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The Novel in Search of Itself: A Historical Morphology

ARGUMENT

Like epic and tragedy, the novel tells of the relationships between human beings and the surrounding world. But while epic heroes belong entirely to their cities, and the tragic hero's fate is predetermined, the protagonists of novels are set apart from the world, and their destiny mirrors its contingency. By imposing a breach between characters and their surroundings, the novel is the first genre to reflect on the genesis of the individual and the establishment of a common morality. Most of all, the novel raises, with extraordinary precision, the philosophical question of whether moral ideals are inherent in this world, for, if they are, why do they seem so remote from human behavior, and if they are not, why does their normative value impose itself so clearly on us? For the novel to raise this question is to ask whether, in order to defend their ideals, humans should resist the world, plunge in to try to defend moral order, or concentrate on trying to correct their own frailties. To explore these concerns, the novel has traditionally focused on love and the formation of couples. Whereas epic and tragedy took for granted the links between individuals and their milieu, the novel concentrates on love in order to reflect on the most intimate, interpersonal form taken by these links.

The premodern novel insists on the primacy of an idea that is more important than the observation of the empirical world. This peculiarity influences both the message and the formal features of the highly specific premodern narrative subgenres. Some of these subgenres like the Greek novel, chivalric romance, and the pastoral, presented invincible or, at least, admirable heroes, defending moral norms in a disorderly world. Other subgenres like the elegiac narrative, the picaresque, and the novella, revealed the irremediable imperfection of human beings. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the dialogue between idealization and denunciation of human frailty took the form of a peaceful coexistence among these subgenres.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, by contrast, arising at the confluence of earlier narrative subgenres, sought to merge their different viewpoints and combine an idealizing vision with a keen observation of human imperfection. The eighteenth-century novel, which gave primacy to verisimilitude, asked whether humans are the source of moral law and masters of their own actions. Nineteenth-century novelists concluded that human beings are shaped less by moral norms than by their social and historical milieu. To prove

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this, they concentrated on scrupulous observation of the social and physical worlds and on the empathetic examination of individual consciences. The genre thus acquired a new scope and power but sacrificed the formal and thematic flexibility of earlier narratives.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernists rebelled against both the attempt to imprison human beings in their social milieu and the method of observation and empathy. This rebellion created an unprecedented rupture between, on one side, the individual, liberated from moral concerns and conceived as the site of uncontrollable sensorial and linguistic activity; and, on the other, reality, which came to be seen as mysterious and profoundly disquieting. Modernism gave the novel a new formal dynamism, without however altering its old focus on the individuals and their relation to the surrounding world.

*From the Beginnings of the Novel to the End
of the Seventeenth Century*

Adventure and Idealization: Greek Novels, Chivalric Romance

The Greek idealist novel, which was rediscovered and translated into modern languages in the middle of the sixteenth century, typically relates the story of a couple of lovers whose moral strength gradually conquers the obstacles to happiness. Set apart from the world around them, and guided solely by their requited love, the protagonists endure a long series of ordeals, which symbolize an unjust world. In the end, the tricks of fate are outwitted and the novel concludes with a sacred marriage, highlighting the protagonists' exceptional destiny.

The Greek novel stresses the unity of the human race, living under the protection of providence. In Heliodorus's *Ethiopian Story*, the protagonist Charicleia challenges the particularities of race and milieu from the moment she is born. Of the three men she calls "father," she owes her life to the Ethiopian Hydaspes, her education to the Greek Charicles, and her vocation to the Egyptian Calasiris, the nomadic priest of Memphis. Her true origins are divine, sacred ancestry prevails over human genealogy, and the unity of the world overrides racial specificity.

The concept of a universal humanity not only devalues blood ties but also makes exile imaginable. We noted earlier that epic depicts characters who are strongly rooted in their native land. While tragic heroes sometimes question the duty to one's city in order to affirm the supremacy of religious duties (*Antigone* being the most famous example), tragedies nevertheless

depict a world fully circumscribed within the walls of the Greek *polis*. The Greek novel, by contrast, rejects ties of blood as well as love of homeland. Charicleia, born in Ethiopia and raised in Greece, readily leaves the country of her youth to heed a divine call that is stronger than any other duty. Her fiancé Theagenes, a native of Thessaly and descendent of Achilles, also departs without hesitation to follow his beloved into the heart of Africa.

Once the protagonists abandon family and city, they encounter a vast world that is both surprising and hostile. Dangers scattered along the young couple's route combine to form a single, gigantic adversity that torments them without respite. True, Theagenes and Charicleia are endowed with supernatural beauty, a sign of their divine election, but, unhappily, their beauty relentlessly fans the greed, lust, and other evil desires of those around them. Persecuted by men's vile passions, the lovers remain faithful to each other, their virtue being a worldly form of sanctification that links their bodies because a divine aspiration has already united their souls.

Beautiful, chaste, and loyal, the heroes of Greek novels are also unwavering. Shipwrecks, captivity, separation, persecutions, prison, torture, and the funeral pyre have no effect on these beings who are as brilliant as diamonds and as resolute as steel. Their endless misfortunes reveal the world to be a valley of tears, whose injustice must be feared and whose temptations must be fled. Like the stoic sages safely sheltered in their inner fortresses, the couple remains ever impervious to change and suffering. For this reason, it makes no sense to deplore the absence of psychological maturation in Greek novels, as literary critics have sometimes done; the glory of these protagonists is, precisely, their constancy.

The universe of Greek novels unfolds, therefore, between two poles. On one side is providence, separated from the world; on the other, its correlative, the inviolable space within human beings. The cosmic power of divinity is reflected in the steadfastness of the human soul, as if these two spiritual entities had forged a strong alliance against the forces that separate them: the physical universe and human society. Relying on this alliance, the predestined lovers do not fully belong to this world and look on the realm of generation and corruption with a godlike calm and detachment: since they view the human world from a peculiar, unexpected angle—*sub specie divinitatis*—they clearly perceive its contingency. If, therefore, the whims of fortune are so frequently depicted in the Greek novel, this is not because the authors lacked imagination or failed to grasp the concrete diversity of human existence. The random sequence of adventures—shipwrecks, kidnappings, persecutions—reflects the fundamental opposition between a couple that relies on the divinity and a world governed by chance.

Chivalric romances, which were widely read as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, depend less on a monotheistic conception of the world than Greek novels do and give a lesser role to divinity. The errant knight, in his travels and struggles, draws most of his power from the rigorous norms he follows. Incarnating the *unconditional obligation* to maintain justice, he devotes himself to correcting the world's disorder, and spends his energy in accordance with the laws of chivalry and courtliness he has freely embraced. These laws require an active encounter with the world rather than union with the divine; they demand solidarity with the other members of society, rather than concern for personal salvation.

Chivalric romances in general and *Amadis of Gaul* in particular depict a decentralized society in which local lords exercise their power far away from the king. The ideal governing this system requires the strong to protect the weak, the fortunate to comfort the afflicted, and people of good faith to resist treachery. Applying this ideal to the multitude of social situations is problematic, however, since the fires of violence are continually rekindled in the absence of a permanent central authority. Knights errant frantically cross the country to extinguish these fires and impose the rule of law. The local, limited nature of the infractions favors rapid remedies, but these remedies are always random and piecemeal, never leading to a decisive combat or permanent restoration of order.

Knights thus risk their lives to protect a norm that is perpetually threatened. The instantiation of this threat is called adventure. Day and night, whether in their castles, at the round table, or on the road, knights remain on their guard, waiting to be called. When someone asks for help, the knight's vow obliges him to take instant leave of friends, family, and king, to withdraw from the arms of his beloved, mount his horse and set off to fight. This obligation is doubly rigorous. The knight must safeguard his honor, which the slightest cowardice would forever sully. But, in addition, the knight entertains a mysteriously personal relationship with his adventures. Fate secretly decrees that each adventure belongs to a specific knight, and he alone can and must undertake it.

The episodic, repetitive nature of chivalric tales thus obeys a very different principle from that of Greek novels. In the *Ethiopian Story* the apparently random sequence of adventures ultimately symbolize the separation between the everyday world and the strong souls who dedicate themselves to love and God. In chivalric romances, by contrast, the endless ordeals that await the hero and his companions-in-arms seal a durable alliance between these heroes and the wide world they ceaselessly try to protect in accordance with their moral norms.

In these romances, the power of the couple, signified by *courtly duty*, does not originate in a heavenly call, as in the Greek models. Rather, its source lies inside the couple, more specifically in the power of the lady. This leads to a paradox: on the one hand the image of the beautiful Oriane, Amadis's lady, is that of a true divinity whom the knight invokes whenever he is in danger, but on the other hand, the love between the two characters is the result of a purely human decision between partners who freely choose each other, without consulting any other parties. The lady ensures a warrior's strength by providing him with an ideal goal toward which to aspire. At the same time, by secretly offering herself to her beloved, she seals the couple's independence from any external power.

The knight and his lady thus are invested with a transcendent authority, even as they are required to accomplish specific tasks in society. This means they are at once included in the circuit of earthly adventures, where their humanity subjects them to adversity and desire, and projected as well into a celestial orbit where, invincible and incorruptible, they exert influence over the destiny of other mortals. Exalting the superhuman power of knights and divinizing the lady are effective means of generating transcendence with purely human means. In this way, and despite its symbolic asymmetry, courtly love furthered the norms of chivalry. Together, they established an ideal whose origin was entirely circumscribed within the human realm.

Imperfection and the Everyday World: The Pastoral and the Picaresque

Originally, the pastoral novel did not belong to the family of strongly idealizing works that included Greek and chivalric novels. The first instantiation of the genre, Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, is a short narrative set in a modest village rather than in the whole known universe. It features characters who aspire to join, rather than defy, the social world. Kin to the protagonists of comedy, these characters flourish in the grace of idyllic love; they happily discover a balanced sensuality and reject cruelty and violence. Much later, Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia* (1501) and Jorge de Montemayor's *Diana* (1559) added a note of melancholy to the theme of hesitant, graceful maturation.

Very soon, however, the pastoral novel came under the influence of the Greek idealist novel and chivalric romances. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Arcadia* (1580) and Honoré d'Urfé in *Astrea* (1607–27) offered ample syntheses of the elegance of pastorals, on the one hand, and the idealizing power of adventure novels, on the other. These works depict at the same time the energetic affirmation of transcendent ideals and gradual self-discovery through

love. *Astrea*, in particular, is not a mere pastoral, but an original synthesis between the pastoral depiction of human frailty and the idealism that governs the life of Greek and chivalric heroes.

Astrea's plot is triggered by a misunderstanding between the two main protagonists, Celadon and Astrea, a fight that underscores the fragility of love. Even the most devoted love, like the one between Celadon and Astrea, is as subject to whim as the most capricious, fleeting feelings. *Astrea* and the entire pastoral universe are governed by the inevitable disparity between ideal love and the behavior of individual couples. Here, the two lovers are separated through their own fault, and the main plot narrates the final triumph of their true sentiments. By forcing the young shepherds to expiate their imperfections, Love distills a pure celestial substance from their imperfection. The base metal changed into gold remains matter, of course, but the transformed substance becomes symbolically incorruptible.

Whereas Greek idealist novels conceived the individual as an utterly steadfast self allied with an omnipotent divinity, pastorals crafted a more nuanced portrait of interiority, focusing on the division of the self and its gradual healing in the course of the character's maturation. The pastoral's shepherds, unskilled at reading themselves or understanding their loved ones, waver between the force of their desires and the ideal they aspire to embody. Their love fills them with a desire for perfection even as it blinds them to the means of achieving it. Only when Celadon is brought to disguise himself as a young woman does he finally rise above his self-involvement and see the world with new eyes. By forgetting himself and scrupulously playing the role of a woman, he succeeds in mastering his passion. Not unlike the disguised lovers in Shakespeare's comedies of the same period, Celadon learns to free himself from his own instincts and passions and follow a general rule that is, and must remain, alien to him. He learns, in short, to follow norms.

It is important not to exaggerate the resemblance between *Astrea* and the modern bildungsroman, nor to neglect another less common premodern subgenre, also devoted to the development of personality: the narrative of the princely education, on the model of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. In all their guises, pastoral novels nevertheless meditate about the process of personal maturation and the apprenticeship of community norms. As these novels endlessly insist, the self is prepared to accept a rule of conduct that comes from the community, as long as he or she can seek it freely.

The picaresque novel is the most corrosive of the genres devoted to human imperfection. It belongs to a tradition that dates back to Petronius's *Satyricon* and Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, and was renewed in the tales of

Boccaccio, the *fabliaux*, and the *Roman de Renard*. These works provoke laughter by showing the contrast between a powerful ideal and the evident imperfection that contradicts it. Beginning in the midsixteenth century, a new kind of picaresque story gradually freed itself from laughter and viewed human imperfection with the deliberate seriousness that had previously been reserved for the description of human perfection.

The first example of the genre is *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes*, an anonymous Spanish work published in 1553–54. The young protagonist is an incarnation of the trickster, the solitary, clever, and unscrupulous character who appears in all oral traditions. As for the world around him, it is highly homogenous, not unlike the world described by the Greek idealist novels. Indeed, all Lazarillo's masters are equally wicked, poor, and dishonest. We observed earlier that Greek and medieval novels used an episodic structure, not because the authors somehow did not manage to construct better plots, but because they sought the best means of representing both the homogeneity and hostility of the world. In picaresque novels the succession of episodes fulfills a similar function. Whatever the outcome of a particular incident, the universe always overwhelms Lazarillo with its inexhaustible hostility, as if each of his masters incarnated, in his own way, a universal threat.

In this particular novel, the threat is twofold: it affects the character's immediate survival as well as the trust among human beings. On the plane of survival, *The Life of Lazarillo*, like most picaresque novels, describes an economy of scarcity. The perpetual concern of picaros is to find bed and board. In their fight against abject poverty, they mirror, in reverse, the struggling heroes of Greek novels. In the *Ethiopian Story*, characters cross land and sea in search of celestial food; here, Lazarillo travels through Spain deploying his cunning to get a crust of bread and a swig of wine. But the true tragedy of the picaresque universe is the decay of the moral order and the absence of trust among human beings. In the picaresque novel, it would be impossible to defend a transcendent law with purely human means. The picaro refutes the chivalric ideal.

We can distinguish between two different kinds of picaros. One accepts the amorality of his condition without remorse; the other, the moralizing picaro, deplores his abject life in the name of a higher law that he is unable to respect. In the first case, a character like Lazarillo acts in defiance of moral norms and perceives his exclusion from morality as his natural condition. This amoral picaro is in fact a happy man, who takes pleasure in fooling others and scarcely reflects on the norms that are supposed to govern human existence. The amoral version of the picaresque genre lacks any

awareness of transcendence and moral ideals. As a consequence, characters do not fully understand why this world is a place of contingency and betrayal. They neither remember nor lament a better, lost world based on trust and moral strength.

By contrast, the second kind of picaresque undertakes adventures just as immoral as those of Lazarillo or of Quevedo's heroes, but, unlike them, does not accept his own abjectness or condone his moral infractions. The puritan Daniel Defoe specialized in describing this type. In *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana, the Fortunate Mistress* (1724) he examines with unprecedented lucidity the social dimension of the picaresques and their world, emphasizes the moral themes of the genre and reinforces the unity, albeit always precarious, of the main characters' destiny.

Moll and Roxana sustain a complicated and often painful relationship with the moral norms they transgress. For Defoe's characters, the desire to obey the norms—which in their case means the aspiration to wedded bliss—is not merely the result of remorse or nostalgia for innocence but becomes one of the most important motives orienting their actions. And yet Moll practices evil not only by necessity but also by inclination, and is surprised to realize the scope of her own corruption. Roxana's imperfection, even more dramatic than Moll's, leads to catastrophe while Roxana's corrupt past comes back to haunt her. Determined to end her career as courtesan (and former mistress to the king) and lead an honest life, Roxana sees her hard-won happiness threatened by the return of a daughter whom she abandoned much earlier in her life. To preserve a semblance of virtue and ensure her husband's respect, Roxana must bury a double secret: the abandonment of her children and her liaison with the king. After a series of hallucinating scenes, she becomes a virtual accomplice in the assassination of her own daughter.

Normally, picaresques, buffeted by contingency, manage to survive as long as they are fully adaptable and avoid the trap of moral dignity. In the universe governed by fortune and filled with surprises, in which both picaresque and idealist novels take place, only two strategies are available. One consists in opposing the world in the name of a transcendent norm, either by fleeing or by imposing justice upon it. The other strategy is to adapt to the world at the price of moral independence. Roxana's atypical inner strength and aspiration to autonomy bring the weight of gravity to the lightness of the picaresque world and imbue its random episodes with a new coherence. By insisting on the seriousness of human transgressions and the indelibility of past sins, *Roxana* brings the picaresque genre to its full fruition and at the same time marks its logical end.

Observations on the Ideographic Method

Despite their differences, all types of idealist novels share certain essential traits. They do not derive credibility from portraying settings that are familiar to the reader. Instead, they invite readers to grasp an idea that unifies the imaginary universe: the radical separation between the human world and the hero who understands the transcendence of moral norms. (Readers may then be prompted to wonder whether this idea does not help them to understand better the actual world better.) Based on this theoretical vision, idealist novels laboriously construct a fictional universe that is very different from the everyday world and present it as a coherent whole. According to this method, which we might call *ideographic*, the imaginary world is shaped by a single abstract idea that is relentlessly illustrated in a multitude of episodes.

Because these novels are generated by an abstract idea, they lack verisimilitude. Both their characters and their settings are idealized, with a focus on primary features—the constancy of Charicleia, the generous courage of Amadis, but also the lust and cruelty of Arsace or the evil trickery of Arcalaus the sorcerer—to the detriment of secondary qualities that remain undeveloped. This insistence on essential traits to the exclusion of accidental ones engenders fictional beings whose qualitative richness is relatively weak but whose main attributes are exceptionally intense. Since in idealist novels the main idea unfolds both in time and in space, the plots of such novels are necessarily episodic. This explains the *durational* character of the novels and the *panoramic* nature of their action. Finally, idealist novels are usually narrated in the third person, as if to convey the objective force of their fundamental idea.

In their own way, picaresque novels perpetuate the ideographic tradition in reverse, as it were, since they replace exceptional beings with flawed individuals. Like idealist novels, the picaresque seeks to evoke, through multiple episodes, an abstract idea: the radical separation between the world and those individuals who are incapable of conforming to societal norms. These characters are just as idealized as the exemplary heroes of the Greek, medieval, or pastoral novels, in the sense that their qualities are reduced to salient traits that coincide with the unifying theme of the novel. Picaresque novels, like idealist narratives, are always durational and panoramic, scanning time and space to uncover the exemplary instantiations of their key idea.

The picaresque novel shares these features, but differs from its idealist predecessors in two ways. One is the massive use of *familiar details* from everyday life; the other is the *testimonial character* of the first-person narrative. It is crucial to realize that both of these traits are meant to enhance the

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ideographic representation of a flawed world rather than to evoke its historical and social specificity. Familiar details in picaresque novels are meant to suggest specific instances of imperfection and place them in the service of the general unifying idea of the novel. The first-person narrative is also a way of highlighting the imperfection of the protagonists, whose actions are so debasing that no one except the character would ever consider narrating them. In the *Ethiopian Story*, the abundance of unexpected adventures and the third-person discourse incite readers to meditate on the general meaning of the human condition. Similarly, in *The Life of Lazarillo* and *Moll Flanders*, the confessional tone and familiar objects exist, not to provide a faithful representation of reality (since picaresque novels are fully as unrealistic as Greek and chivalric novels), but to illustrate an abstract hypothesis about the moral essence of the world.

Elegiac Narratives

Like the ideographic genres, elegiac narratives and novellas concentrate on specific situations in order to emphasize clearly conceived ideas, for example, the vanity of love or the dangers of curiosity. In these subgenres, however, the chosen idea has a more limited scope that is revealed inductively through one exemplary case.

The elegiac narrative, an heir of Ovid's *Heroides* and perhaps also of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, is a first-person lament about a protagonist's sentimental misfortunes. The best-known examples are Boccaccio's *Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* (1344–45?) and Guilleragues's *Letters from a Portuguese Nun* (1669). The typical plot relates the unhappy love between a single man and a woman who is bound by marriage or religious vows. The complaint of the woman, who is seduced and then abandoned, constitutes the substance of the work. The object of elegiac narratives is human interiority and its singularity, an interiority they evoke through lyric expression. Occupying a small niche in the range of premodern narrative subgenres, the elegiac narrative nevertheless played an important role in the eighteenth-century revalorization of introspection.

Novellas and the Role of Induction

The novella, with its deep roots in oral traditions, flourished in Italy, France, and Spain from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, as evidenced by

the collections of prose narratives of the period: Boccaccio's *Decameron* (written after 1350), Matteo Bandello's *Novels* (1554), Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* (1559), Cinzio Giraldi's *Ecatommiti* (1559), and Cervantes' *Exemplary Novels* (1613). Like the picaresque novel, the novella examines human imperfection, but instead of presenting it as a general abstract hypothesis to be demonstrated by a sequence of examples, the novella captures it as a truth that is unexpectedly revealed in the heat of action. The favorite subject of novellas is the chasm between individuals and their milieu, a chasm that does not preexist, as is the case in the picaresque novels. Rather, it results from the behavior of the protagonists, who end up being separated from their communities, either by choice or by expulsion.

In contrast to the durational and panoramic plots of idealist novels, whose readers are allowed to enjoy long-term familiarity with the characters, novellas are organized around a single surprising event located in a setting that is barely sketched but assumed to be real. While idealist novels require the reader's suspension of disbelief, the novella aims at ensuring a rapid, overwhelming sense of reality and claims to present events belonging to the actual world. A believable setting is not merely a reaction to idealist ideography but a necessary condition for a novella's success.

The representation of a singular, striking event against a plausible background can lend itself to comic or serious treatment, depending on the nature of the incident. Clearly, the presumption that their events belong to the actual world helps comic novellas succeed, since comedy is usually associated with a sense of concrete reality. But in serious and tragic novellas, the nobility of the topic often favors idealization and the depiction of a fictional world that looks quite different from concrete reality. For this reason, some serious novellas whose topic is the arbitrary cruelty of destiny and the unwavering virtue of the characters, (e.g., Griselda's story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, 10.10), look very much like shortened idealist novels. This resemblance underscores the main challenge faced by serious and tragic novellas: how to ensure verisimilitude while avoiding the techniques of both comic literature and idealist novels.

It is therefore important to distinguish between two means of creating an impression of verisimilitude. This impression can, on the one hand, be obtained at the level of content; it then comes from the resemblance between the depicted universe and the world we take to be real. *Moral realism*, as in serious novellas, and *social realism*, as in nineteenth-century novels, generate this kind of verisimilitude. On the other hand, the effect of verisimilitude may come from specific details that suggest a vividly perceptible fictional universe. *Descriptive realism* offers readers a sense of immersion into the

world of the work. Obviously, a mythological subject as distant as possible from our experience can be narrated in a rich, sensual, detailed language that helps produce an effect of immersion. Conversely, a subject ostensibly drawn from the everyday world and written according to the precepts of moral realism can be treated in an austere style that carefully avoids concrete sensory details.

The moral realism of the premodern novella captures individuals who are at the same time fully dependent on others and unable to surrender their own passions and interests to the imperious demands of a watchful society. The characters' moral psychology depends on the kind of adversity they face. Sometimes they confront a *visible external adversity*: family opposition to marriage, unfaithful spouses and lovers, the vagaries of fate. In these situations, the characters act as antagonists, opposing the forces that threaten them. Another kind of adversity stalks the victims of trickery. These characters, exemplified by the Moor of Venice, are manipulated from outside by an enemy disguised as an ally. In such cases of *hidden external adversity*, the blinded character unknowingly becomes the agent of evil forces and the instrument of his own downfall. The *visible internal adversity* consists of innocent or guilty passions that place the characters in conflict with their surroundings. Although in preeighteenth-century literature, we do not find real *internal hidden adversity*—passions that agitate the characters without their knowing—the authors of seventeenth-century novellas, notably Cervantes in *The Ill-Advised Curiosity* and Madame de Lafayette in the *Princess of Clèves* (a work we now call a novel, although its contemporaries considered it a novella), plumb the depths of moral realism by exploring a *visible but incomprehensible internal adversity* in the form of a passion whose nature or purpose remains incomprehensible to the protagonist. While Italian and most Spanish novellas represent the inner life of characters according to a grid of universally accepted motivations, and might be called “casuistic” psychological novellas, the novellas that we might designate as “Augustinian” explore the enigmatic force of passions and the terrible plight of self-blindness.

The Eighteenth Century and the Genesis of the Modern Novel

In the course of the eighteenth century, narrative idealism underwent a profound transformation. Moral norms ceased to be perceived as transcendent and were assumed to inhabit the human heart. This interiorization of the ideal was achieved by Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the

name of verisimilitude. It aroused strong opposition and indirectly led to a renewal of the skeptic and comic view of human imperfection, as exemplified by Henry Fielding's fiction. The debate between these two visions encouraged the creation of other new narrative formulas, including the ludic and gothic novels, the sentimental novel, and the novel of manners.

Epistolary Novels and the New Idealism

In the eighteenth century, novels and moral philosophy both contributed to creating a new ideal of human perfection: the beautiful soul. This ideal represented a new answer to the age-old axiological question, as well as the origin of a new conception of love. As I have noted above, the axiological question consisted of asking why, if the moral ideal belongs to the human world, it appears so unattainable, and, conversely, if it does not, why everyone feels its normative weight so vividly. The premodern period assumed that moral values originate outside the human domain and placed the ideal far away from the everyday world, in a realm that was both external and superior. Humans could either give in to their own imperfection or behave heroically and model themselves on the ideal. Souls that captured the light of moral norms and intensified it, like a huge reflector, served as models for human excellence.

The eighteenth-century novel revived the axiological question and offered a new answer that inscribed moral ideals within the human heart. The soul, which had long been assumed to follow norms coming from above, came to be seen as containing within itself (and being capable of deciphering) the eternal laws of moral perfection. Through a process that we might call the *interiorization of the ideal* or the *enchantment of interiority*, all human beings, even the most ordinary ones, were deemed capable of seeking inner perfection, the beautiful soul being the one who always succeeds in the search for perfection.

This interiorization of morality meant that one no longer needed to seek virtuous beings in an ideal, imaginary sphere. If moral beings walked the earth, then the everyday world acquired a value commensurate with theirs. In eighteenth-century novels, beautiful souls no longer felt impelled to separate themselves from their fellow human beings: their inner nobility sufficed to set them apart, *in situ* as it were. Since the destiny of these characters was to love, suffer, and shine among their peers, the modern idealist novel had no need for the wanderings and episodic dispersion that characterized the ancient version of the genre. Instead, modern narratives delved into the

subjectivity of the characters and described with great precision their social and physical surroundings.

Since serious novellas had already plumbed the depths of morality, the close relation between individuals and society and, in certain cases, their physical surroundings, eighteenth-century novelists found ongoing lessons in this narrative subgenre. Examining personal perfection as well as the objective world, they attempted simultaneously to depict the isolation of perfect individuals in their full splendor (the specialty of ancient novels) and to imagine, as the novella had done, striking dramas with complex psychological causes. Accordingly, they now needed to reckon with unity of action, a technique that had been developed by novellas and that helped differentiate them from long episodic novels.

The first novel to unite successfully in a single plot the nobility of humble beings, the richness of inner life, the physicality of the universe, and unity of action was *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson (1741). It achieved a powerful new synthesis of the idealist novel, the picaresque, and the novella. It created a new incarnation of the virtuous heroine, placed her on a trajectory whose many episodes converged toward a single point, and endowed her with an invisible, highly moral consciousness.

A descendent of the heroines of idealist novels, Pamela is an otherworldly creature, protected by providence, with an unbending strength, capable of resisting all adversity. Her origins may be humble, but as in Greek novels, her exceptional beauty is the visible sign of her quasi-divine status. Pamela's unwavering virtue, constancy, and wisdom signal that she does not depend on the setting into which fate placed her. Her roots, like Charicleia's, lie elsewhere. The enchantment of interiority gives its meaning to the first-person narrative. In earlier novels, where the ideal was conceived as external, the impersonal qualities of chastity and inflexibility shone in the distance, while ignominy hid in the depths of the soul. Looking at one's self, one could see only baseness. In Richardson's work, by contrast, where the ideal emanates from within, the heroine's soul spontaneously and secretly radiates moral beauty. Pamela is the only person who can talk about herself, since no outsider could understand or describe the extraordinary sensitivity and strength that lie hidden in her heart.

Presenting all the events from Pamela's point of view heightens the reader's interest in the action, both as a whole and in its myriad individual episodes. One of the great discoveries of *Pamela* is the art of evoking human experience in its immediacy as well as the intimate play of blindness, anticipation, anguish, and hope. For this reason, Richardson's descriptive realism cannot be reduced to a mere testimony about the world, as if readers were a

jury examining the available facts in search of convincing evidence. It is also and above all a way of revealing psychology. This kind of realism immerses the reader in the fictional world as the character perceives it, representing her inner life in a way that is all the more effective for being indirect.

Through the enchantment of interiority, everything the character sees, hears, or feels becomes infinitely precious and worthy of interest. This same enchantment lies, albeit obliquely, at the heart of the new descriptive technique. Instead of going directly to the essence of each event, as his predecessors did, Richardson presents what the heroine perceives here and now, rather than what readers might need to know in order to understand the unfolding of the narrative. In a universe where conscience performs roles once played by divinity, the individual perspective sanctifies all it sees, even the most humble objects. For this reason the representation of immediate experience slowly but irresistibly came to dominate the novel, at the expense of intelligibility and concision.

The Human Comedy or the Emergence of the Author

In *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1749) Rousseau continued and radicalized Richardson's representation of modern virtue by almost entirely basing his narrative on the enchanted interiority of the characters. By contrast, Henry Fielding, who openly opposed Richardson's project, vigorously rejected modern idealism. For him, the goal of the novel was not to lend a modern face to the imaginary virtue of ancient heroes but to capture eternal truths about human nature, in particular about its comic imperfection. In Fielding's view, the novel's true ancestor was the mock epic, a genre illustrated by Matteo Boiardo and Ariosto, whose *Orlando Innamorato*, circa 1484, and *Orlando Furioso*, 1516, respectively, poke fun at the medieval epic and chivalric novels. Fielding saw the novel as a mock epic in prose, portraying men and women drawn from everyday life, instead of heroes and princes. Far removed from heroic idealism, this genre nevertheless maintained the high style of mock epic.

In opposing the modern idealist novel, Fielding also took as a model the grand parody of chivalry, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which acquired a new importance in the eighteenth century and influenced the evolution of the genre. For a long time after its publication (part 1 in 1605, part 2 in 1615), *Don Quixote* was admired as a prodigiously smart and funny text. Yet its readers would have been quite surprised to learn that it had opened a new era in the history of the novel. The initial public correctly sensed that while *Don*

Quixote's principal target was the idealism of chivalric romances, the book was not simply a comic work but offered a true anthology of the literary and moralist genres of the period, including the pastoral, the novella, the Erasmian dialogue, literary criticism, and moral eloquence, all of which were deemed to be preferable to the obstinate unreality of chivalric narratives. As a man of his time, Cervantes knew how to discern the particular strength of each narrative genre in depicting ideals and imperfections, and he was careful not to dismiss all varieties of idealist novels. On the contrary, the author of *Don Quixote* belonged to that late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century literary group that criticized chivalric tales precisely because it preferred the idealism of the recently rediscovered Greek novels. In fact, Cervantes ended his career with *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda* (1617), a Christian adaptation of the *Ethiopian Story* of which he was immensely proud. It is only later, in the eighteenth century, with the rise of the enchantment of interiority and the *new* idealist novel that the adversaries of idealism, notably Fielding and his contemporary Tobias Smollett, conferred on *Don Quixote* the status it has retained as the ancestor of the ironic, skeptical, anti-idealist novel.

Since then, *Don Quixote* has been assumed to teach that human beings cannot withdraw from the world; that our roots do not grow in the heavens of idealist novels but in the earth of our mortal condition; that the otherworldly individual, struggling against universal contingency, and the heroic, energetic righter of wrongs are mere fantasies and bookish fictions; and that the ideal pursued by the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance is not inspired by gods or by the chivalric code but rather by undigested reading. Richardson's critics, and especially Fielding, understood that the author of *Pamela* was surreptitiously trying to graft the idealist novel onto the everyday world, just as Don Quixote himself had tried to live the life of an errant knight. But while the honest Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance explicitly proclaimed his devotion to the models of Roland and Amadis, the sly Richardson did not warn us that he was forcing Pamela to emulate the heroines of Heliodorus and Madeleine de Scudéry. In Fielding's view, one can hardly avoid concluding that Cervantes refuted *Pamela* long before its publication, showing once and for all that human nature is not capable of sustaining the goals of idealist literature.

Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and, even more, *Tom Jones* (1749) defy the subjective perspective and the enchantment of interiority to reclaim their mock heroic and parodic antecedents. Unlike Richardson's plots, which typically have one major thread and are organized around an obsessive structure that subordinates the story to the individual perspective of the character, Fielding's narratives develop multiple plots that are fully under-

stood only by the author and the reader, the characters' narrow field of vision being unable to encompass the full development of the plot. Richardson's solution excels in psychological intensity but fails to deliver what Fielding's can: an objective view of human destiny that is not reducible to the egocentrism of the characters. Fielding's rejection of individual perspective is also apparent in the way his narrator judges the characters, who generally act under the sway of poorly rationalized impulses and try to hide behind unreliable justifications. Unbeknown to everyone, the protagonist navigates between high principles and deplorable conduct. Only the narrator, steeped in the elegant irony that characterizes mock heroic epic, guesses the character's frailty and exposes it indulgently.

Fielding combines in a single powerful role an inventor-narrator who directs the multiple strands of intrigue, a wise commentator who exposes the gap between the characters' boastful speech and their often reprehensible actions, and a literary critic who explains the meaning of the work. As an impartial, bemused observer of characters whose weaknesses he uncovers, Fielding does not refrain from sprinkling his story with wise remarks that are often as ironic as the narration of the episodes themselves. The inventor-narrator-commentator who has a well-defined moral physiognomy and steers the moral course of the story cannot be reduced to the role of a simple narrator, since he does not simply present the story but openly assumes the role of organizer and creator of the narrative. His voice, which converses with equal joviality about the human comedy and the literary trade cannot be designated by any other name except that of *author*: the one who creates and controls the story, structures and comments on it, ensures its moral and artistic balance, and relates it in his own words.

Thus defined, the author has always been present, more or less visibly, in novels. What Fielding achieved was an unprecedented promotion of the role, a true *anointing of the author*, in reaction against the way modern idealist novels enhanced the narrative and moral authority of the characters. Fielding's promotion of the author led to a new relationship between the narrative voice and the fictional universe, and marked the beginning of a long rivalry between author and character. For the next century and a half they would fight for control of the narrative text.

The Multiplication of Narrative Forms

Tristram Shandy (1760–67) by Laurence Sterne and *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* (1773–75?) by Denis Diderot, benefited from Fielding's lesson,

although the roots of these works lie in the tradition of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century parodic and burlesque narratives, which deliberately defy mimetic conventions and maximize the sheer fun of storytelling. François Rabelais, Charles Sorel, and Jonathan Swift are the best-known examples. Within this tradition, one should distinguish between works that are truly unclassifiable both according to genre and mode of representation (*Pantagruel* and *Gulliver's Travels*) and ludic novels, whose goal is precisely to take advantage of various prose techniques in a playful tone, at the expense of narrative clarity (the *Comical History of Francion*). *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques the Fatalist* belong to the latter category of works, yet they cannot be fully understood outside the debate that pitted the new idealism of Richardson and Rousseau against the ironic skepticism of Fielding.

While Fielding criticized the modern idealist novel for being too unrealistic, the gothic novel rejected it for the opposite reason, claiming that it favored attentive observation of nature and neglected the powers of imagination. Invented by Horace Walpole, whose *Castle of Otranto* (1765) served as a model for Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and many other authors, the gothic novel turned away from empirical reality to engage in an open, unabashed celebration of the most extreme kinds of fictional improbability. Seeking to revive chivalric tales, this genre brought back castles, turrets, and dungeons in the hope of impressing readers more directly and powerfully than Richardson or Rousseau ever did. In the name of imagination, the gothic setting called into question the recently acquired objectivity of the social and physical world and gave new life to the earlier symbolic function of the world as a prison-house of the soul.

The gothic novel also fostered a new kind of hero: the demonic character, overwhelmingly malevolent and endowed with boundless energy. This new character was undoubtedly meant as a response to the enchantment of interiority and to the idea that virtue is an unwavering yet passive force. As a result of the clash between modern idealism and the trends that opposed it, the eighteenth-century novel ended up portraying constancy and energy as mutually exclusive. In the early part of the century, the only characters brimming with energy were thieves, scoundrels, and womanizers, like Roderick Random, Tom Jones, and Lovelace. Later, the gothic novel stripped the beautiful souls of the quasi-supernatural power they possessed in idealist works and abandoned them without defense to the evil designs of their enemies.

The novel of manners, following in the lineage of picaresque novels and of Fielding, is linked to Richardson's idealism as well. While Tobias Smollett's *Expedition of Humphry Clinker* is rooted in picaresque irony, Fanny

Burney's *Evelyna* (1778), which presents a critical image of London society, seen through the eyes of an innocent, generous young provincial woman, merges social satire with modern idealism. Another subgenre, the sentimental novel, exemplified by Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*, mitigates the improbability of idealism by creating a believable setting, characters who are virtuous but not sublime, situations that are difficult but not tragic, and moral outcomes that are desirable but not dazzling.

In *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Goethe continues the efforts of earlier writers to reconcile the enchantment of interiority with psychological realism, but he does so by entirely sacrificing the character's force. The inflexibility of Richardson's great heroines, which was downgraded to mere prudence in the sentimental novel, is here reduced to deplorable weakness. Werther's very impotence to act has a crucial narrative role: it provides the story with unity of action and makes possible a synthesis between features of tragic novellas and of elegiac narratives. Like a novella, *Werther* depicts a restricted space, a limited number of characters, and an insoluble conflict between passion and marriage, while the lyrical tone, absence of decisive action, and resignation of the main character remind us of elegiac narratives. In Werther's case, nobility of soul is nothing more than a subjective poetic state, devoid of tangible external consequences. The power of modern idealism thus gives way to the magic of romanticism. This actually heightens the verisimilitude of Werther's story, since it is much more natural to participate in this character's idle daydreaming than it is to believe in the prodigious moral strength of Richardson's and Rousseau's heroines.

The Sorrows of Young Werther signals the rise of a new pessimistic idealism that acknowledges both the greatness of elected souls and the impossibility of reconciling them with the world. Works like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginia* (1787), Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1799), François-René de Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801), and Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807) lament the natural and historical forces that conspire to defeat great yet defenseless souls.

The Nineteenth Century: The Novel Reaches the Height of Its Glory

The nineteenth century kept alive the modern idealist project of reconciling the representation of a beautiful soul with the reality of the world. Novels of this period gave center stage to the social and historical reality of the conflicts they depicted. The eighteenth-century novel had brought the beautiful soul down to earth, while preserving the contrast between the soul's greatness and

its surroundings. Nineteenth-century novels, concerned with individuals' rootedness in their community, examined the links between individual and society, depicting these links not merely as general and relatively uniform, but rather as a precise and well-differentiated network of social and historical dependencies.

The attention that almost all nineteenth-century novelists devoted to the social and historical dimensions of the fictional universe did not mean, however, that they turned away from the debate between modern idealism and moral skepticism. Nineteenth-century partisans of idealism worked hard to find a credible place for beautiful souls at the heart of the empirical world. Seeking plausible examples of moral strength and beauty, these authors examined the universe with a fine-toothed comb to discover examples of virtue buried in the foggy past, lost in exotic countries, or trapped in the labyrinth of modern society. Opponents of idealism were equally active. Some portrayed with ironic benevolence the social incarnations of moral imperfection, while others examined with a mixture of sympathy and severity the traps of subjectivity. The fiercest opponents of idealism, claiming that idealism fosters a mirage meant to disguise our moral depravity, sought to dissipate this mirage and reveal the atrocious truth of the human condition. Finally, in the second half of the century a few great writers achieved new syntheses of idealism and anti-idealism.

Idealism, Anti-idealism, and Social Milieu

The idealist tradition, revived by romantic pessimism, finally had to admit the difficulty of situating the ideal within the modern, prosaic world. But rather than accept the inevitable defeat of heroic souls, writers belonging to this tradition set about discovering other societies and periods where heroism had indeed flourished. Walter Scott's historical novels solved an internal problem of the genre—the plausibility of a great soul—by taking advantage of the dramatic development of historiography in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Scott's great innovation was to introduce characters who exhibited the constancy and energy required by idealist novels and to make them believable through proper historical justifications. Since, for Scott, nobility of soul emerges from the archaic customs of warrior states, it can rightfully be celebrated in its original setting while also being explicitly detached from the moral demands of the modern world. Beginning with *Waverly* (1814), which contrasts the adventurous spirit of Scottish highlanders and the modern prudence of the main English character, Scott's his-

torical novel won over two opposing constituencies of readers: those who enjoyed the exceptional deeds of admirable characters and those who distrusted fictional exaggerations.

By studying the variations and discontinuities produced by history, geography, and social class, Scott opened up a vast thematic field for prose narrative. After him, novels no longer needed to focus on universal ideal norms but could explore the myriad normative links that govern human communities. This in turn meant that the fundamental axiological question—if the moral code is inherent in our world why is it disregarded so frequently, and if not, why is it so readily recognized—would henceforth have to be asked only in relation to specific communities. As a consequence, Scott’s audience, being rooted in a peaceful, prosaic civilization, could readily agree in principle with the heroism of past times, while remaining totally impervious to it.

Since the historical novel had henceforth to accommodate historical variations in mores, customs, and values, writers who wished to paint truly universal greatness had to discover, among the multiplicity of codes that have governed human beings, those that actually transcend specific societies. We owe to Alessandro Manzoni the most successful effort to fit a novelistic plot of universal import into the mold of the modern historical novel. *Betrothed* (1827), a modern “remake” of the *Ethiopian Story*, narrates the vicissitudes of two young lovers whose unwavering fidelity triumphs over all ordeals. Two courageous villagers, Renzo and Lucia, are persecuted by the local lord, but protected, like the heroes of Greek novels, by the divinity and its church. Their story illustrates a version of the liberal Whig theory of history, which credits the advent of modern liberty to a vast providential project imprinted long ago in the virtues taught by Christianity.

The exotic novel follows a similar project as it seeks nobility of soul in areas and nations untouched by modern civilization: the American Indians in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper; the Caucasus of Lermontov and Tolstoy, the Italy of Stendhal and Lamartine; the Spain of Mérimée. Similarly, the regional novel discovers noble souls in poor, isolated areas where archaic innocence secretly survived, as in Adalbert Stifter’s novellas or in George Sand’s *Devil’s Pool*, *Country Waif*, and *Fadette*. The idealist social novel finds virtue in the midst of the lower classes: in *Les misérables*, Hugo finds true inner beauty in people who emerge from the poorest rungs of society: Jean Valjean, a convict, and Fantine, a prostitute. The novel of childhood portrays an age of moral innocence and strength: in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens exalts the purity of a lost child; in *Little Dorrit*, that of a young girl scarcely out of childhood.

Balzac focused on a different landscape: modern society as a whole. Using Walter Scott's method of dividing humanity into a multitude of different social and historical milieux, he undertook a vast study of human greatness and misery. As a consequence, in Balzac's novels, larger-than-life characters are highly specialized, as it were. There are faithful, resigned lovers, like Madame de Beauséant in *Old Goriot*; do-gooders bubbling with energy in the *History of the Thirteen*; great artists and thinkers, like Joseph Bridau in *La Rabouilleuse* and Daniel d'Arthez in *Lost Illusions*; and philanthropists, like Dr. Benassis in *The Country Doctor*. Force of character develops only in relation to a well-defined social domain. Since Balzac's goal was to represent all varieties of human beings, he also painted fallen angels alongside his heroes, the best-known being Lucien de Rubempré, protagonist of *Lost Illusions*. A multitude of mean, repulsive characters—the abbé Troubert in the *Curé de Tours*, cousin Bette in the novel that bears her name, Baron Hulot in the same story—emerge from the bowels of modern life, which turn out to be particularly fertile in ugliness and stupidity. On the lowest stratum of society reigns the terrifying yet seductive Vautrin, the demon of the *Human Comedy*, brother of the great evildoers of the gothic novel—Mary Shelley's monster, Frankenstein, and Heathcliff, the hero of Emily Brontë's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights*.

The anti-idealist tradition brought together various remote disciples of Fielding, beginning with what could be called the school of irony, whose main representatives, Stendhal and Thackeray, unexpectedly returned to the freedom of picaresque novels and the snide skepticism of the eighteenth century. Scrupulously respecting the norms of historic and descriptive realism, these authors gave equal weight to historical determinism and to the study of the human heart, which they saw as constant in all times and places. In their view, the differences in customs among regions and epochs were not the most important factors influencing human life, however striking they might seem. Such differences may limit our range of action and choice of careers, but they do not control the individual energy that drives human beings and shapes their destiny.

While the school of irony was particularly strong on plot, the school of empathy concentrated on characters' self-awareness and mutual understanding. Like Fielding, Jane Austen distrusted the subjective perspective, but hesitated to intervene in her own name to debunk its fallacies. Instead, she used free indirect discourse, a stylistic device that vividly suggests the fallibility of the subjective perspective. The interiorization of plot as well as the careful notation of characters' opinions about themselves and those who surround them came to dominate late-nineteenth-century psychological

novels, especially those of Henry James, whose work achieved a complete separation between moral skepticism and the comic tradition in which it had been rooted. This period injected a new moral seriousness into concerns that had hitherto tended to provoke laughter or irony, thereby continuing a more general tendency in the history of the novel. Thanks to this transformation, the school of empathy bequeathed to the twentieth-century novel its rich understanding of the infinitesimal fluctuations of the human psyche.

Under the influence of radical anti-idealist authors like Gustave Flaubert, Émile Zola, and the Goncourt brothers, the critique of idealism veered sharply toward pessimism. By allowing readers to become immersed in the minds and senses of the characters, the technique of empathy sought to reinforce the readers' repulsion at characters' flagrant moral deficiency. Living intimately with Emma Bovary, Germinie Lacerteux, or Gervaise, the protagonist of Zola's *Drunkard* (*L'assommoir*), is a perpetual lesson in the sadness and depravity of the human condition. In the premodern novel, this repugnant spectacle was the exclusive specialty of the picaresque subgenre and was limited to characters on the fringes of society. In a remarkable reversal, Flaubert, Zola, and the Goncourts claimed that moral depravity is an inescapable truth of the human condition. The enchantment of interiority had ultimately engendered its opposite, and the universality of virtue, proclaimed by modern idealism, had given way to an equally universal sense of moral failure.

Syntheses: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Fontane, Galdós

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the majority of genuinely influential novels were written and published in France and England. Yet, with a single exception, the most interesting syntheses between idealism and anti-idealism came from other countries, whose relative marginality encouraged the development of original positions. The exception was George Eliot, whose *Middlemarch* relates the life of a strong woman who achieves happiness after the failure of her first marriage. As self-controlled and flawlessly honest as the heroines of ancient Greek novels, the protagonist is nevertheless fallible, but has the ability to recognize and correct her errors. Her story encompasses all the themes of modern interiorization of the ideal: the moral equivalence between public heroism and private, anonymous, greatness; the moral beauty of humble beings; and the vocation of the modern novel to honor those quiet souls who secretly keep idealism alive.

Tolstoy, by contrast, was deeply distrustful of everything that resembled modern idealism. He disliked the apotheosis of the individual, the cult of individual consciences making their own laws, and the idea that duty is indelibly inscribed in human hearts. He did not see social roles as a direct cause of personality but rather as invitations to change our ways of perceiving and acting on the world. Such change does not happen automatically, however. Tolstoy's best protagonists refuse ready-made norms in order to fight, naively and awkwardly, the burdens imposed by society, as well as the contradictions of their own moral instincts. Olenin in *The Cossacks*, Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, and Levin in *Anna Karenina* are all examples of beautiful souls who do not proudly exhibit virtue to the eyes of the world (since for Tolstoy, lack of modesty is one of the chief symptoms of moral failure) but stubbornly seek the rules of the good life. These characters ultimately embrace the splendor of the moral norm in their own hearts, but not in the form of evident truths that can be grasped by mere observation. What Tolstoy's beautiful souls discover by listening to themselves and to the world are inner illuminations or intimations and personal states of joy, uncertainty, or dissatisfaction, rather than explicitly formulated rules and prohibitions, as was the case for the protagonists of Richardson, Rousseau, Balzac, and Dickens. Striving to overcome their blindness and achieve self-understanding, Tolstoy's characters, deprived of the peremptory language of morality, remind us of the scrupulous innocence of pastoral heroes for whom, as for Bezukhov, Levin, and Olenin, the world is a benevolent shelter that protects sincere hearts as they search for virtue.

In the work of Adalbert Stifter and Theodor Fontane, idealism penetrates into the heart of the real world even more deeply than in the novels of their predecessors and contemporaries. Yet, at the same time, the power of this idealism diminishes to the point of being barely perceptible. In Stifter's stories, the poetry of the heart can usually be found in human beings who lack physical beauty or sentimental success—beings, in short, who have not been elected by fate. These seemingly banal individuals, ostensibly battered by life, are nevertheless overflowing with energy and goodness. They are exemplary beings, and their exemplarity is all the more striking given the bland, unglamorous lives they live. Fontane, continuing in this vein, does his utmost to discover the poetry hidden within the most ordinary souls, an Effi Briest, an Innstetten, a Cecile, a St. Arnaud, prosaic beings who passively submit to the demands of their surroundings, even as they suffer from the conflict between moral duty and their desire to live in a kind, generous world. Their best-intentioned efforts to abide by social norms cannot fulfill their secret aspiration to give themselves wholeheartedly, to trust unconditionally, to love

passionately. Even the happiest individuals, the ones whose worldly success seems perfect, are visited homeopathically by dreams reminiscent of Goethe's Werther. However minute the dose, it is sometimes sufficient to kill the dreamer.

Fyodor Dostoevsky defended a position radically opposed to Fontane's moderation and Eliot's optimism. He rejected idealist novels on the grounds that they exalt human grandeur and autonomy. At the same time, he refused anti-idealism because it derives a bitter amusement from human imperfection. In opposing the ancient idealist tradition, Dostoevsky sought to prove that the magnanimity and constancy of early heroes were utterly unreal. To refute modern idealism, which exalted the capacity of exceptional beings to create their own moral laws, he proposed the example of Raskolnikov, the student who, in the name of autonomy, takes the liberty of killing an innocent person. *The Devils* returns to this critique and, through the portrait of Stavrogin, shows that a superman who dreams of imposing laws on his peers can only be a predator. Unlike the anti-idealists for whom human imperfection was the undeniable truth of our condition, Dostoevsky nevertheless believed in the possibility of perfection, which he equated, in the Orthodox Christian manner, with contemplative holiness, self-immolation for the good of others, and, above all, abandonment into the hands of God. Reacting against those writers whose characters are beautiful souls in perfect control of their thoughts and actions, Dostoevsky depicted his ideal characters as awkward human beings, deeply humble, as if they realized that their efforts had scarcely earned them any merit and were asking pardon of their fellow human beings for having been chosen by God, despite their flaws. In a deeply corrupt world, the only beauty is that of these rare, naive, impulsive misfits. Dostoevsky thus distanced himself equally from idealism and anti-idealism, without creating a genuine synthesis between them. Instead, he established a novelistic formula based on the contrast between the most ethereal holiness and the most repugnant forms of human abjection.

Late-nineteenth-century Spanish writers brought yet another vision to the novel. Their characters are irrevocably flawed by pride and even by a grain of folly. While their nobility is enhanced by immense reserves of vital energy, they also suffer from a striking psychic imbalance, as evidenced by Fortunata's obstinacy and Maximiliano's angelic love in Benito Pérez Galdós's *Fortunata and Jacinta* and by the protagonist's holiness in his *Nazarin*. A similar current is evident in the tortured femininity of Ana Ozores in Leopoldo Alas's *La regenta*. The influence of Cervantes is surely responsible for this alliance of folly and idealism. Conversely, these novelists revive and modernize *Don Quixote*.

Another element deeply rooted in the Spanish prose tradition is the chasm separating characters touched by folly and the society around them. Like the picares who are always persecuted by bad luck, Maximiliano Rubin marries the beautiful Fortunata, but she remains forever inaccessible; Fortunata is reunited with her beloved Juanito Santa Cruz only to endure even more suffering on his account; Ana Ozores ultimately finds carnal love but not happiness. To the extent that these characters comprehend their inevitable alienation from the world, they willingly accept their precarious condition. Indeed, thanks to a psychological reversal fostered by the stability of traditional societies, they often feel at home in an atmosphere wholly unfavorable to their aspirations. Their unhappiness, which is akin to tragedy, is thus laced with a kind of comic complicity between those who have been excluded and the world that tortures them. At once sublime and ridiculous, the characters of Spanish novels aspire to the chimera of autonomy. Their passionate quest commands respect, yet no one is surprised by their failure. In these novels, the shattering of the noblest dreams is perceived as the inescapable law of human existence, since everyone assumes that dreams cannot be achieved. Protagonists thus preserve all the grandeur of their ambitions in the very ridiculousness of their fall.

The Twentieth Century and the Return of Formal Multiplicity

In the last third of the nineteenth century novels displayed an array of options—idealism, anti-idealism, and the synthesis of both—yet they conformed to strikingly similar forms. Writers like Henry James who charted their own courses did so at their peril, and rare swatches of originality scarcely ruffled the massive monotony of the genre. At the level of plot, characters always demonstrate a mixture of imperfection and moral aspiration; they are almost always rooted in their surroundings, departing from them only rarely and, even then, almost imperceptibly. On the level of style, authors paid scrupulous attention to social and historic details, taking care to create realistic dialogues and to ensure the reader's sensory and affective immersion in the characters' world. These traits prevailed for a long time, as though the success of a formula discovered after so much effort discouraged any attempts at renewal.

Does this mean that the debate begun by the ancient novel and pursued by its modern descendants was over? That the progress of knowledge had finally reduced the fundamental axiological question to its true historical, sociological, and psychological dimensions? That the question of whether the world is our true home had been definitively and positively answered?

Not at all. The equilibrium reached by the novel in the second half of the nineteenth century may have given most writers and readers the impression that these perennial problems had been solved. Soon enough, however, a new generation of writers vigorously questioned the novel's apparently solid anchors in historical, sociological, and psychological reflection.

The history of the novel across the twentieth century is shaped by this questioning. The new era began with an aestheticist wave that was already present in J. K. Huysmans's *Against the Grain* (*A rebours*) (1884) and reached maturity by the time of André Gide's *Immoralist* (1902). This aestheticist current felt only contempt for the social condition and the moral aspiration of human beings and claimed, instead, that since we have the right to invent our own destinies according to aesthetic rather than moral criteria, we must take advantage of the world as we see fit. In ancient novels, moral laws were transcendent; subsequent writers situated ethical norms within the human heart; in a later avatar, these norms came to be rooted in socio-historical contexts. Aestheticism is the first trend entirely to dismiss moral concerns, seeking instead freedom from society and norms.

Marcel Proust was both more moderate than Huysmans and Gide in his aestheticism and more radical in his rejection of the world. His masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past*, took advantage of all the subtleties of moral and social realism to show that the real world is decidedly not our true home and that art offers our only access to the plenitude of life. This new rupture between human beings and the world contrasts sharply with nineteenth-century depictions of individuals' dependence on society. It denies the appeal of the moral norm, whether external or internal, and affirms the radical irreducibility of human beings to their surroundings.

A kindred though even more somber spirit animates James Joyce's *Ulysses*. As in Proust's masterpiece, the protagonists of *Ulysses* remain strangers to their world. Even more than in Proust, their capacity for action atrophies. In hypernaturalist fashion, Joyce evokes the multiplicity of competing details that solicit our attention. *Ulysses* pushes the discoveries of the empathetic school to their logical limits by reproducing the most minute images, impressions, and fragments of thought that are assumed to form our stream of consciousness. Joyce's unquenchable stylistic verve and the abundant details, which might appear useless at first glance, suggest that the human mind, although overflowing with images and bizarre juxtapositions of ideas, sorely lacks rationality and the energy to act. While Proust saw art as a way to liberate human beings from their sad condition, Joyce used art to illuminate, but not overcome, this condition. In their own ways, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner both pursued this *undigested form of writing* in which whole segments of the narration are presented without a prior

elaboration that might help readers figure out the stakes of the story. After World War II, Nathalie Sarraute and other representatives of the so-called French New Novel continued to explore this vein.

Another fictional form that omits elaborate narratives is the essayistic novel as developed by Thomas Mann and Robert Musil. Here philosophical discourse is incorporated into the fabric of fiction. Abundant theoretical reflections in Mann and Musil ultimately produce the same effect as the sensory data of Joyce and Faulkner. In both options, readers have the impression of attending a brilliant performance during which very little actually happens. All these authors unwittingly return, along their own routes, to the ancient practice of Greek, medieval, or episodic picaresque novels. Like those early works, the texts of Joyce, Faulkner, and Musil present generalized relationships between the self and the world rather than specific cases of conflict between individuals and moral norms, as novellas traditionally did.

Franz Kafka, by contrast, uses the techniques of *elaborated narration* involving plausible characters, a clearly defined setting, a well-delineated subject, dialogues subordinated to the needs of the plot, and an easy-to-follow style. Describing the world from a seemingly objective point of view, Kafka emphasizes the gravity of the new rupture between humans and their milieu as well as the resulting strangeness of the world. His readers discover that the ties between the character and the world have for all practical purposes been severed, but not, as in Joyce and Musil, because of the idiosyncrasies of the protagonist, who, in Kafka's novels is always perfectly common, but because the world, behind its thin film of normality, is actually a half-terrifying, half-comic nightmare. This new rupture is so profound that love can no longer be considered capable of reconciling individuals and the world. In the twentieth century, for the first time in the history of the genre, love and the couple are no longer central to the novel.

Given his narrative simplicity at the formal level, Kafka renewed even more resolutely than Joyce, Faulkner, and Musil the premodern practice of multiple episodes that endlessly reiterate a general, abstract, relationship between self and world. Joseph K., the protagonist of *The Trial*, who is subjected to an exceptional and incomprehensible legal procedure, as well as K., the surveyor of *The Castle*, who tries in vain to gain acceptance from the local administration, can trace their ancestry to the characters of premodern idealist novels, who face incomprehensible danger at every step. The difference is that in Kafka's world there is no benevolent providence to protect and ultimately save the characters.

The deeply disturbing layer of reality discovered by the author of *The Trial* has become the canonical topic of many subsequent novels, just as the

stream of consciousness worked out by Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner exerted considerable influence on the novelistic depiction of individuals throughout twentieth-century narratives. In the so-called postmodern novel, the characters are prisoners of the perceptual and linguistic chaos of their consciousness and confront a world that is devoid of substance and riddled with illogical, incredible, or mythical elements. Prefigured in the ethnic surrealism of Jean Giono, Mircea Eliade, and Ismaïl Kadare, as well as in Alfred Döblin's late novels, the postmodern strand is illustrated in many different ways by Gabriel García Márquez, Georges Perec, Michel Tournier, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco, Mario Vargas Llosa, Don DeLillo, and others.

Clearly, these three major options—aestheticism, intellectualism, and depiction of the disoriented psyche and of the strangeness of the world—do not exhaust the immense novelistic production of the century. Dostoevsky's successors, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, Julien Green, Heinrich Böll, and Walker Percy, as well as existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, continued to reflect on moral imperfection. The heirs to social realism, Roger Martin du Gard, John Galsworthy, Doris Lessing, Hans Fallada, Saul Bellow, Tom Wolfe and, in Russia, where socialist realism carefully nurtured this method, Boris Pasternak, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Vassilii Grossman, remained faithful to the grand style perfected by nineteenth-century novelists. Neoromantics like Marguerite Yourcenar, Thornton Wilder, Julien Gracq, and Ernst Jünger sought to capture the destiny of exceptional beings in their historical context, while the heirs to the ironic and skeptic tradition, John Dos Passos, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Jaroslav Hasek, Milan Kundera, Josef Skvorecki, John Barth, and Philip Roth, brought indefatigable verve to their portraits of human imperfection in a hostile, absurd world.

All these approaches remain alive in an age when the novel reaffirms its international vocation. The most ancient literary traditions as well as newly emerging ones choose the novel as a means of affirming their modernity. Over the past fifty years, recipients of Nobel Prizes in literature have come from diverse national backgrounds but almost all have been novelists. The disorientation of the self in a world that we have come almost serenely to accept as incomprehensible appears to be one of the most frequent themes of new novels written around the globe. It recalls the ancient chasm that separated the virtuous heroes of Greek novels from the precarious, sublunar world.

Translated by Carol Rigolot

The premodern novel insists on the primacy of an idea that is more important than the observation of the empirical world. This peculiarity influences both the message and the formal features of the highly specific premodern narrative subgenres. Some of these subgenres like the Greek novel, chivalric romance, and the pastoral, presented invincible or, at least, admirable heroes, defending moral norms in a disorderly world. Other subgenres like the elegiac narrative, the picaresque, and the novella, revealed the irremediable imperfection of human beings. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Philosophical novel is a genre that was an innovation of the 20th century, a literary phenomenon that emerged in the 20th century after World War I. Some people were enthusiastic about it. They believed that the achievements of psychology would facilitate human progress and make the human nature more perfect. But World War I and World War II with its fascism, the greatest evil, all these seemed to disprove all the previous notions of the human nature and made intellectuals opposed to the same universal question: What am I?, What was I born for?, What should I do to fulfill myself? People were searching