

The
Theory
of the
NOVEL

NEW ESSAYS

Edited by John
Halperin

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OF THE
NOVEL
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John Halperin

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*To the three kind and inspiring men
who made this book possible:*

Howard Schultz, J. Hillis Miller, and A. Walton Litz

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THE
GENRE
TODAY

THE THEORY OF THE NOVEL

A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION

JOHN HALPERIN

Christ left home at the age of twelve. Poetry's age, at the time, was in the thousands of years, and drama's in the hundreds. It was not until a millennium and a half later that the gestation period of the novel began. Thus it is not surprising, three-quarters of the way through the twentieth century, that we find ourselves with a growing but still relatively small body of critical *theory* pertaining to the novel, while poetic and dramatic theory exists, and has existed for centuries, in a multiplication of varieties.

In the last fifty years or so a greater interest has been taken by practitioners and critics of the novel in some of the theoretical bases of the genre. What began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as tentative theoretical groping has begun to blossom, in our century, into a gradually recognizable body of critical novel-theory. It is the purpose of the present volume to reflect and hopefully to deal with some of the more radical issues of contemporary novel-theory that have emerged along with the steady growth of interest in this century in the novel as a *form*. Novel-criticism is beginning to reach not only a degree of sophistication and virtuosity comparable with that of the other genres, but also a measure of searching inquiry that exceeds that of older bodies of theory. This collection, containing original essays of a theoretical cast written especially for this volume by some of the most distinguished critics of our time, hopefully will be a major addition to the growing corpus of theoretical approaches to fiction.

It is my intention in this introductory essay to give the reader a general and, I fear, a kaleidoscopic overview of novel-theory before the twentieth century. A full-scale survey is impossible here; I aim only to provide a flavoring, an indication of what modern trends in theoretical novel-criticism are built on, where they have come from, what they are reacting against.

The earliest theoretical novel-criticism, that of the eighteenth century, tended to concern itself only with the moral implications of technique. Thus Dr. Johnson on fiction:

It is therefore not a sufficient vindication of a character that it is drawn as it appears; for many characters ought never to be drawn: nor of a narrative that the train of events is agreeable to observation and experience; for that observation which is called knowledge of the world will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good. . . . In narratives where historical veracity has no place, I cannot discover why there should not be exhibited the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability (for what we cannot credit, we shall never imitate), but the highest and purest that humanity can reach, which, exercised in such trials as the various revolutions of things shall bring upon it, may, by conquering some calamities and enduring others, teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform.¹

Such criticism is concerned less with theoretical aspects of novelistic form than with the moral function of art. Johnson is arguing here not against literary realism *per se* but rather against fiction, such as Fielding's, which for him is corrupt in that it does not adequately distinguish between virtue and vice. This is not an endorsement of unrestricted idealization, for the excessively idealized is too remote to teach us anything ("what we cannot credit, we shall never imitate"); rather it is an invitation to emphasize the virtues of those who are essentially good and whom it is appropriate to imitate. Such emphasis puts into greater relief the model meant to instruct us and thus more effectively appeals to our higher nature. Like Aristotle in sections of the *Poetics*, Johnson is concerned here with art as moral instructor and the artist as instrument of moral instruction. He admired the fiction of Richardson, in whose books the moral pattern is always abundantly clear. Richardson's method uses the letter as the record of consciousness, of the mind at work. If we are exposed to

the psychological processes of the ordinary person, Richardson believed, we can compare his private experience to our own—which means that we can identify and sympathize more easily with that person, and, in learning more about him through our aroused interest, we may also learn more about ourselves. This, as we shall see, is also the method of George Eliot a century later; indeed the idea of sympathetic identification for the purpose of moral enlightenment is a tenet as central to mid-nineteenth-century thought about the novel as to that of the Augustan age. In Defoe, to take another example, life is seen as a perpetual moral struggle. Every item of personal experience, as Ian Watt points out, is seen by the novelist as morally important in some way, and thus formal realism—the transcription of real life—in effect has the purpose of alerting us to the moral importance of everything we do.² Such, of course, is also the concern of George Eliot: “The evil consequences that may lie folded in a single act of selfish indulgence, is a thought so awful that it ought surely to awaken some feeling less presumptuous than a rash desire to punish.”³

Despite Johnson’s reservations, Fielding, though perhaps less attentive than some of his contemporaries to the didactic functions of literature, is explicit about his moral aims as a novelist. He is interested less in individuals than in types, and his approach to character is in the main external. His desire as a novelist, as he makes clear in the opening paragraphs of *Joseph Andrews* (1742), is the improvement of his reader, an expansion of sympathy through moral education.

It is a trite but true observation, that examples work more forcibly on the mind than precepts; and if this be just in what is odious and blameable, it is more strongly so in what is amiable and praiseworthy. Here emulation most effectually operates upon us, and inspires our imitation in an irresistible manner. A good man therefore is a standing lesson to all his acquaintance, and of far greater use in that narrow circle than a good book.

But as it often happens that the best men are but little known, and consequently cannot extend the usefulness of their examples a great way; the writer may be called in aid to spread their history farther, and to present the amiable pictures to those who have not the happiness of knowing the originals, and so, by communicating such valuable patterns to the world, he may perhaps do a more extensive service to mankind than the person whose life originally afforded the pattern.

The critics have not as yet decided how seriously Fielding is to be taken here,⁴ but his concern with the comparative effects of positive and negative examples in fiction is apparent everywhere in his writings. In an essay written two years before *Joseph Andrews*, he says: "We are much better and easier taught by the example of what we are to shun, than by those which would instruct us what to pursue. . . . [T]he reason . . . may be, that we are more inclined to detest and loathe what is odious in others, than to admire what is laudable."⁵ If the opening of *Joseph Andrews* seems to contradict this, the fact remains that Fielding in both places is concerned with the moral effect of literature upon its readers. And despite his professed reservations, Johnson's *Rambler* essays in many ways echo the moral precepts for literature suggested by the author of *Joseph Andrews*.

It is interesting to note that the idea expressed in the quoted passage from *Joseph Andrews*—that of the novelist as a provider of moral examples of the good and useful lives often led by the ungreat, the uncelebrated—is also a generating impulse in George Eliot's story of Dorothea Brooke. In the Finale to *Middlemarch*, George Eliot says of Dorothea: "The effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive for the growing good of the world is partly dependent upon unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." The Victorian novelists, despite the distance of years between them and their Augustan predecessors, differed in no serious way in their mutual preoccupation with the pedagogical value of art.

Both Augustan and nineteenth-century novel theory (before Flaubert and James, at any rate) are primarily interested in the relationship between the reader and the text. The nature of that relationship, determined by the mimetic adequacy of the fiction itself, signals some sort of moral value—that is, the spiritual level of a novel is seen as determined as much by the reader's relationship to it as by the moral nature of the writer himself. The moral writer will produce fiction sufficiently "realistic" to teach the reader to be good. The emphasis on the mimetic adequacy of the fiction is really an emphasis on its effect upon the reader. Literary realism, based on a satisfactory imitation of nature, was held to have a particular spiritual effect, for the more "realistic" a novel, the greater was considered its capacity for

exercising that effect (both for good and ill). The more moral the writer, the more likely that the effect would be salutary.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as Ian Watt points out in *The Rise of the Novel*, writers as diverse as Sterne, Fanny Burney, and Jane Austen concern themselves in their novels with the mental life of their characters—sometimes, as in the case of Sterne, to parody the form of the novel itself, but more often, as in the novels of Jane Austen, to teach us about ourselves through the depiction of a psyche which may not be far removed from our own. In general, however, eighteenth-century writers of fiction gave little thought to the theoretical bases of their genre.

It is true that both Richardson and Fielding saw themselves as founders of a new kind of writing, and that both viewed their work as involving a break with the old-fashioned romances; but neither they nor their contemporaries provide us with the kind of characterisation of the new genre that we need, indeed they did not even canonise the changed nature of their fiction by a change in nomenclature—our usage of the term “novel” was not fully established until the end of the eighteenth century.⁶

By then, however, the Gothic novel and the novels of “sensibility” were in full bloom, and serious speculations upon the form of fiction were more or less in limbo.

Dickens, in his preface to the 1839 edition of *Oliver Twist*, voices a complaint and enunciates a principle remarkably similar to Johnson’s in the passage from the *Rambler* essay quoted above. Vice and virtue, says Dickens, have become so inextricably mixed in contemporary fiction that one may often be unable to tell them apart. Reacting strongly against the widely popular “Newgate” novels of the time—many of which, such as the early tales of Bulwer-Lytton, and those of Harrison Ainsworth, had criminals as their heroes—Dickens has, he says, written *Oliver Twist* both to show “the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last” and to define the thanklessly tortuous setting in which the criminal mind must pass its existence. For Anthony Trollope, who was no admirer of Dickens, the novel was no less a vehicle for the presentation of a lesson in conduct. Even Hardy comments, some years later, to the effect that the “true object” of reading fiction “is a lesson in life, mental enlargement from elements essential to the

narratives themselves and from the reflections they engender."⁷ Neoclassic attitudes toward the novel, then, did not disappear in the Victorian age.⁸

George Henry Lewes, surely the most brilliant English-speaking theoretician of the novel before James, echoes what is sometimes implied in Augustan novel criticism when he asserts that the novel should avoid depicting the sordid and the ugly because otherwise it will be unable to engage the sympathies, and thus enlarge the sensibilities, of its readers. Art, says Lewes, should not attempt to deal with the unreal; but it should idealize reality to some extent in order to inspire and enlarge man's highest faculties—the mere imitation of nature will not impress the human soul with any sense of beauty. In his *Principles of Success in Literature* (1865), Lewes argues that whereas a surface realism is concerned only with achieving verisimilitude in relation to the outward aspect of things, idealism attempts to reveal *inner* as well as external truths. Idealism, then, is a kind of realism; it is "the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but Falsism."⁹ Lewes's insistence that fiction reveal inner as well as external truths leads to his emphasis upon the importance of psychological characterization. His favored method in this context is dramatic representation, or what he calls "dramatic ventriloquism," the means by which the writer makes the character reveal himself.¹⁰ The most immediate fruits of Lewes's theories were of course the novels of George Eliot, who adopted his doctrines of sympathetic engagement and modified realism through psychological characterization (though she is a more intrusive presence in her novels than Lewes's theory of "dramatic ventriloquism" would seem to allow for). Late in her life George Eliot told Cross that she had been taught by Lewes that dramatic representation was the highest quality of fiction.¹¹ Throughout her career as a novelist, essayist, and reviewer, George Eliot insisted upon the necessity of dramatic representation as the most efficient means of achieving the spiritual enlargement, through example, of her audience (the most obvious place to see this is the famous seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*). She admired Stendhal for employing the scenic method.¹² Implicit in an essay on Charles Reade published in 1856 is George Eliot's belief that the successful novelist must possess both the negative capability of a Keats in creating character and the imagination of a Coleridge in

shaping his material.¹³ But for her, as for Meredith in the 1850's, realism is the only basis of art. Her later novels, like his, are less mimetic, more a softening of reality. Both writers in their later years attempted to steer a middle course between idealism and naturalism.¹⁴

Another brilliant and unfortunately much-forgotten nineteenth-century critic and theoretician of the novel is David Masson. In his monumental *British Novelists and Their Styles* (1859), a nineteenth-century *Aspects of the Novel*, Masson carries on the attack upon pure realism by arguing that novels are or can be prose epics; for Masson, the novel ought to deal with "elemental" subjects rather than merely with daily life and its comedies of manners. More important, however, are Masson's opinions that novels "give a more various interpretation of passing life" than poems do, that the novel is therefore a form capable of as much high seriousness as poetry, and that the kind of criticism poetry is used to enjoying ought also to be applied to the novel. Masson's well-known essay on Dickens and Thackeray, which is primarily an identification of the differences separating romance from realism in fiction, employs "poetic" criticism in its close analysis of the *styles* of the two writers. Masson's emphasis remains typically upon the connections between mimesis and the moral elements of fiction on the one hand and the moral nature of the novelist himself on the other. For Masson, as for many of his Augustan predecessors, the moral nature of the novelist inevitably colors the moral nature of the fiction he writes:

The novelist, as the creator of his mimic world, is also its providence, he makes the laws that govern it; he conducts the lines of events to their issue, he winds up all according to his judicial wisdom. It is possible, then, to see how far his laws of moral government are in accordance with those that rule the real course of things, and so, on the one hand, how deeply and with what accuracy he has studied life, and, on the other, whether, after his study, he is a loyal member of the human commonwealth, or a rebel, a cynic, a son of the wilderness.¹⁵

In his obsession with the connections between morality and realism, Masson is clearly typical of his times, but in his insistence that fiction deserves the sort of criticism usually accorded only to poetry, Masson is bucking a popular view of the novel—which held, following the expressed opinions of such diverse but important writers as Scott, Thackeray, Trollope, Ruskin, and Mill, that the novel was an