributed to Calisthenes, Heliodorus’ exotic *Ethiopian Story*, the comedic-ribald wanderings of Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* and Petronius’ *Satyricon*, and continuing through such global early foundations as *The Tale of Genji*, *Don Quixote*, *Oroonoko*, and *La Princesse de Clèves*, in all of which courtly romance and prose fiction joust, on toward its eighteenth-century consolidation, through the period of European colonialism and imperialism that saw the nineteenth-century novel’s modular spread, and on to postmodern and postcolonial iterations of this global genre.⁴ So vast and various a genre cannot be indexed with any real thoroughness here, nor is a catalog of multiple accounts of the novel my major purpose. Rather, I hope to craft through a necessarily impressionistic survey of theory about the novel a portrait of a genre that is known one way (as A, as B) but operates as well in quite another way (as X, as Y) – like Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, so young and new on the surface, so old and abiding beneath. This duality, I will argue, is a hallmark of the novel and of genre too. Both are categories marked by dialectical form, that is, an interplay of contradictory forces.

I began with the question, what is the novel? Perhaps the novel answers, like wily Odysseus wrapped in sheep’s clothing beneath the watchful eye of Polyphemus, to the name of “nobody.” Nobody’s novel describes a genre whose genius is to be everything and nothing, a category without which modern genre theory is unthinkable yet a category that swallows itself to the

point of disappearance, something that can be understood as a proper name (The Novel) and as a series of proprietary names (The Novelists) yet which also operates, as Jacques Derrida suggests, as a generic law of perpetual transformation, and, not least of all, a genre that in small ways and large evades the critical gaze that would capture it. To attempt to define the novel as a genre is risky, even quixotic. The object of the analysis is so monstrously indefinite, so historically long and geographically broad, so diverse in its modes (realism, sentimentalism, naturalism, magical realism, postmodernism, localism, globalism), and so cannibal in its appetites that to hazard a taxonomic description is surely to court being swallowed by the object itself, as if in some Borgesian nightmare. We all tilt at windmills, however, and in that task we must reach for such aid as we can. This chapter might just as well have been titled (with apologies to *Dr. Strangelove*), “Genre: Or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Novel.” I am proposing, for scholars and lovers of the novel alike, the usefulness of genre as a category that helps us to understand not only the *what* and *whence* of the novel – its nature (and culture), its history (and future) – but also the novel’s *whys*. Why does this particular form of prose fiction do the things that it does? Why does it move so stealthily and powerfully across the globe? Why does it additionally move human beings, charging and channeling the mysteries of sentimental identification? Why does it condense, again and again, the historical sensibility of a moment, capturing what it is to live now, live here, live this way? Why does the novel, as a genre, occupy time and space and heart and mind in the ways that it does? And why should thinking through these *whys* change our grasp of the novel’s, and genre’s, *what*? To answer all these questions in detail is well outside the scope of this chapter. I pose them, however, to signal the possibilities of genre theory, to signpost where one might alight in the quest of critical genre theory.

In *The Ideology of Genre* (1994), Thomas Beebe identifies “four stages of genre criticism – genre as rules, genre as species, genre as patterns of textual features, and genre as reader conventions [that] correspond to the four positions in the great debate about the location of textual meaning: in authorial intention, in the work’s historical or literary context, in the text itself, or in the reader.”⁵ Such stages follow the passage from classical genre theory (Aristotle above all), to the nineteenth-century phylogeny of genres (Ferdinand Brunetière), to narratologic formalism in the early twentieth century, through to postwar structuralism, reader-response criticism, and, I would add, poststructuralism. The analytic object I have called “Nobody’s Novel” cannot be read merely by naming its generic rules, its species or individual history, its formal attributes, or its variously housed “meaning.” Taking “nobody”

as a sign for a deanthropomorphized history of the novel, in what follows I propose the virtues of taking a different approach to the novel and to genre theory itself. Certain scales of the human fall away as I index approaches that focus on the novel's commodity status as a circulating good, a market force, a literary gold standard, even as other scales of the human continue to pulse – the novel's capacity to structure subjectivity, to produce sentiment, and to “sediment history,” to borrow Fredric Jameson's phrase.⁶ Nobody's genre is one that takes a shape only to change its shape. As such, the novel offers a powerful invitation for genre theory that takes its cue from processual change rather than cumulative inheritance, from becoming rather than arriving, from Odyssean twists and turns rather than straight lines.

A Swiftly Tilting Genre

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “genre” as “1: kind, sort, species, style, category kind; 2: a category of artistic composition characterized by a particular style, form or content.” Genre encompasses both an object of analysis and the method, the particular sorting strategy, that allows said object to come into view. Because differentiation is indispensable to genre theory, many accounts of the novel describe its particularity, especially its much-vaunted *newness*, by comparing it to other genres, be it the epic, romance, and travel narrative with which Behn's *Oroonoko*, the first novel in the English tradition, does battle, or the penitent's confession, sermon, treatise on political economy, sailor's yarn, and ship's record that insert themselves into Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the other contender for the title of first English novel. In both *Oroonoko* and *Robinson Crusoe*, these interweavings establish a network of connection that mirrors in generic form the capitalist world system coalescing into colonial form in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. We additionally invest the empirically differentiating category of genre with an almost mystical capacity to trace history and predict the future. As Claudio Guillén explains in *Literature as System* (1971):

[T]he concept of genre looks forward and backward at the same time . . . Backward, toward the literary works that already exist. Forward, in the direction of the apprentice, the future writer, the informed critic. A genre is a descriptive statement, but, rather often, a declaration of faith as well. Looking toward the future, then, the conception of a particular genre may not only incite or make possible the writing of a new work; it may provoke, later on, the critic's search for the total form of the same work.⁷

Genre theory and genre theorists also navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of empirical measurement and occult possession, as can be seen in the dual tendencies to tell the story of the novel, on the one hand, as if it were a measurable scientific phenomenon, like the evolution of a species or the patterning of the stars, and, on the other hand, as if it were the story of our very selves, the stuff of dream and fantasy.

As a sigil for generic history's servants, consider the words of Cervantes himself in chapter 47 of *Don Quixote*, speaking as a canon from Toledo excoriating novels of chivalry:

I have seen no book of chivalry that creates a complete tale, a body with all its members intact, so that the middle corresponds to the beginning, and the end to the beginning and the middle; instead, they are composed with so many members that the intention seems to be to shape a chimera or monster rather than to create a well proportioned figure.⁸

The monstrous hybridity feared by the canon is nothing other than the novel's (Cervantes' but also everyone else's) *form*: the "cut-n-mix" sampling of whatever material falls to hand, the inventive synthesis of old with new, fact with fiction, social with imaginative, political with personal. Both chimera and chameleon, the novel is defined by the *ongoing* nature of its hybridity. Mikhail Bakhtin's paean to the perpetual newness and liveness of the novel captures it thus: "As form, the novel establishes as fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being; as the idea of becoming, it becomes a state. Thus the novel, by transforming itself into a normative being of becoming, surmounts itself."⁹ In this presciently postmodern formulation, the novel is less essence than process, a genre that is always in the mode of *becoming other*, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. For Bakhtin, the novel overcomes its overwhelming "lack of limits," its "'bad' infinity," through "recourse to the biographical form." For Bakhtin, this means that the novel's impossible effort as a "conceptual system" to capture life – the quixotic quest for totality – finds its resting point in a form, like that of "the individuality of a living being," that straddles the divide between specific identity and worldly context.¹⁰ It is not merely that the novel concerns the lives of individuals ("the development of a man is still the thread upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls") but, more significantly, that the novel as a genre invites individualization, subjectification, and anthropomorphization.¹¹

Why is the plot and scale of human time the one to which the theory of the novel turns? Why are we so quick to attribute a life to the novel or, for that matter, a birth and a death? Why are we so drawn to the taxonomy of proper names and particular places, as if the history of the novel could unfold like

a biography or a sailor's chart? Marthe Robert's *Origins of the Novel* (1980) offers a fine example of the latter strain, diagnosing the generic equivalent of a Freudian primal scene in the novel's history, something to which the novel returns again and again, namely, a gendered quest to find and tame otherness, otherwise known as Romance, with its adventure trials, conflicts, and resolutions. The chronological antecedent of Romance becomes for Robert the genre's interiority, that which it cannot escape and compulsively repeats, "a *pre-romanticised fancy*, the outline of a plot which is not only the inexhaustible source of subsequent plots, but the one convention to which it is willing to submit."¹² For Robert, the novel is an unruly child that

receives from literature as such no hard and fast directions or interdictions; be it popular or highbrow, old or new, classical or modern, its only rules are derived from the family setting whose unconscious desires it perpetuates; so that while its psychic content and motivations are completely pre-determined, it is totally free to choose one or more of the various structures and styles at its disposal.¹³

The anthropomorphic account of the novel is striking: why the impetus to tell the story of the novel as if the genre were human, possessed of a psyche, an unconscious, even agential choice? For Robert, "primal romance" is generic all:

[M]ore than simply the psychological origins of the genre; it [primal romance] is the genre, with all its inexhaustible possibilities and congenital childishness, the false, frivolous grandiose, mean, subversive and gossipy genre of which each of us is indeed the issue . . . and which, moreover, recreates for each of us a remnant of our primal love and primal reality.¹⁴

In a rather different meditation on the novel's housing of romance within its generic protocols, Michael McKeon asserts that "the origins of the English novel entail the positing of a 'new' generic category as a dialectical negation of a 'traditional' dominance – the romance, the aristocracy – whose character still saturates, as an antithetical but constitutive force, the texture of the category by which it is in the process of being replaced."¹⁵ What McKeon calls the novel's "definitional volatility" is in point of fact the volatility of genre itself as a category. So it is that "we may see that the early development of the novel is our great example of the way that the birth of genres results from a momentary negation of the present so intense that it attains the positive status of a new tradition . . . this broader dialectical reversal . . . [and] tendency to dissolve into its antithesis . . . encapsulates the dialectical nature of historical process itself at a critical moment in the emergence of the modern world."¹⁶ Thanks to this diagnosis of the oscillations of generic time – the spectral haunting of the generic present by a never altogether

sublated generic past – both the novel and the theory of the novel become engagements with nonlinear time. This is sharply different from Watt’s mere rise. Time, I would contend, is the hidden lever in the theory of novelistic genre, that which extends the incipient biographicalism in telling the “story” of the novel to a broader philosophical inquiry into the relationship between the novel, the subject, and the world.

Genre is chronotopical, to use Bakhtin’s term for the process in which “time thickens out, takes on flesh, and becomes artistically visible, likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.”¹⁷ It is in the novel’s *language* where Bakhtin detects the flesh of time, locating the “germs of novelistic prose” in the “decentered language” that emerges in moments marked by the “decay and collapse of the religious, political and ideological authority connected with that language,” as, for instance, in the Hellenistic era, Imperial Rome, and the Middle Ages.¹⁸ Decentered language shapes meaning not by monological power but “by means of heteroglossia,” the many-voicedness that for Bakhtin comprises the material stuff of novelistic prose and its revolutionary effect. The Renaissance and Protestantism destroy the verbal and ideological centralization of the medieval era, ushering in the “Galilean language of the novel,” as opposed to the Ptolemaic linguistic consciousness of traditional styles.¹⁹ *Don Quixote* might then be positioned as Stephen Moore sees it: decisively split between the eponymous protagonist’s irrational belief in chivalric literature and Catholic religion (“A medieval man, he still believes in the Ptolemaic view of the universe and prefers prayer to perception”) and his companion Sancho’s pragmatic modernity, cast as the empiricism of an inquiring mind that wants to know.²⁰ Don Quixote looks back to romance; Sancho looks forward to an essentially skeptical tradition (Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Gustave Flaubert, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, and on to James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace). This essentially *historical* division, however, threatens to reinscribe novelistic genre in a tale whose temporality mimics that of linear history (to say nothing of progeniture). By focusing on the linguistic capacity for endless internal differentiation as the mark of the novel’s historical newness and its constitutive, perpetual break from authoritarianism, Bakhtin’s theory of novelistic genre tunes into a set of measures – language, time, space, form – that produces not a metronomical model in which the pendulum between ancients and moderns swings sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, nor a filiative model of novelistic fathers and sons, but rather a model more monstrous, inhuman even, in its image of a cannibal genre that heteroglossically digests the world. Such is the magnitude of the novel that it even swallows other genres. So where Northrop Frye disaggregates genre

(romance, tragedy, comedy, irony), Bakhtin unifies it into the novel's capacity to unite all genres and to serve as "an encyclopaedia of all types of literary language of the epoch."²¹ Put differently, if Frye's anatomy of criticism vivisects genre, Bakhtin's account brings the novel to heterogeneous life, pulsing across two and a half millennia and, with a fine disregard for the spatiotemporal barriers of history, ever heeding and frequently anticipating the modernist call to *make it new*.

The novel's newness takes on a quite different cast in the hands of Walter Benjamin, who shrouds the genre in a mournful landscape of loss, memory, and melancholy. Benjamin's essay, "The Storyteller," urges us to "image the transformation of epic forms occurring in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries . . . it took the novel, whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered in the evolving middle class those elements which were favorable to its flowering."²² Alluvial in its flow, the novel's generic history is punctuated with sharp moments, for instance, the rise of the ideology of the individual. So, for Benjamin, "the birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual," the latter's rise concomitant with the decline of storytelling's oral tradition and collective culture.²³ Storytelling produces a community of experience, whereas the novel, because "the novelist has isolated himself," becomes the record of a radical aloneness. The novel "gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living," and it is nothing other than *Don Quixote*, "the first great book of the genre," that Benjamin cites as proof of the novel's generic preoccupation with how the greatest, the boldest, the noblest in the end "do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom."²⁴ If the novel is didactic in forms such as the *bildungsroman*, it is merely an attempt to cover unending human confusion with the veneer of a forward-moving "social process."²⁵ The novel is magic, and not necessarily good magic. More like cheap sleight-of-hand or, in the metaphor Benjamin favors, modernity's copy of something done better, more authentically (one is tempted to say more humanly) in the past.

For all that novel and storytelling figure agonistically – the former the product of the atomized society of print capitalism, the latter the work of a lost culture of listening while "weaving and spinning" – what the two genres do share is the work of memory. For Benjamin, "memory is the epic faculty *par excellence*," and epic itself, that "oldest form" of "the record kept by memory," is "a kind of common denominator [that] includes the story and the novel."²⁶ Memory is what turns story and novel from historical antagonists to secret sharers. The "perpetuating remembrance" of the novel and the "short-lived reminiscence" of the story (which "preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of

releasing it even after a long time”) are a present distinction that reveals a past connection, “the unity of their origin in memory having disappeared with the decline of the epic.”²⁷ As an exercise in genre history, Benjamin’s essay turns on the diagnosis of something hidden within a particular form that reveals not its self-sameness but its ghostly doubleness, its coexistence with what precedes and follows it. “The Storyteller” also offers, against the sequential lines and breaks of genre history, a series of interpenetrating, crisscrossing lines, one as striking as that which Benjamin praises as the work of storytelling catalyzed by memory, the weaving of “the web which all stories together form in the end.”²⁸

As inviting as it is to read the account in “The Storyteller” of the decline of storytelling’s Scheherazadian art as a chronicle of loss, ending, and spinning out, for which the novel serves as modernity’s lesser twin, it is equally possible to discern in the essay’s various resistances to such rise and fall, start and stop temporalities the shape of another kind of genre history, one that I will call *nonlinear*. The flow-forward/flashback movement of Benjamin’s biography of the novel reveals it, and genre too, as indubitably marked by time, not just moving through time but experienced as a negotiation of time, be it the large scale of social and species being or the work of memory or the apprehension of history. This account of preserved traces and spectral presences that *remain* even as they are recombined yields a particular orientation to the novel as genre. Benjamin’s account of the novel, like McKeon’s similarly dialectical one, situates it as a break with older forms of culture and narration yet also unravels the presence of the old that has been lost, the haunting Mnemosyne within. It is this ghost within the novel machine, this animate spirit behind narrative *techne* (art or craft), that invites a reading of its generic multiplicity. Genre’s technology is a virtual one, meaning that it regularly activates a potential that lies within it, like the alien in John Hurt’s belly or the swallowed men whose revenge Odysseus will take in blinding Polyphemus. Genre’s time does not simply grind forward in the style of historical progress. True, each new generic instance cannibalizes its predecessor; genres are monsters, and they eat their old. Yet genres, by virtue of their forward/back, stop/start machinery, regularly call into question the foundational assumptions that cause them to be named as such. Hence the classificatory confusion that is marked in certain postmodern fiction, with its encroaching footnotes, metacritical narrative voice, and language pyrotechnics, or in such contemporary developments as the digital novel in email, text, and IM form is, far from the “end” of the novel, a kind of look homeward (conjure what angels you will, Wolfe’s and Benjamin’s) to a past that keeps coming back. The line between Cervantes and Pynchon

narrows, allowing us to see genre as a way to name an electric current of sorts, an energy flow that in the end survives and transcends critical capture.

Jameson describes the process thus:

This final moment of the generic operation, in which the working categories of genre are themselves historically deconstructed and abandoned, suggests a final axiom, according to which *all* generic categories, even the most time-hallowed and traditional, are ultimately to be understood (or “estranged”) as mere ad hoc, experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work.²⁹

If generic definition is doomed to obsolescence, if the good it does is oft interred with its bones, it nonetheless serves the useful purpose of showing exactly *what* a particular moment finds important – important enough to play content to a particular generic form. It is in this light that we might consider the antiauthoritarianism, individualism, nationalism, capitalism, domesticity, imperialism, subjectivity, empiricism, etc. that have so regularly been linked to the novel, like so many limpets on a strange creature of the briny sea.

The novel is never just one thing. Even the taxonomy of singularity fails, as witness the narrative of the genre’s eighteenth-century origins in the fact/fiction tension, chimerically grafted in *Robinson Crusoe*, or the account of the novel’s branching evolution into epistolary, gothic, and realist modes, the latter tending, on the one hand, to the historical (Scott, Balzac, Tolstoy) and, on the other, to the domestic (Austen, Eliot, Trollope), or the tale of modernism’s wholesale capture of the novel by, and for, language. The fact is that the novel was never fully tamed, never adequately contained within a definition, never readily consigned to this or that period of history. Thus a description like Steven Moore’s can only be caricatural (as Moore himself knows – it’s a warning not a beacon): “realistic narratives driven by a strong plot and peopled by well-rounded characters struggling with serious ethical issues, conveyed in language anybody can understand.”³⁰ The novel is this thing, true, but it is so many other things beside and simultaneously. Tony Tanner takes adultery as both a central topic of and model for the novel, which “might almost be said to be a transgressive mode, inasmuch as it seemed to break, or mix, or adulterate the existing genre-expectations of the time.”³¹ Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Dorothea Brooke, and Catherine Linton are heroines *of* the novel and a telos *for* the novel. Their thrust is not to marriage as an end in itself but as a state that demands its undoing, its canceling, what Marxist criticism like Jameson’s calls its dialectical transformation.

What Bakhtin calls “this most fluid of genres” is perhaps better conceived, like genre itself, as a *flow* rather than an *end*.³² We will not find the nature of

the novel searching between a rock and a hard place but rather by riding the “wave,” to borrow one of Moretti’s units for world literary analysis, of its movement. The novel is not a critical shibboleth, a *thing* like Marlow’s empire, “something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.”³³ No idol and no ideal, the novel might be better analogized to the sea, that Conradian force of change, all ebbs and flows of space and time, a thing of global spread and emotional recall. Contemplating the “waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth” on the deck of the *Nellie*, Marlow says: “We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs forever, but in the august light of abiding memories.”³⁴ To have “followed the sea,” Marlow adds, is to be able “to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames.” “The sea is history,” writes Derek Walcott in a poem of the same name.³⁵ Walcott’s lyric rewriting in *Omeros* of Homer’s *Odyssey* is an example of the way in which genres are haunted by their predecessors yet in that haunting perpetually remake themselves. Think too of the novelistic rewritings of Homer: Joyce’s *Ulysses*, William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacock* and the larger *Guyana Quartet*, Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad*, and Zachary Mason’s *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*. As a figure for critical genre theory, to follow the sea is to see the presence of the past flashing forth, to use Benjamin’s figure,³⁶ into the present, to see the novel not only for its newness but for its oldness too and not only as a category but also as a process. Here we would do well to remember Benjamin’s distinction in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” between mere historicism, which “gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past,” and dialectical historical materialism, which eschews such continuity in favor of stop-start rhythms. If historicism yields “universal history,” historical materialism enables “not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well” and in that moment of arrest (“where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions”) what is produced is a “shock.” This shock makes it possible to apprehend in the “cessation of happening” an opening toward something else, a future from which the past is neither mere antecedent nor obsolescent. This is a way of dwelling in time as if in the third stage of Hegel’s dialectic, where thesis and antithesis are simultaneously preserved and annulled in the synthesis (*aufheben*). This, I argue, is the time of genre and thus the time of the novel when considered through genre theory. Read thus, the novel is never just itself and is always open to futurity. Like the “No, not yet . . . no, not there” with which E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* concludes, as Fielding’s and Aziz’s horses crash against one another and draw apart, the novel itself is animated by a suspension, a cessation, or a pregnant waiting, what we might call the *freeze-frame of generic time*, as opposed to its

alluvial flows.³⁷ Read through genre theory, the novel is both snapshot and substrate, both the congealed form of a particular history (say, waning British imperialism and rising anticolonial nationalism in Forster's novel) *and* the ongoing wave of transformation, the altered state that ensues when something is exported, expanded, taken up, taken apart, adopted, adapted. To understand the novel as both a nodal point of condensation and a networked pattern of connectivity is to place it in the realm of yet another kind of history, this one not dialectical but nonlinear.

The Novel and the World: A Nonlinear History

Manuel De Landa's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, with its titular nod to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, embraces the nonlinear as that which resists the analytics of sequence, stage, and telos; foregrounds interactions between parts rather than sum totals; and thus arrives at a notion of history in which each new phase, be it geologic, biological, human, linguistic, cultural, agricultural, or urban, "simply added itself to the other ones, coexisting and interacting with them without leaving them in the past."³⁸ De Landa's map of nonlinear history recalls the rhizomatic map of *A Thousand Plateaus*, a map with no center and no periphery, no top and no bottom, but structured instead by points of density or saturation and by lines of connection or departure, a map in motion. Taking nonlinearity as a philosophical approach to genre, we can foreground the novel's formative relationship to history and memory, both of which reveal (like genre itself) the coexistence of multiple times.

Genre's palimpsestic, sedimentary time, rhizomatic space, and recombinant form enable its functioning as memory, both in large-scale histories of literary form and period and in accounts, such as Benjamin's, Jameson's, or McKeon's, that pinpoint how a particular form condenses a particular moment, providing a formal resolution of historical contradiction. If the former acts of genre memory are, to borrow a category from Deleuze and Guattari, sequential-teleological or "arborescent," the latter are rhizomatic, understanding the very object of the analysis (here novelistic genre) to, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "act at a distance, come or return a long time after, but always under conditions of discontinuity, rupture, and multiplicity."³⁹ Novelistic genre cannot be thought of as a singular thing – not only because of the novel's own heterogeneity, its cannibal combination of prior influences, but also because of the heterogeneity, and the heterochronicity, of genre itself. At its largest scale, the novel's generic multiplicity renders it world historical, but in such a way as to offer us a chance to reconceptualize what we mean by both world and history.

The novel is, for Lukács and Bakhtin, as later for Moretti and other world literature theorists, a *world genre*. This is far more than a genre with the world as the content of its form. As a world genre, the novel is marked by a sensibility of interconnection, what world literature theory often figures as the networked lines of times and spaces: ellipses (to borrow David Damrosch's figure)⁴⁰ of old texts coming back around in new uploads, patterns of influence (not always anxious), a substrate of textual connectivity across what Dimock refers to as *deep time*: "at once projective and recessionary, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations."⁴¹ World is both a space and a *time* and, beyond that, a methodology of reading that finds its Archimedean lever, as does genre theory itself, on the axis of time. The novel emerges from certain regimes of space (nationalism, imperialism, transnationalism, globalization), but its history reminds us that such spaces, no less than the genres that mirror them, are always also forms of time. Mixed, multiple, and multidirectional, genre offers a window onto not merely the history of genre but also history itself.

For genre theory, history is an inescapable backdrop of the novel. History is what animates the novelistic individual character moving in time against the backdrop of larger events, as for Bakhtin and, later, György Lukács. History is furthermore the real of the global-colonial world system that finds itself "haunted and tattooed" onto the map of the novel's form in Fredric Jameson's world-systems informed reading.⁴² But history is also what comes back, comes around, demands remembering, finds the possibility of forgetting in the formal resolutions of the novel. The implicit relationality of novel to world, the representational form to the historical real, is central to the Marxist literary theory of the novel, and its claim for the radical secularism of the novel is a foundational one. For Lukács, the novel unfolds in a world without "immanence of meaning," a world without God, in which meaning is "found everywhere." "Inconsolably sad," the novel is nonetheless capable of issuing a "song of comfort": the "affirmation of life that seems to emanate from it [the novel] as a mood is nothing other than the resolving of its form-conditioned dissonances, the affirmation of its own, form-created substances."⁴³ Novelistic form comforts by registering the felt immediacy of historical loss and further absorbing that feeling – Lukács' "melancholy of form." Immediate apprehension is thus turned to some broader historical consciousness or sensibility, some looking back, living after, knowing, for which the novel serves as an imaginative archive. So it is that the novel captures "the feeling of an age," turning history's events to form's residues. For Lukács, as for so many other of the genre's anatomists, the novel is both formal structure and philosophical mode, a strictly dissonant style of

knowing that negotiates the gap between “the conventionality of the objective world and the interiority of the subjective one.” As Timothy Bewes elegantly phrases it, in Lukács, “the novel designates less a form or genre than a condition in which form and content are for the first time radically heterogeneous.”⁴⁴ Such heterogeneity has been central to readings of the novel’s life, as, for example, in Bakhtin’s celebration of heteroglossia, dialogism, newness, and perpetual becoming. But the heterogeneous substrate of the form has equally been understood to describe what might be called the novel’s life work, its historical function, its form as a condensation of history itself.

Seen through the novel, the familiar cycle of history’s repetitive overturn is more than the same damn thing over and over again – first time as tragedy, second time as farce, but perhaps always as novel. The temporal coordinates of the novel here extend beyond the chronotope so famously associated with Bakhtin’s theory of the novel to encompass a sense of historical time itself as novelistic, that is to say, wildly differentiated, non-linearly coexistent, palimpsestically layered. Read chronotopically (through the process by which Bakhtin says “time thickens out, takes on flesh, and becomes artistically visible, likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history”⁴⁵), the genre of the novel is marked by spatiotemporal densities both internal to the form (melancholy) and external to the form (dissemination, evolution, accretion). The latter is part of what Dimock means when she casts genre as “a planetary phenomenon, an evolving field spread across temporal as well as geographical coordinates.” A genre’s spread is for Dimock its cumulative reuse, the “recycling that bring[s] it back, break[s] it up, and redistribute[s] it across a variety of locations, a variety of platforms.”⁴⁶

In another instance of nonanthropomorphic genre theory, Dimock elsewhere glosses genre as *virtual*, “a runaway reproductive process: offbeat, off-center, and wildly exogenous.”⁴⁷ When a genre is virtual, she adds, its “key attributes” become “stackability, switchability, and scalability.” Genre further works through “regenreing: or cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory.”⁴⁸ These scales are important. Despite its long-standing equation with the real (recall Henry James’ snapshot description of the novel as a mirror held up to life or the earlier eighteenth-century genealogy of the novel’s debt to fact), the novel’s generic *virtuality* highlights its ongoing capacity for change, its steady state of constant change, its perpetual process of becoming other, and, not least of all, its status as a formal process that may take individual subjectivity as one of its representational targets, even perhaps effects, but in the end cannot be explained by such subjectivity alone.

Dimock's departure point, Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre," accomplishes this critical task by taking genre out of the rhetoric of mastery, with its stealth subject of knowledge, and into the disseminatory textual economy of errancy. It is not the quixotic critic but genre itself that is knight errant: turning and twisting, tilting and transforming. For Derrida, genre operates less by selection and sequence than by combination, even contamination, and coexistence.⁴⁹ If the category of genre tends to teleology, codifying the vagaries of literary movement (rises, falls, births, deaths) into historical lineages, genre operates equally through nonlinear processes of interaction, selection, and combination, revealing an essentially recombinant structure and questioning the discourse of origins itself. Thus genre for Derrida is not a point of origin, still less a law of reproduction, but rather something that is always running from, yet routing back through, itself. In this formal feedback loop, each successive iteration or "contamination" of genre becomes part of the system. Impurity, antioriginal heterogeneity, is especially germane to the novel, that historically mixed form, as is also the conceptualization of genre not as a fixed essence but rather as a process.

World-systems style and world-literature approaches to the novel have turned precisely from the inner workings of the form to large networked patterns of generic movement over time. As literary critics indebted to Immanuel Wallerstein, including Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and Roberto Schwarz, have intuited, literary genres are elements within a world system.⁵⁰ Like any other commodity form, both genre's forms and flows can be mapped, traced, for instance, though the linear succession of capitalist cores and peripheries described in Wallerstein's account of the world capitalist economy or through the more uneven coexistence of capitalist and noncapitalist structures, European and non-European world-scale economies. The former allows us to tell the story of the novel's proto-imperial "rise"; the latter the story of its postcolonial "spread." But such temporalizations of generic modernity are not sufficient, for genre's time is more than this. If genre can be understood to operate as a world system, it is also equally the ghost within the system – a memory or trace of something long gone. Genre is mappable not only in its rises and spreads, its cores and peripheries, but also in its *holdings*: the melancholic interior of the form, encrypted around a loss that the form itself preserves and even in some form redresses. Genre theory of the novel, then, can turn both to the zone of what Lukács called the novel's inner melancholy of form and what I would term the novel's *affective intensities*, as well as turn outward to the disseminatory energy of the novel's global spread.

Despite a professional foot in world literature, I have been unable to consider the novel as simply one flow among others, yet another commodity

caught in the circuits of the global capitalist system as it centralizes, expands, and feeds new resources back to some center, in the model described by Casanova (with a distinctly Eurocentric, even Paris-centric, cast) and complicated by other world literature theorists.⁵¹ For all that I embrace Dimock's vision, figured as "a model of recursive kinship," of a literary history that "loops the gnarled contours of the globe through the gnarled contours of every single node," the warp and woof of this fabric ends up being American.⁵² More tempting to me has been the unearthing of a specific logic of racial-colonial capitalism, the system Eric Williams and C. L. R. James have understood to provide the extra-European motor for such iconically European inventions as the French Revolution and the British Empire and the possibility that the novel might follow that process, as Moretti suggests in his claim that the uptake of novelistic form into local materials outside Europe invigorated the genre into a global phenomenon.⁵³ But these flow-based, world-systems-oriented models take us only so far in examining the novel's broader cultural role, its part in negotiating, resisting, coming to terms with, and moving on from the haunting history of racial capitalism and historical trauma. To answer this question, the novel needs to be considered not only as a world object but as a kind of prototype for the world subject, a genre inimically linked to the categories of subjectivity, interiority, epistemology, power/knowledge, and ideology and further routed, equally irrevocably, through the psychic terrain of affective life.

In a foundational Foucauldian analysis of the novel, Nancy Armstrong suggests that

we might expect the history of the novel to provide the record of the power that helped to determine how people understood themselves as individuals and what they thought it meant to be happy and free ... we should be able to read the history of the novel as the formation of the individual who proved fit to inhabit a world based on the twin powers of supervision and information control, a world, in short, like ours.⁵⁴

In the current moment of dystopian fiction's resurgence (since the 2016 election of Donald Trump, sales of *Brave New World*, 1984, and *The Handmaid's Tale* have skyrocketed), it is hard not to concede the degree to which novelistic form provides a shorthand not only for the individuals created by a particular social regime but also for the regimes of self and society per se. Chicken and egg, novel and nation, representation and reality – it's not which comes first but, true to the dialectical form of the genre, that one can't exist without the other. This, of course, is Benedict Anderson's influential thesis of the novel as an imaginative technology for the nation form, thanks to its peculiar capture of accumulating time, circulating

connection, and the experience of community in anonymity, each reader of novel or newspaper aware of others like him or her, caught in the same world, experiencing the same thing.⁵⁵ What Armstrong diagnoses beyond the homology of novel and nation is the role that the former plays in the making of the subject assumed by the latter. Citing Rousseau, social contract theorist, autobiographer, and novelist, Armstrong reminds us of the entwined threads (society, self, human nature, social culture, free desire, practiced restraint) that combine to produce an idea of “an individual capable of transforming his own historical circumstances through the production of laws that are at once the extension and containment of his desires.”⁵⁶ It is just such an individual that Armstrong shows the novel to produce, indeed to model. At once desiring and disciplined, this Foucauldian individual’s emergence tells the story of the novel’s *domesticating* work, by which we should understand not only the specifically gendered realm of “domestic fiction” but also domestication as a particular technology of novelistic world-making, the crafting of subjects of desire caught within networks of capitalized power. This is similar to what Jameson detects in Henry James’ creation, through his hallmark point of view technique, of “strategic loci for the fully constituted or centered bourgeois subject or monadic ego” – the very ego that capitalism is invested in creating, and also the very novelistic individual around which, Dorothy J. Hale argues, revolve a series of ethical dilemmas involving telling, lying, acting (out), betraying, knowing the self and the other, staging the impossibility of just such a knowing.⁵⁷ Such subjects of the novel, emerging through Armstrong’s Foucauldian analytics or Jameson’s Marxist-psychoanalytic “political unconscious” or ethical criticism’s detection of a prototype for the subject of human rights in fictional characters “produced as ‘human,’”⁵⁸ are not the romanticized Freudian humans of Robert’s account of the novel as primal romance. Rather, these are novelistic subjects emerging through the lens of poststructuralist reading and returning us to where I began this chapter, with James’ identification of the novel as a “loose baggy monster.” Stitched together like *Frankenstein*’s creature from an assemblage of parts, precariously positioned at the nexus of fables of origin and evolution, life and death, humanity and monstrosity, creation and destruction, the novel repeatedly invites the creature’s own question: “Who am I?” To answer “Nobody” is in the end to attest to the wily work of the novel’s wor(l)ds.

NOTES

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17. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 84.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
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25. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
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30. Moore, *The Novel*, vol. 1, p. 3.
31. Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, p. 3.
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