

The Novel as a Challenge to the Concept of Literature

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Accepted: 3 November 2023 / Published online: 14 November 2023

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Abstract This article takes two supposedly emergent genres of contemporary fiction – »autofiction« and the »theory novel« – and holds them up to a critical scrutiny made possible through close analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin’s 1941 essay »Epic and Novel.« Bakhtin’s principle of the heteronomy of novelistic discourse anticipates such formal developments and suggests, rather, a nonformal definition of the novel in terms of the thought of which it is capable.

Der Roman als Probe für den Literaturbegriff

Zusammenfassung Dieser Beitrag untersucht zwei vermutlich emergente Genres zeitgenössischer Literatur – Autofiktion und »Theory Novel« – und unterzieht sie einer kritischen Überprüfung mittels einer genauen Analyse von Michail Bachtins 1941 erschienenem Essay »Epos und Roman«. Bachtins Prinzip der Fremdbestimmung des novellistischen Diskurses nimmt derartige formale Entwicklungen vorweg und schlägt dagegen eine nicht formale Bestimmung des Romans in je geeigneter Begrifflichkeit vor.

Every suicide is a sublime poem of melancholy. Where can you find in the great ocean of literature a book still afloat which can compete in genius with a newspaper item like this one: yesterday at four o’clock a young woman threw herself into the Seine from the parapet of the Pont des Arts. Honoré de Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*

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I.

Of course, no scholarly reflection on the current state of literary production should restrict itself to developments in the novel; other genres have their own historicity and sense of narrative progression. And yet for Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in 1941, the novel is the only truly contemporary genre, in a rather distinct sense, for only the novel was »born and nourished in a new era of world history.«¹ Other genres »entered that era as already fixed forms.« They were thus condemned to adapt themselves to it; only the novel shares the condition of »incompletion« with the world in which it came into being; the novel is therefore contemporary in a way that applies to no other genre.

By contemporaneity, what Bakhtin means is that the novel is »the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted« (3), whereas the world depicted by the epic, say, is always over and done with. These qualities are not merely empirical, a matter of the situation in which we encounter such forms; they are defining qualities of the forms themselves. As Bakhtin puts it, »the epic [...] has been from the beginning a poem about the past«; its authorial position is that of »a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible,« whereas novelistic discourse is »the discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries« (13–14).

Bakhtin's observations about the contemporaneity of the novel introduce an important qualification to the project of producing a theoretical response to perceived changes in the historical parameters and dimensions of the novel form. One of the major implications of the novel's inherent contemporaneity is that the novel »has anticipated, and will continue to anticipate, the future development of literature as a whole« (7). For Bakhtin, the novel has no formal definition or limitation, which means that there is no discourse or register that the novel is not predisposed to incorporate. Letters, diaries, confessions, philosophical tracts, political manifestos are just a few of the discourses listed by Bakhtin; the list is in principle inexhaustible.

Bakhtin's theory of the novel thus problematizes both the proposition of »recent developments« and that of »established notions« of literature. For Bakhtin, the novel form cannot be situated or stabilized in relation to either concept, for the novel is inimical to formal circumscription. In Bakhtin's schema, the very idea of the »contemporary novel« is an oxymoron, or better, a tautology.

Three implications of the novel's contemporaneity are particularly worth emphasizing. First, what defines the genres of epic and novel has nothing to do with a particular content: say, in the case of the epic, the presence of the past – castles, battles, knights, and so on. The epic consists, rather, in the »finished« quality of its world – its »transferral of a represented world into the past« (13). Likewise, the contemporaneity of the novel has nothing to do with the presence of (for example) Google employees, teenagers with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), nonbinary persons, literature professors, or readers of twentieth-century literary theory among the novel's characters (nor with the corresponding arrival of

¹ M.M. Bakhtin, »Epic and Novel,« *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, Austin 1981, 4.



their discourses among the novel's registers). It has to do rather with the novel's »forms of presentation:« the fact that in the novel there is no »finished and already formed object, definite and clear« (8). If we approach the novel in the cataloguing spirit, we are implicitly consigning the novel to the past, treating it as something removed from us. In so doing, we strip from the novel precisely what is distinctive and essential about it: its »spirit of process and inconclusiveness« (7). The novel is not just chronologically or empirically incomplete or unfinished, it is incomplete in its essence, meaning that everything we encounter in the novel is unfinalized and unfinalizable. Represented thoughts are neither »affirmed« nor »repudiated«;² they belong to the characters fully as much as, or more than, they belong to the works in which they appear.

This lack of finalization implies that the novel resists theorization – at least if we hold to the modern sense of theory as »a singular explanatory or evaluative account.«³ Thus – second – even though Bakhtin uses the term »genre« to denote the novel, Bakhtin's novel resists generic definition or subdivision. Once we start to identify generic features to the novel – once we start to theorize it, to treat it as an object of knowledge – we are no longer treating it in its essence as a novel. Not only is the novel not a genre, but the novel signals, for Bakhtin, the abolition of genres in literature.

Third, there is no canonicity to the novel. Of course, our modern, socio-critical conception of the novel inevitably has a sense of canonicity to it. A recent scholarly article heavily invested in the generic distinction of the contemporary novel talks of the »contemporary canon« in English as including works by Teju Cole, Maggie Nelson, Ben Lerner, and Tom McCarthy.⁴ However, following Bakhtin's proposition, once we begin to differentiate canonical works from the mass of novelistic production we are privileging certain formal conceptions of the novel over the enormous range of possibilities to which the novel gives rise. Those unfathomable possibilities are not external to the novel, a matter of the novel's capacity for prophecy or imagination. They are internal to it, the secret of the very order of thought, of every fact, interpretation and idea to which the work gives us access.

The novel, in fact, is not a form at all. Does the novel even »exist«? It is almost possible to say that for Bakhtin it does not; this is another extraordinary implication of his comparison of the novel with the epic. The novel is not a form but a *logic*. A better word for »novel« is »novelization,« a term that signals the rupture of Bakhtin's thinking about the novel from anything to do with genre or canon. »Novel,« says Michael Holquist, »is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system.«⁵ And so we might say that Bakhtin's theory of the novel is not the theory of a genre, but a theory of contemporaneity, of »the process of ›becoming‹« that is, for Bakhtin, inseparable from the novel as an evolution and a practice (5).

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Manchester 1984, 80.

³ D.N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory*, Cambridge 2014, 57.

⁴ Theodore Martin, »Contemporary, Inc.,« *Representations* 142 (2018), 138.

⁵ Michael Holquist, »Introduction,« in: M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, Austin 1981, xxxi.



These three points – dealing with *content*, *theorization*, and *canonicity* respectively – are summed up in a few sentences towards the end of Bakhtin's essay:

Since it is constructed in a zone of contact with the incomplete events of a particular present, the novel often crosses the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature – making use first of a moral confession, then of a philosophical tract, then of manifestos that are openly political, then degenerating into the raw spirituality of a confession, a »cry of the soul« that has not yet found its formal contours. These phenomena are precisely what characterize the novel as a developing genre. After all, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical. And the growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition; the boundaries themselves are constantly changing.⁶

All three concern the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, supposedly the most fundamental modern principle of literary classification. It is the distinction we reach for when we try to define the novel, the first fork we come to when we enter a bookstore.⁷ But when it comes to analyses of the contemporary novel, one of the most frequently invoked propositions by critics in the field is that of the erosion of this boundary in the form of, say, a new »sincerity« in the contemporary novel;⁸ or the novel's »formal incorporation« of theory;⁹ or the emergence of »autofictional« practices that require readers »capable of freeing themselves from the shackles of« twentieth-century theoretical traditions.¹⁰

I'd like briefly to examine this proposition, in the context of Bakhtin's work, by addressing two critical conversations currently taking place around two supposedly emergent genre categories: »autofiction« and the »theory novel.«

II.

As a genre category, considered from a Bakhtinian perspective, »autofiction« lacks coherence and therefore plausibility, for the simple reason that a narrative work makes no formal distinction between a fictional and a nonfictional »I.« Ever since the publication in 1719 of *The Life and Strange, Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe [...], Mariner [...] Written by Himself*, there has been no way to securely

⁶ Bakhtin (note 1), 33.

⁷ Catherine Gallagher, »The Rise of Fictionality,« *The Novel*, Vol. 1: *History, Geography and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti, Princeton 2006, 336.

⁸ Adam Kelly, »The New Sincerity,« in: Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden (Ed.), *Postmodern, Postwar – and After: Rethinking American Literature*, Iowa 2016, 197–208.

⁹ Martin (note 4), 141. Martin poses the question as follows: »What happens to the novel form once novels begin to see themselves as inextricable from the academic discourse of the contemporary?« (137). But the novel has always made use of such discourses. Nothing in the academic »discourse of the contemporary« distinguishes it from any other discourse the novel might make use of.

¹⁰ Toril Moi, »Describing *My Struggle*,« *The Point* (December 27, 2017), <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/describing-my-struggle-knausgaard/> (01/28/2019).



fasten any particular use of the pronoun »I« to the person who authors it (whether Joseph Conrad, Karl Ove Knausgaard, or Maggie Nelson). To identify principles of autofictional writing that differentiate it from other kinds of first-person writing is thus very difficult, for autofiction has no distinguishing characteristics other than of being – as Fredric Jameson puts it laconically in a long review of the final volume of Knausgaard's *My Struggle* – »somewhat autobiographical.«¹¹

If we wanted to circumscribe a field of autofictional studies, we would do better populating it not with literary works but with critical theses: explanations or arguments for the existence of a mode of writing that would be sufficiently distinct to warrant a terminological innovation and a corresponding change in critical procedure. A number of such theses have emerged in recent years.

For example, Toril Moi presents the work of writers such as Knausgaard, W.G. Sebald, and Rachel Cusk as a »respon[se] to a new craving for reality in literature, a new demand for emotional identification and for an immersion in the world proposed by a novel.«¹² For Moi, the appeal of Knausgaard's *My Struggle* has nothing to do with the work's »formal« innovations. On such criteria, Knausgaard disappoints. Knausgaard's work signals the arrival of new terms on which to evaluate literature, such as »authenticity, passion and integrity,« the quality of »descriptions,« and the »capacity to convey reality.«¹³ Knausgaard must then be taken at his word when he insists that »everything he writes is true.« Moi's interest in Knausgaard is primarily as a rebuttal of late 20th-century literary theories that put the centrality of the author and the simplicity of his or her narration into question.

A contrast to Moi's position might be represented by a remark made by Carla Freccero at a panel on »Autotheoretical Grammar« at the Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in January 2020. Freccero was concerned not with »autofiction« but »autotheory.« The two terms may seem to approach the ambiguous zone of fictionality from opposite directions. In practice, however, the terms pose similar questions, for Moi's criteria – »authenticity, passion, and integrity« – imply that the opinions of Knausgaard's narrator are the author's, that he is writing in his own name and his own voice, that the many »essayistic« moments of his texts – moments of pontification, analysis, and interpretation – are referable to Knausgaard himself. Freccero's answer to a question at the MLA panel described a quite different relation between formal narration and the work's »content« from Moi's conception. In response to a question about developments within feminist theory, Freccero said this:

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, »Itemised« (review of *My Struggle*, Vol. 6, by Karl Ove Knausgaard), *London Review of Books*, 11/08/2018, 3c.

¹² Toril Moi, »It isn't your home« (review of *Nathalie Sarraute. A Life Between* by Ann Jefferson), *London Review of Books*, 09.10.2020, 38d.

¹³ Moi (note 12).



It used to be an imperative to remove as much figuration as possible with a commitment to exactness. What's different in autotheoretical practice is to allow figuration to be unconstrained; this is a different ethics and a different praxis of writing.¹⁴

In other words, the space of autofictional or autotheoretical practice, far from being predicated on »authenticity« and »integrity,« introduces a specter of fictionality (»unconstrained« figuration) into theoretical discourse. That specter of fictionality, far from being incidental, has implications that are directly relevant to the theoretical work undertaken by the discourse in question.

Between these two extremes we find a number of other substantive positions. In an article in 2018 entitled »Autofiction Infiltrated,« Annabel Kim positions an extraordinary novella by Anne Garréta, narrated in the first person, as a critique of autofictional practice »from within« – a »Trojan horse« – on the grounds of the work's »hostility to the premises of the genre.«¹⁵ Those rejected premises, for Garréta (and implicitly for Kim), are an »attachment to the subject, [to] the *inconscient*, and [to] desire« (565b). For Sarah Brouillette, meanwhile, autofiction is a »generational archetype« that operates primarily in the interest of publishers as an ideological and commodity form insofar as it »intensifies and personalizes the novel as therapy.«¹⁶

Finally, in the aforementioned review of Volume 6 of Knausgaard's *My Struggle* for the *London Review of Books*, Fredric Jameson puts forward at least three separate theses, each of which presumes at the outset that Knausgaard's work is a novel (Jameson does not use the term »autofiction«). The most interesting involves the narrative scene of Knausgaard's work, which, Jameson says, is not one of action, nor »introspection,« nor even »reading,« but (as in Proust) »writing.« Knausgaard, says Jameson, brings us, as readers, closer to the protagonist »than in any ordinary novel or autobiography« – we might say *unprecedentedly* close, such that the narrative forms of Knausgaard's work are no longer vehicular at all. The diegetic loop created by the relation between *narrating* and *narrated* event is drawn so tightly that the two coincide. The novel's action is constituted not by the actions of the protagonist or his family, however minor and quotidian, nor by the author's conversations and opinions, however monumental and consequential; but by what happens in between all these other things: »the writing of the sentences« (Jameson 8c).

We have, therefore, four or five hypotheses:

- i. *a new craving for reality in literature, and a new demand for emotional identification and immersion in the world;*
- ii. *a different ethics and praxis of writing predicated upon a maximal acceptance of figuration;*
- iii. *the novel as therapy;*

¹⁴ Carla Freccero, session #491: »Autotheoretical Grammar: Undoing the Singular and Other Experiments in Political Endurance,« Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Seattle (Washington), 01/11/2020 (question-and-answer period).

¹⁵ Annabel Kim, »Autofiction Infiltrated. Anne Garréta's *Pas un jour*,« *PMLA* 133/3 (May 2018), 562b.

¹⁶ Sarah Brouillette, »Sally Rooney's Couple Form,« in: Gloria Fisk (Ed.), *Reading Sally Rooney, Post45*, 06.15.2020, <https://post45.org/2020/06/sally-rooneys-couple-form/> (01/06/2021).



- iv. *a new ideology of the subject, one that may be subverted from within the work;*
- v. *an unprecedented closeness to the protagonist, secured on the basis of a practice of drawing the reader into the process of the writing itself.*

By contrast with all of these, Bakhtin's concept of novelization locates »autofiction« squarely within the novel tradition. For it is in the very nature of the novel to refuse to remain docilely within generic boundaries; and generic boundaries, it should be clear, are always categories of subjectivity, determining both who is speaking and the nature of the speaker's relation to the utterance. »Epic and Novel« lays bare these most radical implications of Bakhtin's theory of the novel; it is where the impossibility of situating the novel in subjective terms – the near impossibility, in other words, of attributing a subjectivity to the novelistic work – is revealed most clearly.

For Bakhtin, the novel has a »special relationship« with extraliterary genres, including »the genres of everyday life« (i.e., genres of self-narration) and with »ideological genres« (by which Bakhtin means the genres of opinion and theorization). This is because the novel *is not itself a genre* – this can't be emphasized enough. Again, all genres are destroyed in the novel, which we should understand to mean that all forms of discourse lose their subjective determination when they enter into or are appropriated by the novel.

To distinguish »autofiction« from fiction is to assume that the use autofiction makes of forms such as confession, the diary, letters, etc., is fundamentally different from the use made of those forms by fiction. This assumption is suspect, since the only grounds on which to make it are statements of principle by the speaking (or writing) subject itself. If autofiction has any critical significance in the present moment, it is because, as Annabel Kim says eloquently in »Autofiction Infiltrated,« it »neatly and economically poses the question of the self as fiction« (560b). But we could state this claim even more strongly in Bakhtinian terms: autofiction is a species of novelistic practice that enlarges the novel's capacity to de-congeal all concepts that depend for their completeness on the insistence of a self. Most directly and precisely, autofiction does not reiterate but rather destroys the subjective illusions underlying the practice and the persistence of literary discourse as such.

III.

The »theory novel« is a second, supposedly emerging subgenre of contemporary fiction.¹⁷ In a 2012 article Nicholas Dames defined the »theory novel« as a form tied to theory's historical obsolescence as a critical method. In recent American fiction, he writes, theory is no longer interesting on account of its philosophical implications for the novel, nor for its influence on the formal practices of writers, but rather as »an uneasy part of fiction's *content*.«¹⁸ The theory novel is for Dames a new genre

¹⁷ Anna Kornbluh, »The Murder of Theory,« *Public Books*, 08.01.2017, <https://www.publicbooks.org/the-murder-of-theory/> (10/12/2018).

¹⁸ Nicholas Dames, »Theory and the Novel,« *n+1* 14 (Summer 2012), 159.



produced for and about the »theory generation.« The works that Dames includes in this genre feature characters who either »us[e] Theory to read situations in [...] everyday life« or exhibit a familiarity with critical and literary theory as »simply and naturally part of the whole context of a person« (159).¹⁹ In these novels, says Dames, theory is submitted to judgment »from within the forms it tried to dismantle« (for example, realism and the *Bildungsroman*). »If novelistic realism aspires to be a history of the present,« he continues, »that present now includes – in the educations of writers themselves – the Theory that relegates novelistic realism to the past« (159).

However, it should be obvious that, as part of fiction's »content,« the presence of »theory« does not amount to a generic innovation in the novel, nor a new historical condition, nor a significant formal development of any kind. For the novel has always included theory among the discursive registers available to it – as when the narrator of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* reflects on how the use of »historical parallels« in imaginative writing may be the surest way to give »low« subject matter an »ennobled« character;²⁰ or when Stephen Dedalus, in the presence of his friend Cranly, advances a theory of epiphany as »sudden spiritual manifestation,« an experience of »the most delicate and evanescent of moments« (and is immediately disgusted at having thereby »cheaped the eternal images of beauty« – by, precisely, treating them as content);²¹ or when Stevens, the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, advances a hypothesis of the imbrication of small events with global events of »unimaginable largeness,« using the image of a »wheel« with »the great houses of this country« at its hub.²² Content of this nature asks to be judged as »theoretical« because of its ideational nature; nevertheless, such theoretical material in the novel is entirely a matter of represented discourse.

These examples may seem exceptional because of the way they seem directly to implicate the works in which they appear. But such reflections cannot escape the limits that attach to them as »object[s] of representation,« which is to say, as emanations of »speaking persons.« In this form, reflective statements are necessarily »subjected in the novel to contest.«²³ The novel cannot operate as a forum for the lossless dissemination of ideas. As Bakhtin puts it, »the speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes.« Even if what is spoken in the novel is a transcription of the author's own point of view, the fact of that transcription utterly transforms the status of the spoken word from that of *representing* to *represented* discourse.

The important question to ask when it comes to the so-called »theory novel« is not, therefore, what happens when novels accommodate theory as content – for

¹⁹ Dames is referring, respectively, to Mindy, a character in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, and Julius, the narrator of Teju Cole's novel *Open City*. The words »simply and naturally part of the whole context of a person« are a quotation from James Wood's *New Yorker* review of Cole's *Open City*. See James Wood, »The Arrival of Enigmas,« *The New Yorker*, 02/28/2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas> (10/12/2018).

²⁰ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, New York 2015, 341.

²¹ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, London 1977, 188–190.

²² Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, New York 1993, 76–77, 115.

²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, »Discourse in the Novel,« *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, Austin 1981, 333.

novels have always done this – but rather: can novels do theory? *Doing* theory is a fundamentally different action than the reproduction or *representation* of theoretical discourse. And the identity of the subject to whom any such »doing« may be attributed is also fundamentally different. There can be no doubt as to the location of the subject behind the novel's act of representation. He/she/it must exist outside, and prior to, the thought being represented. *Doing* theory, however, means *thinking*: an event in the present. If the novel does theory – if the novel thinks – that thinking would take place not as the representation of a thought that necessarily precedes it, but rather »in the space between what is reproducible« in the utterance »and what is not.«²⁴ For the materiality of the novel comprises nothing other than »represented speech and thought,« in Ann Banfield's distinctive phraseology.²⁵ Doing theory in the context of the novel is itself a »subjective act of enunciation,«²⁶ but any such act can only be understood by reference to the singular conditions of expression of the novel. If the novel does not exist as a form, as we proposed earlier, such nonexistence (or nonreproducibility) also implicates the question of the novel's agency, its capacity for doing, thinking. No theorization that the novel were capable of could ever appear as reproducible content, either in the work or anywhere else.

IV.

For Bakhtin, in sum, there is nothing formally new about the presence, in works of literature, of professors opining about the state of the novel, or narrators who, having gone through an intoxication with literary theory in graduate school, are now experiencing a disenchantment with it; or essays penned by the work's narrator and peddling views indiscernible from those of its author; or novelists engaged in writing the novel we are reading; or first-person narrators assuring us that, in this case, the story is true. The contemporaneity of such features is solely a matter of content. As formal qualities of the presentation of the material, such elements represent nothing but a continuation of a quality that is constitutive of the novel form, the presence of nonliterary (»heteronomous«) material, and therefore the perpetually shifting nature of the »boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature.«²⁷

Novels, finally, do not produce knowledge. They may represent opinions, but in doing so they do not communicate them. Thus novels will never achieve the status of a theoretical, normative discourse. And novels are unable to theorize themselves; not because they are unable to »theorize« – in a sense, they do so incessantly – but because, as repositories of formal incompleteness, novels are themselves untheorizable.

²⁴ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines. Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, South Pasadena 2014, 188.

²⁵ Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences. Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, Boston, London 1982, 12.

²⁶ Lazzarato (note 24), 188.

²⁷ Bakhtin (note 1), 33.



This is not to say that there is no »push toward heteronomy« in contemporary fiction. Novelization, as Bakhtin calls it, is well under way. However, that development does not require new genre designations, new terms of analysis, nor even a new theory of the novel. On the contrary, »heteronomous« practices are the demonstration and enactment of a truth that is central to Bakhtin's conception of the novel (even as it places every novel beyond the analytic reach of the critic): that the novel is not a form or genre but simply a mode of thought of which it alone is capable.

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