Criticism after Romanticism

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6.1. Early theories of the novel

The theory of the novel had been neglected during the emergence of the genre in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is not to be found in the classifications of Boileau or in the criticism of Dryden. In the 18th and early 19th centuries the critical statements which are found are usually far behind the theoretical development of the criticism of poetry.

Novelists themselves are among the first to write significantly about their craft. The novel is an intrinsically parodic genre, and the best novels are very often a parody, or at least a commentary and interpretation, of previous ways of fiction writing. *Don Quijote* is often defined as a satire on romances, and this implied critique can be read everywhere in fiction, more explicitly than in drama or poetry. Great novels have always been to some extent metafictions, or anti-novels.

Henry Fielding, the great heir of Cervantes in the British scene, also integrates commentary and fictional writing, most obviously in *Tom Jones*, where each book is headed by one introductory commentative chapter. Among other reflections, Fielding proceeds to define the "new province of
writing" he inaugurates as an "comic epic poem in prose"—a deliberately paradoxical statement, stressing the fact that the novel is born from the convergence of diverse genres and that it is essentially parodic in nature: a way of setting previous conventions of writing against one another. Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, pushing experiment to the limit, can also be read as an entertaining commentary of the way narrative expectations are created and frustrated.

Among early essays on prose fiction we can mention Friedrich Schlegel's *Brief über den Roman* and Hegel's views. It is Schlegel who voices in an explicit way the notion of the novel as a medley or convergence of all previous literary genres. For Hegel, the novel is the modern version of the epic: it is both a bourgeois epic and a subjective epic—a result of the subjective turn of romantic literature.

In England, one of the most interesting of the early theoretical essays on the genre was written by Edward Bulwer Lytton, best known as the author of historical novels such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*. His essay "On Art in Fiction" (1838) is an attempt to define the sources of narrative interest in the novel and to distinguish them from those of drama. Lytton, like Poe, gives great importance to the author's calculation of the intended effect and to his deliberate manipulation of the materials. It is essential to have a plan in a novel: Lytton sees the novel as a genre with an artistic shape, even though its shape does not coincide with that of drama. For instance, the novelist uses descriptions, not used by the playwright, and notes the way it is integrated with plot and character:

In the description of natural scenery, the author will devote the greatest care to such landscapes as are meant for the localities of his principal events. There is nothing, for instance, very attractive in the general features of a common; but if the author lead us through a common, on which, in a later portion of his work, a deed of murder is to be done, he will strive to fix deeply in our remembrance the character of the landscape, the stunted tree, or the mantling pool, which he means to associate in our minds with an act of terror.¹

Also, the plot of a novel is less tight and less guided by cause and effect than that of a play.

The novel allows *accident*, the drama never. In the former, your principal character may be thrown from his horse, and break his neck; in the latter, this would be a gross burlesque of the first laws of the drama; for in the drama the incidents must bring about the catastrophe; in the novel there is no such necessity . . . . So if you wish to bring out all the peculiarities of a certain character, you will often seem to digress into adventures which have no palpable bearing

on the external plot of incident and catastrophe. This is constantly the case with Cervantes and Fielding; and the critic who blames you for it, is committing the gross blunder of judging the novel by the laws of the drama.

The novelist has other interests than the playwright, a greater interest in character study and in a greater range of less public, more intimate emotions. The construction of a novel may be as craftily designed as that of a play: only the details add to each other in a different way.

There is another distinction between the catastrophe of a novel and that of a play. In the last, it ought to be the most permanent and striking events that lead to the catastrophe; in the former, it will often be highly artistical to revive for the consummating effect, many slight details — incidents the author had but dimly shadowed out — mysteries, that you had judged, till then, he had forgotten to clear up; and to bring a thousand rivulets, that had seemed merely introduced to relieve or adorn the way, into the rapid gulf which closes over all.

Lytton's essay is an interesting attempt at trying to study the conventions of the novel in itself, and to distinguish narrative from drama. However, many novelists will praise narrative technique which approaches the effects of drama. Some comments on narrative technique by Richardson, Stendhal or Dickens are interesting forerunners of Henry James's theories of fictional form because of the value they set on the dramatic elements of the novel: the writer must not tell the whole of the story in his own person: he must rather make his characters tell the story by themselves through the use of dialogue and action. Stendhal proudly notes that all other novelists tell the story, while only he shows it to the reader. Richardson distinguishes three narrative techniques:

• 1st person narration, in which the writer tells of his own adventures;

• the narrative or epic narration: "in this the author relates himself the whole adventure," he may know everything about his characters, "he can be concise or diffuse, according as the different parts of his story require it." 2

• "But his narration will not be lively, except he frequently drops himself and runs into dialogue: all good writers therefore have thrown as much as possible of the dramatic mode into their narrative." (Richardson).

The most finished form of this dramatic narration in the 18th century will be the epistolary technique which Richardson himself used in Pamela or Clarissa; in the twentieth century, the equivalent would be the interior monologue.

In a letter to a prospective lady writer, Dickens makes a similar point:

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It strikes me that you constantly hurry your narrative (and yet without getting on) by telling it, in a sort of impetuous breathless way, in your own person, when the people should tell it and act it for themselves. My notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their own business to do it, and not mine.\(^3\)

In connection with the doctrine that literature must be direct and dramatic we may also remember Aristotle's praise of Homer's dramatic style and Coleridge's denunciation of Wordsworth's "ventriloquism." But as late as the Romantic age English theorists are concerned almost exclusively with poetry. Even those who are sympathetic to the novel, like John Stuart Mill, consider it as a minor and somewhat childish genre.

The theory of fiction will be developed in France by theorists of realism like Balzac. In England we find an eloquent defense of realism in the essays of George Henry Lewes ("Criticism in Relation to Novels", 1865). His companion George Eliot will in her turn attack popular romantic fiction in her "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), and will hold that realism is a moral responsibility on the part of the writer of novels.

Studies of technique will appear little by little, in Switzerland with Edmond Scherer (Zur Technik der modernen Erzählung (1879), and in Germany with Friedrich Spielhagen (Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans, 1883).


\[6.2. \textbf{Henry James} \ (1843-1916)\]

Only in the second half of the 19th century do we find a purposive aesthetic theory of the novel. Flaubert, Maupassant, Henry James and Zola put forward the view that the novel is a serious form of art, emphasizing formal construction rather than simple imitation of reality. Henry James has been called "the best reader of Henry James." A great deal of his best criticism is

James's main statement on this subject is his essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884). He knows that he opens a new era in the English novel: the novel in the earlier 19th century, he says, was "unselfconscious," "pre-theoretical," "naïve." Accordingly, its claims were modest, and it did not set itself any purposive ideals. It was assumed to be a "make-believe," a fiction unable to represent the complexity of life. But this must not be so.

The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. (662).

In order to do this, the novel must above all change its tone. The recognition of fictionality, the intrusiveness of 19th century authors must disappear. There the Victorian novelists gave themselves away:

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Antony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside he concedes to the reader that he and his trusting friend are only "making believe". He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime. (662)

James does not want to give himself away. The novelist must speak with the assurance of a historian. To do otherwise is a "betrayal of a sacred office"—a religious metaphor which is often used by the aestheticist propounders of art for art's sake.

James discusses above all this sacred office, the activity of the novelist, but incidentally he develops a formalist theory of the novel seen as a completed aesthetic object (as the aim of the novelist). The artist is a central presence in all of James's criticism, sharply contrasting with his assertion that this presence must not be felt.

James opposes abstract theoretical analysis of the elements in the novel. He sees the novel as an organic whole: for him there is no sense in dividing action from character, or description from dialogue, etc.: they are all fused as the flesh and the blood in a living being; they melt into each other:

A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. The critic who over the closed texture of a finished work shall pretend to trace a

geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. . . . (666)

You cannot divide, as other critics were doing, a novel of characters from a novel of incidents. In all good novels, character and incident define one another. As James says in one of the famous prefaces he wrote for a later edition of his works,

I might envy, though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents positively to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it.5

And in "The Art of Fiction":

There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures, but that is the only distinction in which I see any meanin, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character. When one says picture one says of character, when one says novel one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character? (665)

James opposes Besant's reductive definition of the novel as something ultimately concerned with telling a good story full of action, as well as Trollope's idea that character is all in the novel, that the plot is something unimportant, and something which is not necessarily linked with character. The psychological analysis of the character and the formal structure of the novel coincide in James: his novels are at the same time psychological studies and formal experiments, and the revelation of the character's self is dealt with through an original formal organization, a careful distribution of the perception of the action and judgment about the action. The relationship between action and character is defined as an organic one, but perhaps it could best be defined as a relation of organic subordination of action to character. Here James is arguing not only for an adequate description of the unity of a novel, but also for the novel of character and psychology against a narrow notion of the novel of action (vs. Besant's concern with plot):

There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason, and yet, I protest, the novel seems to me the most magnificent form of art . . . . The other arts, in comparison, appear confined and hampered; the various conditions under which they are exercised are so rigid and definite. (668)

5 Henry James, preface to The Portrait of a Lady (Penguin, 1963) viii.
The novel (unlike drama) can reveal to us the inner life of characters, and this is the essence of the genre, which otherwise must follow, in James's opinion, a dramatic ideal of concentration (cf. Aristotle on tragedy). But the novel is a free form, he says. It has no grammar which can be defined, no rules that can be taught.

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life. ("Art" 664).

The intensity of the impression and the execution are the grounds of its value, and they cannot be defined. They stem directly from the personal way each novelist sees life. This in some contrast with all we have said of his criticism of the Victorian novels. His own novels are thoughtful, concentrated, calculated works of art, while Victorian novels are "loose, baggy monsters" without technique or design. James thinks there are no rules, but he also thinks his own way is superior, his own technique more refined, his own vision more adequate. Still, we have here a profession of tolerance and catholicity.

It is an irony of fate that the theory of the novel should have profited so much from James's own analyses of his novels, given the little faith he has in theoretical definitions and analysis. In his prefaces, we find some of the most clear and influential statements of the nineteenth century on point of view and narrative voice, as well as on action and character.

James makes a distinction between voice and point of view in his novelistic practice as well as in his theoretical statements. This distinction comes from his concern with the ability of the novel to depict experience and psychological life. First-person novel will not do for this, because James is not looking for a conscious revelation of the person, or for a kind of novel based on recollection of past experience, which is what 1st person narrative implies. His novels are usually written in the 3rd person, which is less "intrusive," more "dramatic." Where James does otherwise, he makes sure that the result will be equally dramatic—for instance, using an unreliable narrator in the main narrative of The Turn of the Screw. The action should in any case unfold in a transparent way, without the writer stepping in to make his own comments. We are shown its development through significant scenes, we are not simply told. Percy Lubbock will develop in his The Craft of Fiction (1922) some of James's insights in this particular.

And there is an ideal way of "showing" in third person narration which is at once dramatic and psychologically immediate. This is what James usually calls narration through "centers of consciousness" (preface to The Portrait of a Lady ), "vessels of sensibility" or "reflectors" (preface to The Wings of the Dove ), and which we now usually call focalizer characters. The scenes usually act on a perceiving character, an reflector or focalizer, whose psychological reaction, the development of his understanding of the action, helps give the plot an organic unity. This is the role of Strether in The Ambassadors, of Maisie in What Maisie Knew. James does not require, as some of his followers, that there be no changes of perspective during the narrative; but he does seek to cut the story into perspectival blocks that are
internally coherent. For instance, in *The Wings of the Dove*, the story of Milly Theale is seen mainly through the eyes of two characters, Merton Densher and Kate Croy, as well as her own. Every change or apparent incoherence of point of view, James says, has its aesthetic justification, its dramatic coherence:

There was the "fun", to begin with, of establishing one's successive centres- of fixing them so exactly that the portions of the subject commanded by them as from happy points of view, and accordingly treated from them, would constitute, so to speak, sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to have weight and mass and carrying power; to make for construction, that is, to conduce to effect and to provide for beauty. . . .

Do I sometimes in fact forfeit the advantage of that distinctness? Do I ever abandon one center for another after the former has been postulated? From the moment we proceed by "centres"—and I have never, I confess, embraced the logic of any superior process—they must be, each as a basis, selected and fixed; after which it is that, in the high interest of economy of treatment, they determine and rule. There is no economy of treatment without an adopted, a related point of view, and though I understand, under certain degrees of pressure, a represented community of vision between several parties to the action when it makes for concentration, I understand no breaking-up of the register, no sacrifice of the recording consistency, that doesn't scatter and weaken.6

Just as in Aristotle we found that an action or *praxis* had to be treated artistically before it became the plot or *mythos*, we find in James a distinction between the "subject" and the "wrought material" or novel, and in the Formalists we shall find a related opposition between *fabula* and *sanzhet*. A series of rules on the use of point of view define what is the relationship between the material and the finished novel. Form and psychology converge: the dramatic form gives us a new insight into the characters' perception and interiority. We see that James conceives of these "rules" he formulates on the use of point of view as organic, internal rules, which spring from the very nature of the psychological material of the novel. They will be transformed by many critics in the 20th century into external, *a priori* rules to decide on the quality of any novel, irrespective of its internal economy.

The influence of James's ideas is readily apparent in most important twentieth-century writers on fictional technique and point of view: Percy Lubbock (*The Craft of Fiction*, 1921), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (*Understanding Fiction*, 1943), Jean Pouillon (*Temps et roman*, 1947), F. K. Stanzel (*Typische Erzählsituationen*, 1954), Norman Friedman

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James also opposes external rules as to which is to be the aim of literature:

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting" ("Art" 663)

His ideas about the relationship between the work and the world are of little consequence, contrasting with the heavily moral interest of the novels themselves. In his theory he does not seem to go beyond a vague belief in realism and morality. A novel is an impression of life, and the quality and vividness of this impression is more valuable than the moral purpose of the novel. James seems to have seen the moral element in the novels as something which is fused in the total whole, an artistic ingredient. That is why we may dare to include him among the believers of Art for Art's sake. The novel is a self-enclosed whole, isolated from the world of continuous relations; a perfectly finished object, an autonomous world with little connections with the world outside, save the enjoyment it brings to a reader.

6.3. William Dean Howells (1837-1920)

In Howells we find an ideal of scientific realism in moderately developed conflict with a genteel idealism. He was the editor of the influential The Atlantic Monthly from 1871, and a novelist (Indian Summer, 1886; A Hazard of New Fortunes, 1889). He was a great promoter of naturalism in America, and discovered and encouraged many younger writers such as Stephen Crane.

In Criticism and Fiction (1891) Howells puts forth his radical ideas on literature and criticism. Howells' attitude to the literature of the past is radical: the classics are dead, nobody reads them, we had better forget them and concentrate on contemporary literature. The classics only survive because of the vested interests and the snobism of the critics in their survival. Only critics appreciate the literature of the past; ordinary people know better, they do not care about it and they are right. Arnold's high ideal of art is false and pretentious for Howells. Art is an expression of life, and realism the norm of artistic methods. The literature of the past has nothing to do with our present reality: it is not realistic, it is the literature of an aristocratic, not a democratic age.

The literature of the present age will be realistic and democratic. The literary establishment is constantly petrifying the taste and submitting it to authority;

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this will not do in America. Howells links realism to America and democracy in much the same way as Whitman had done with Romanticism. Romanticism, Howells admits, was all right as a reaction against the petrification of realism, but now it is the Romantic ideals which are worn out and must be replaced by the new realistic ideal. American novelists will show reality as it is, they will democratize the arts. They must be "as American as they can unconsciously be."

But what is realism supposed to be? A faithful rendering of reality, no more, no less. That is Howells' first answer. In an essay on Mark Twain, he writes:

Let fiction cease to lie about life, let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know."\(^8\)

His ideal of realism in the English novel is Jane Austen; the English novel has been declining ever since. He does not appreciate Dickens or Emily Brontë. Instead, he turns to European models like Balzac, Turgenev and Tolstoi. However, he finds that many among the European novelists are indecorous, indecent. They show things which must not be shown in public. This will not do in America, either. Howells advocates a "scientific decorum"; this, he says, is more realistic than the obscenities of the European naturalists. Art must be humanistic and socialist: it must be a documentary of social ills, and defend the victims of society. Of course, he rejects the idea of art for art's sake. Art has a very definite aim, which is to make the American race (and humanity in general) more perfect, by means of showing it the truth.

### 6.4. Émile Zola (1840-1902)

Around 1855 the aesthetic ideal in France was no longer inspiration or romanticism but either art for art's sake or realism. The two are not contradictory: Flaubert's novelistic work was influential in both movements. Flaubert conceived of the novelist's attitude to his work as one of objectivity and detachment, cool observation, documentation. Flaubert himself said that he "detected" reality rather than simply observing it, but in the pronouncements of some more naive realists (such as the painter Courbet) the ideal of art is a photographic representation of the world.

Émile Zola was the main theorist of French naturalism. His ideas are a reaction against Romantic and aestheticist movements. Zola was a leading

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Leftist intellectual, a socialist and a materialist, and he cannot accept a literary creed which is based on philosophical idealism. Zola does not completely discard the romantic ideal of genius, but he says it must be used under control.

The genius, the idea a priori, remains, only it is controlled by experiment.9

The naturalistic writer must use his genius guided by a method and with a definite end in view: to analyse social phenomena. Writing is an exploration and discovery not of new ways of writing, but of social reality. However, naturalism does not mean merely to report or copy social reality. The key word is not copy, but experiment.

In *Le roman expérimental*, Zola proposes to introduce in literature the experimental method of science as defined by the medical scientist Claude Bernard in his *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*. He believes that in this way he will give to his literary theory "the rigidity of a scientific truth" (647). All sciences can be reduced to the same principles, he believes: it is only a question of degree which separates chemistry from sociology. All bodies, living or inanimate, are determined, all follow inflexible laws of behaviour. Man is not an exception. The purpose of the experimental novel will be to demonstrate these laws. Like all scientific procedures, the experimental novel only shows the "how" of the process, not the "why." Asking for causes is not a scientific question, Zola affirms. The novelist looks for laws, not for the cause of the laws.

Although Zola set a heavy emphasis on documentation, watching factories and shops, little notebooks, etc., this search for laws is not done through mere observation, but through experiment. An experiment is a modification of nature without departing from it (cf. symbol). The novelist is both an observer and an experimentalist; he forms a hypothesis by observing some facts in real life, and then checks it by writing a novel. He places characters in a situation appropriate to the testing of that experience. The hypothesis must be confirmed by the result of the situation, without a violation of the laws of nature. Zola seriously believes that this is a scientific approach to literature:

> It is undeniable that the naturalistic novel, such as we understand it today, is a real experiment that a novelist makes on man by the help of observation. (649)

He acknowledges however that the task is difficult, that the experimental novel is just born and that it cannot yet give any fixed laws of human behaviour: heredity and surrounding, however, are obviously very important. But in time, he says, the experimental novel will help psychology become an exact science:

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A like determinism will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man. (650)

This knowledge will be used in the future
to be masters of good and evil, to regulate life, to regulate society, to solve in time all the problems of socialism. (652)

The experimental novel is the literature of the new scientific age, and it must contribute to the advance of mankind. "Zola rode the current of positivism and accepted the myth of progress that accompanied it" (Adams 646). Purely imaginative novels will be replaced by experimental novels. In these new novels the moral conclusion is self-evident, it is pointed out by the situation, and does not need the commentary of the novelist(cf. James's very different justification of the same narrative principle). Virtue and vice must be treated objectively. However, Zola does not see the relationship between the rest of the rhetorical devices of the novel and the fact that it is an experimental novel. The method is foremost. The style is important, but it is not related by Zola to his ideas on content. It is an expression of the literary temperament of the writer; as such it must not be obtrusive. Zola favours a clear, logical style. Indeed, he complains that "today an exaggerated importance is given to form."

Claude Bernard himself had already remarked that the experimental method could not be applied to literature. For him, literature was "a spontaneous creation of the mind that has nothing to do with the verification of natural phenomena." 10 But Zola pays no attention to this remark. He says that it is all right for the lyric, but not for the novel. In the novel, the artist does not indulge in personal feeling: he is subject to the higher laws of truth and nature. When the area of the novel has been conquered, he predicts, artists will attempt experimental drama, experimental poetry and experimental criticism. The works of art of the past will live on forever because of their beauty, but the future belongs to science and art will have to become scientific. It is the novelist's duty to become an experimentalist. Zola would surely have been grieved by the present-day view of his work as a kind of rough epic, heavily laden with symbolism, no less than by the absolute rejection of his views on art. However, apart from his enormous influence as a novelist, he was also to some extent an influential critic for some years. Frank Norris' Responsibilities of the Novelist (1903) is the American counterpart of Le roman expérimental. But even here the ideals are philosophical, political and epic, rather than scientific, just like his novels (The Octopus, 1901; The Pit, 1903).

Naturalism will be opposed not just by aestheticists like Oscar Wilde, but also by Marxist theorists like Georg Lukács (The Historical Novel), who defends the great tradition of nineteenth-century classical realism (Walter Scott, Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoi).

10 Claude Bernard, Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale, qtd. in Zola 758.