Notes on Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History, 1600-1800*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

A History of the Novel Without Literary Theory

At one point *The Novel: An Alternative History* was projected in two volumes, with the second going up to 2012. Moore says in a couple of interviews he hasn’t been reading much contemporary fiction since 2004 in order to finish *The Novel*. It’s a reasonable inference he’s catching up, working away on volume 3, which I hope will be called *The Novel: An Alternative History, 1800-2020*, if only to avoid the indecisive 1800 to the Present, the quirky alternatives 1800-2017, 1800-2018, and so forth, or some inevitably failed subtitle like From Romanticism to Postmodernism and Beyond. My comments here are aimed at that imagined third volume.

In preparing for these remarks I read volume 2, *The Novel: An Alternative History, 1600-1800* (2013), skimmed volume 1, *The Novel: An Alternative History, Beginnings to 1600* (2010), and read at least ten reviews of both books. The reception of the first two volumes of *The Novel* is marked by several leitmotifs, which I think are unhelpful in the sense that they distract from a deeper and more intriguing theme. Among the reviewers’ concerns:

1. The Novel is inclusive; Moore doesn’t want to limit the novel to a bourgeois or romantic invention. For most reviewers, that’s salutary; for some, it’s anathema, and for a few, it’s true but not original. I can’t quite see the stakes here: as E.H. Gombrich once said, it’s hard to know exactly what the point of definitions is, if not to defend territory.

2. The Novel is anti-religious, and for some readers that has meant it’s seriously flawed. Moore doesn’t like *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, and he offers a strong but focused interpretation of Don Quixote, in which the novel’s hero is simply insane, and the book is a veiled allegory of the psychosis of “people of the book.” Don Quixote insists on the veracity of books of chivalry, just as religious fundamentalists insist on the truth of the Bible or Qur’an. Moore suggests Cervantes was hinting at this, and that it’s the book’s salient feature. But given that Moore is offering An Alternative History and not A Comprehensive History, I can’t see how it makes sense to chastise him for not seeing virtues in religious novels.

3. The Novel is erudite, so everyone says: but that is a mobile category, and not often useful in criticism. Diderot, one of the novelists described in *The Novel*, was far more “erudite” than some of the minor novelists Moore reviews, whose books are filled with arcane histories. Canetti was more “erudite” than Musil, but how exactly does that count in either author’s favor? Nabokov’s Eugene Onegin is “erudite” (I am reading it now: I’d like to be one of the few who has read every note), but that erudition produced a monstrosity. There are also always standards according to which erudition is ignorance. For some Chinese scholars, this won’t be an erudite book. For example there’s little about the history of the reception of Cao Xueqin in Chinese letters; that’s as if Moore had read Joyce but nothing about Joyce. This isn’t to say there aren’t surprising displays of reading in *The Novel*; my favorite is a footnote that gives a list of novels with indices, starting with Laurent Bordelon’s *History of the Ridiculous Extravagances of Monsieur Oufle*, and going on
from Richardson to Nabokov, Julian Rios, Malcom Bradbury, Milorad Pavic, and a dozen others. But noting this sort of erudition isn’t a useful way to characterize The Novel’s contribution, except in that Moore is very much drawn to the specific version of “learned wit” and erudition he finds in Gaddis. (For this see the illuminating passage on Monsieur Oufle, whose “learned wit” is however motivated not by Moore’s own interest in experimental writing—see the fifth point, below—but by Oufle’s anti-religious polemic.)

4. The Novel doesn’t find much use for literary criticism or literary theory. The book “holds no brief for theory, or literary criticism in general” in the words of Roger Boylan (Boston Review). This is generally the case, although Todorov and many other critics make appearances. It would be a flaw if Moore were engaged in the debates that have emerged in literary theory. He doesn’t use De Man’s sense of romanticism isn’t noted in these two volumes, but it’s also not at stake. Like any critic, Moore deploys his own judgments, and if that cuts him off from other people’s conversations, it can also make his own arguments cleaner and clearer. Michael Orthofer of The Complete Review is similar in this regard: he has championed Arno Schmidt, but he hasn’t included any academic work on Schmidt, which he finds less than useful. In my field—art history, theory, and criticism—these traits would simply mark Moore’s book as an essay in criticism rather than history, and the question would be for whom this alternative (critical) history was written. (Incidentally, this is a different issue than the one William Vollmann raised by objecting to the time Moore spends summarizing plots: I agree with Moore’s response, namely that it’s time well spent when readers don’t know the novels in question.)

5. The Novel is partial because Moore is interested in “style”—that is, language—and not real-world politics, or society. As Moore said in an interview: “The reason some of us consider Ulysses the greatest novel ever written is not because it has a gripping story, lovable characters, or unique insights into the human situation, but because it is the most elaborate rhetorical performance ever mounted, making wider and more masterful use of all the forms and techniques of prose than any other novel.” The Novel’s most contentious review was by Denis Donoghue, who said Moore prefers “long, difficult novels that ask to be read, he thinks, as stylish performances: he approaches them in the same spirit as that of watching a ballet or a figure-skating competition.” I think most reviewers have sided with Moore’s interests. As Jeff Bursey put it in a review in Quarterly Conversation, novels have in fact often been about things “far from portraying the real world”; for over “two and a half millennia” they’ve been about “grandiose conceits, lengthy sentences, and intricate structures.” This fifth concern is closer to mine, but the reviewers are still, I think, off-topic, partly because Moore shows plenty of interest in plot and reference, but mainly because, as I wrote regarding the second point, Moore doesn’t claim to be representing the entire history of novels with an equal hand: this is a critical history.

These five preoccupations of the critics all miss something I think is more interesting. I’ll call it the shape of history that’s implicit in The Novel. The shape is formed by the comparisons that Moore employs to explain unfamiliar texts. Most reviewers have observed the surprising links he proposes between his authors (writing before 1800) and Gaddis, Pynchon, Wallace, and others. There are many examples. An episode in Novalis’s Heinrich von Ofterdingen is described as “Pynchonesque telluro-mysticism”; Voltaire’s “complex metafictions” are said to “resemble those of Borges, Barth, and Coover”; Dong Yue’s Tower of the Myriad Mirrors is said to anticipate “Carroll, Freud, Kafka, Joyce, and Borges”; Wu Jingzi’s The Scholars has “a modernist feel” that prompts Moore to compare it to Gaddis’s J R; Diderot’s Jacques the Fatalist gives us a world “characterized by what Pynchon calls ‘anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything’.” I haven’t made a full account, but I think Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace are the central pivots.

Such links are usually taken either as welcome insights into premodern authors (that is, as discoveries), or else as evidence that the “experimental novel” has been around long before Gaddis’s generation. I think both those conclusions are consonant with Moore’s intentions, but they miss the effect of such parallels on The Novel’s implicit shape of history. At the risk of being too systematic, let me take each of these interpretations in turn.

1. The idea that the parallels are discoveries. Jeff Bursey, writing for Music & Literature, notes
that Moore “can look down the road and pick out descendants from this or that author (e.g., linking Goethe with David Foster Wallace).” Or again: “Young Werther/David Foster Wallace: the unexpected parallel is perfect, and unforgettable.” But this makes it sound as if the comparison is simply an insight, and it implies that all that’s happening in such passages is that Moore is discovering genealogies for Wallace. More is at stake, I think. First it needs to be said that Moore is following a modernist and postmodernist tradition in searching for antecedents to the apparent newness of 20th century fiction. One that I have studied is the link that’s been said to exist between Arno Schmidt’s Zettels Traum, Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, and Johann Fischart, the 16th century author of an “untranslatable” novel known as the Geschichtsklitterung that is full of portmanteau words. An academic approach to such lineages would see them as “origin myths”: Fischart isn’t like Joyce or Schmidt, but it has seemed important to provide both modern authors with deeper roots. So when Moore is praised for finding links “between linguistic innovators of the Renaissance like Colonna and Rabelais and modern ones like James Joyce and Germany’s own Arno Schmidt,” the question, for an historiographer—by which I mean someone, like me, who is interested in how historical narratives are constructed—is why it seems interesting to propose such lineages. I don’t think Moore is often motivated by a desire to provide deeper lineages for authors of his or recent generations; in The Novel it’s more the opposite: it’s a desire to record moments of recognition in earlier works. But the historiographic question mark should still be there: where does that desire come from? And for whom is it persuasive?

2. The idea that the parallels show the “experimental novel” has been around long before postmodernism. Boylan and others say Moore’s book “unearths evidence” that “experimental fiction has been around as long as storytelling itself” (Boston Review), and Moore says “experimental” means “to depart from the norm and try something new” (2010 interview for Porter Square Books), making many of the books he reviews “experimental”—but for me this doesn’t fully the question of what counts as “experimental” fiction. (I want also to note in passing that the claim that “experimental” fiction has been around as long as storytelling itself is different from the claim that novels have always been experimental, at least up to the bourgeois novel and the contemporary reaction against “experimental” prose: the latter would be much more difficult to argue.)

In my reading, “experimental” is understood in The Novel as a combination of at least four things: writing that goes against the norm; writing that explores form rather than pouring content into familiar molds; writing that experiments, self-consciously, with the novel; writing that is excessive in length, density of allusions, or logical complexity; and writing that is done with attention to the “style” rather than the content. (“Style” in quotation marks because it’s another complex word, in Empson’s sense.) Because it’s amalgamated from several potentially disparate elements, “experimental” is difficult to characterize. In art history and theory, anti-experimentalists like Franzen could be called antimodernist, which could ally them with nationalist literatures; people like Donoghue are a different sort of anti-experimentalist; in art and music theory they could be called modernists or late romantics. In the end, what counts as “experimental” in The Novel is writing that’s similar to the two or three generations from Finnegans Wake to Gaddis, Barth, Pynchon, Vollmann, and Wallace, and so it has an historical specificity that tempers some of its apparently transhistorical traits.

In The Novel, the general answer to the question of why it is of interest to link Goethe to Wallace, or give Finnegans Wake a genealogy that reaches back to Geschichtsklitterung, is that it’s important to show that novels have always been experimental. But if “experimental” is taken in the historically specific sense I’ve sketched, then what’s actually happening is a reading of novels from any number of cultures and periods in terms of postwar American fiction. If I put it this way, it sounds at once narrower and less convincing than the way it’s put in The Novel, or the way The Novel has been received. Certainly comparisons like the one between The Sorrows of Young Werther and David Foster Wallace are among the most obviously non-academic traits of The Novel: an academic historian of the novel would resist such a comparison. If you were an academic historian, and that comparison occurred to you, you’d probably want to ask yourself what misunderstanding of history had led you to link two such disparate figures; you’d probably interrogate your understanding of Goethe in order to recover his otherness, his distance from the
present, his distinct character and difference, and you would never commit your comparison to print.

Yet I think that Moore’s unexpected comparisons are actually a tremendous strength, for at least three reasons. First, they’re honest. Second, they belong to the realm of criticism rather than history. In comparative literature there is virtually no criticism that involves judgment; “criticism” denotes a more circumspect and nonjudgmental engagement. Third, and most important to me, Moore’s comparisons register an awareness of literary history as a subject that is only visible when it is related to the present. Such a sense of history remains a minority interest in art history and music history. In my field I think of Keith Moxey, Michael Holly, and Mieke Bal; in music history, I think of the magnificently self-centered history of modern music written by Richard Taruskin. The overwhelming majority of historians of art and music repress the present as a condition for historical awareness; that is, they don’t write about the conditions of their own interest in historical periods, or if they do, they detach those conditions from their historical writing.

This brings me, at last, to the notion of the shape of history. The history of the novel has a particular shape in Moore’s books. Entirely aside from whatever erudition he might be said to have, his survey of the world’s novels proceeds across a remarkably level field: the chapters are divided mainly by languages, and sometimes by cultures or nations, and each is, in theory, as interesting as another. The field of history is like a plain, dotted with castles or villages representing achievements such as Don Quixote or The Tale of Genji. (My topographic metaphor is taken partly from La Mancha, and partly from 15th century Italian paintings of plains dotted with hill towns.) But sometime in the middle of the 20th century, especially in America, that field rises into foothills and then higher peaks. History has a shape. Moore looks down at the plain, across it, and into the distance as far as China, Greece, and Rome.

This kind of topological “distortion” is in fact the condition of the sense of any historical account, as Moxey and others have argued so well, but it is usually ignored or denied. This isn’t a perfect metaphor, in that novels from distant parts of the landscape can at least partly be “seen” from close up; but it captures the perspectival view that informs The Novel. What interests me here is how volume 3 can work with that shape. When the terms of your interpretation are implicitly general (the “experimental” novel as a form that has always existed; the ideas of “style,” complexity, self-reflexivity, and allusion understood as things that have always been of interest), it can be difficult to describe your own generation. In art history and music history, this is the problem of the intersection of historical and critical writing. The problem is egregiously and traditionally confused in literary studies because of the expression “literary criticism,” which implies all writing about novels of the past is already criticism, despite the fact that scholars present themselves as historians. The problem is easier to see, if not to solve, in art history, because art historians know that it is conceptually problematic to write art histories of contemporary art.

I will be very interested to see if Moore’s third volume presents itself in the way volumes 1 and 2 present themselves--as a critically motivated history of the novel. I suspect that volume 3 will have to be more a project of advocacy, and that it will have to revisit “experimental,” “style,” “displays of linguistic prowess” (that’s Boylan again) and other terms. Those terms will necessarily lose some of their proposed trans-historical reach. If Gaddis, Pynchon, Wallace, and others are the writers we steer by (thinking of Wallace’s comment about the “25% of Pynchon”), then who do we steer by when we’re thinking about Gaddis, Pynchon, and Wallace?

[Updated, August 2016: Steve tells me he won’t be writing a third volume. Too bad!]