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Patricia McManus - Review Essay

The Novel, Vol. 1: History, Geography and Culture

Franco Moretti (ed.)

(Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006), 910 pp., £65.00 (hbk)

The Novel, Vol. 2: Forms and Themes

Franco Moretti (ed.)

(Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006), 950 pp., £65.00 (hbk)

Sometimes the novel is a hard thing to take. It always, inevitably, gives form. It cannot but give shape; even the tremendous shapelessnesses of disorder, of panic, loss and pleasure, are caught by it and moulded, lent momentarily a precision and sense before the novel moves on or ceases. Form in the novel is redolent of both choice and of care. Choice not alone of topic or theme but of this word rather than that, of this sequence of events rather than that. Nothing in a novel *has to be* what it is. Care is the care taken and lavished on the chosen things, on significances all the more significant because they're sculpted with such thought.

Rubbed up against the ultimate formlessness, the lack of finish of the present, the novel's formal plenitude sometimes grates. This irritation is the reader's: shapelessness or the misery of unchosen and uncared for shapes belongs to the moment of reading. This moment is always a present-tense one. A particular novel might loosen the weight of the present for the duration of reading it but that novel will end whereas the present won't.

Novelists of course are readers too and inhabit their own present moments but if any such fretful observations about the shapelessness of things, or about the novel's infidelity to this, worry them, the novel yet finds it hard to speak of these anxieties. Notwithstanding modernist and postmodernist attempts to dissolve the fixities of form, the novel speaks consistently rather of successful shaping: the thing is finished, it is here, it is being read.

In a short piece on Samuel Beckett included in the second volume of *The Novel*, Declan Kiberd writes of 'a buoyancy of form and ... sadness of content' in Beckett's work. The

airy looseness of Beckett's narrative structures holds a paradoxically definite and sturdy, almost robust set of figures and their laments. For Kiberd, this combination emerges out of Beckett's doubly displaced position as an Irishman and a Protestant. 'Buoyancy of form' may be given a wider application, however, for it suggests what is peculiar about the novel itself as a form of narrative. This is the novel's combination of a massive ambition and appetite for the world, side by side with the apparent weightlessness of its narrative apparatus, the lack of a formal code of rules and regulations it must adhere to.

The most diverse, mobile and enduringly popular of our literary forms, the novel is an enigmatic thing on many levels but none more so than its capacity to appear not an enigma at all but rather as common and expected as rain. A number of the essays collected in these two volumes engage with the paradoxes generated by the novel's immanent claim to 'ordinariness'. In 'The Prose of the World' (*Vol 2: Forms and Themes*), Michal Peled Ginsburg and Lorri G. Nandrea, historicise the cultural situation of prose as the realm of 'unworked on language, language in its "ordinary form"', a realm at once morally superior to poetry's play with potentially deceitful tropes and figures, yet also a dull realm, decent yet 'prosaic': 'The problem with "the prose of the world" then, is not – or not so much – that it poses obstacles to the aspirations of the soul but that it is formless. The prose of the world is then the product of the loss of enabling, meaning-producing, forms – social, epistemological, and literary' (p. 248). Nancy Armstrong in 'The Fiction of Bourgeois Morality and the Paradox of Individualism', (*Vol. 2: Forms and Themes*), and Moretti in 'Serious Century' (*Vol 1: History, Geography and Culture*) likewise draw out the novel's strange capacity to normalise its own procedures as not procedures at all, its forms as not form at all.

Unlike the essays mentioned above, Kiberd's piece on Beckett forms one of a number of shorter 'Readings' dispersed throughout the two volumes of *The Novel*. Composed of analyses of individual texts, these readings follow and reflect on groups of essays organised into themed sections.¹¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 11. [View all notes](#) The essays form the bulk of the volumes' material and they amply realise the stated aim of making the literary field of the novel 'longer, larger and deeper'.

The field is made longer by the sheer chronological scope of the project. A history is opened here which stretches to the Hellenistic world, which takes in the world of a dying Mediterranean epic and of medieval French Romances, of ten centuries of the *magāma* in Arabic culture, and which takes in too the numerous varieties of *romanzo*, *roman* and *novella* issuing from the printing presses of Italy, France and Spain before the terms 'the novel' became fixed as a publisher's category and a reader's pleasure. The field is made wider because essays on Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Latin American, European and African formations open up the sense of 'the novel' to reveal significant regional structures and variations whilst also pointing to transcultural appropriations and subsequent mutations.

This geographical and historical scope already underwrites an increase in the depth of our knowledge of the novel but the essays are not satisfied with a descriptive accounting. A number of writers do concern themselves with empirical, even statistical accounts of the novel's distribution and modes of reception at a particular time in a

particular place. Thus Walter Siti's 'The Novel on Trial', in *Volume 1*, records the novel's treatment as a shameful form, shamefully 'feminine' or vulgar or fictitious, in the eyes of theologians, poets and philosophers up to and beyond the eighteenth century. Or Nathalie Ferrand in 'Toward a Database of Novelistic Topoi', in *Volume 2*, recounts the adventures of a group of literary historians in France who, in the 1980s, decided to embark on 'systematic research to recover the topoi of French novels from the Middle Ages through the Revolution and of generating an inventory in the form of a computerised database'^{2 2} Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 200. [View all notes](#) (p. 327).

For the most part, however, the essayists practice and are adept at what Moretti himself terms a form of "reverse engineering" (Vol. 1, p. 380). A literary situation is sketched and its meaning given, this meaning often emerging out of an articulated disagreement with previous descriptions or analyses of the phenomena in hand. The second stage takes this established situation and problematises it, asks how and why it was this way and not another, points out how things could have taken a different shape or direction, before proceeding to trace and interpret – or argue the merits of a particular interpretation – the conditions of the given phenomena's success in coming-to-be.

'Reverse engineering' is a methodological device, it makes easier the management of always diverse and often unwieldy material. The first stage is typically one concerned with narrative, stylistic or epistemological innovations or dilemmas; the second stage lifts, as Moretti puts it, the interpretative horizon so that the same innovation or dilemma is transformed as interpretation widens its frame to take in social history. The engineering is 'reverse' in 'the sense that the object is given, and one proceeds backwards, from the solution to the problem as it were' (p. 380).

But this methodological device is also a theoretical claim; it assumes the contingency of history and hence the contingency of the novel's existence as a historical object – continuing yet changing – in time. If what happened, if 'history', is a solution, then it is a home-made thing, a living response to a particular set of conditions. Crucially there may have been other such responses. That there wasn't speaks not of predetermination or of any other narrative of teleological necessity but of contingency. Thus Jack Goody, for example, in an essay beautifully placed as the first in the first volume, treats the novel as a significant *absence* in certain cultures. In 'From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling', Goody chases the notion of narrative through anthropological categories and units of time to point up the vivid strangeness of both the novel and of the levels of popularity and scorn it had attracted by the eighteenth century. For Goody, writing systems form the core historical condition of novels as long prose fictions. Oral or 'pre-literate' cultures neither knew nor needed novels. But the novel didn't follow writing immediately; after the presence of narrative fictions in Greece and Rome and some in the Near East, there is a 'long hiatus' in Europe and 'fiction seems to have revived only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries' (p. 19). The key question for novel studies, then is not how 'novelistic narrative' relates to earlier, oral narrative forms, but 'why the novel appeared so late on the scene, when printing was able to diffuse it rather than with writing alone?' (p. 17).

Taken together the essays admit the implausibility of the thesis that the novel is a modern form (and because modernity first took its shape with the Enlightenment, that the novel is hence a Western European and secular form). A wider awareness amongst literary historians of the highly specific narrative sub-genres Thomas Pavel names collectively as the 'premodern novel' ('The Novel in Search of Itself: A Historical Morphology', Vol 2: *Forms and Themes*, p. 8), coupled with the knotty interpretative problems posed by the novel's relatively late arrival and uneven distribution (in both Europe and China), undermines those genealogies which would confine discussions of the history of the novel to Europe or even to eighteenth-century England. Rather than diminish the specificity of the novel, however, this admission motivates a renewal of attention to what exactly the novel does, how does it do it and why. There is 'always a better account' writes Francis Mulhern in 'Inconceivable History: Storytelling as Hypersphasia and Disavowal', 'better because more closely specified, more historical, that is, and materialist' (Vol 2: *Forms and Themes*, p. 776).

This renewal of attention to history is arguably the most radical and necessary aspect of the volumes' intervention into the field of literary studies. There has recently been a quiet tendency to recast the novel as but another form of humankind's need to tell stories. The supposed universality and timelessness of this need disperses the specificity of the novel as a genre and renders redundant or reductive questions about the novel's historical origins or social nature. Academic courses and texts on the novel allow history back in by generating topics like the eighteenth-century novel, the modernist novel or the post-colonial novel. These rubrics have their own demands, however, and the historical and theoretical questions they turn on typically devolve from a unifying theme which forbids any larger enquiry into the nature of the novel as a genre.

With the exception of feminist scholarship on relations between gender and genre, the last few decades of English language scholarship have seen no attempt to develop a theory of the novel of the type last articulated by Lukács and Bakhtin. Tellingly the most influential recent English-language work, or at least the most ambitious, on the novel as a genre, was one which denied the need for theory altogether by construing the novel as a gloriously baggy, 2000 year old trans-cultural attempt by humans to know the world as a polymorphous thing, to forge a 'model of coming-to-know-the-world'.³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 55, 180 n.2 and see p. 65; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 256. [View all notes](#)

A variety of reasons underlie this lack of theoretical interest, not least the novel's own bewildering productivity, its capacity to straddle 'high' and 'low' borders, to spawn multiple sub-genres, to alter dramatically in time and space without ever losing the continuity of its integral identity as novel. The post-structuralist vogue for subsuming diverse cultural artefacts under the theoretical horizons of semiotic or discourse regimes must also be considered, however, as must the success of narratology in attracting critical attention to 'narrative as such'. As Michael McKeon observed in his 'Introduction' to the 2000 anthology, *Theory of the Novel*, the past few decades has seen 'interest in the theory of the novel as a literary-historical genre ... replaced by interest in narrative or "narratology" ... Treated as a local instance of a more universal activity, the novel has been subsumed within narrative in such a way as to obscure or ignore its special "generic" and "literary" properties'.⁴ This information comes from Françoise Gadet,

Saussure and Contemporary Culture (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 11. [View all notes](#)

The question set in 'The Preface' shared by the two volumes is then a welcome one and it is one which unifies the two volumes as a whole: 'Countless are the novels of the world. So, how can we speak of them?'. Albeit via a sometimes confusing array of approaches and practised or explored through diverse historical and geographical materials, each contributor identifies the need for and explores ways of achieving a theoretical and historical vocabulary capable of embracing at once the multitude of forms taken by the novel and the unity these obtain in all being novels.

University of Sussex

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