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Introduction

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Introduction: Form and Medium

Penny Fielding and Andrew Taylor

This volume is the second issue of *NOVEL* to draw from papers originally accepted by the *Society for Novel Studies* conference that was due to take place in April 2020 but was one of the early casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic, with some additional essays that addressed our themes. We selected essays that spoke to a fundamental question for scholars of the novel: how and why do we still recognise a textual entity made familiar by the term “novel” when novels have been so generative of other forms of discourse? Since Michael McKeon’s *Origins of the English Novel*, we have been used to plotting heterogeneity from the start (from whenever we may date the novel.) Novels, we know, are composite things, drawing on other forms, driven by the rapidly changing demands of readers and the material technologies of publishing. The novel has taken many shapes—serial publication, triple-decker, graphic novel—whereby formal flexibility has ensured its ability to respond to the endlessly diverse conditions of its production.

The novel form is paradoxical—both the most recognized of modern forms, yet the least stable. However much it adapts and changes as a genre, it still remains available as a cultural marker, a recognizable thing by which we can plot historical, cultural and personal experience. From its early heterogeneity, mixing with letters, journals, newspapers and travelogues, to recent challenges to its recognized form like Olga Tokarczuk’s *Flights* or *Emoji-Dick*, the crowd-sourced translation of *Moby-Dick* into emojis and edited by Fred Benenson, the novel refuses to submit to a singular form. Yet we still call them novels and reach out for the term to understand other narrative forms—the novel in verse, or the suggestion that admired television series such as *The Wire* are the successors of the Victorian

serial novel. The cultural significance of a work like *The Wire* seems to evade understanding until its form can be brought into view as a culturally accepted narrative shape. As Kent Puckett's essay in this volume argues, individual novels (in this case the original *Moby-Dick*) can act as reference points for the way we think in narrative contours, while Caroline Levine shows us how the seemingly-contrived ends of Victorian novels—the marriage plot and the convenient inheritance—may have real social and political value.

In his introduction to a recent issue of *Novel*, John Frow writes: “We tend to think of ‘the novel’ as a genre, but it may be better to think of ‘the novel as genres,’ as collection of forms whose common core is almost impossible to define” (Frow 1-2). But if we focus not so much on genre as on form itself, the argument becomes less one of how we identify a common core, and more of something that can be recognized or something that presents itself to the reader of novels. This volume demonstrates that novels have a certain shape—whether in terms of story, narrative or arrangement—and that they exist in describable media, whether these be paper, film or something less tangible. That is, the novel's ontology is one of form and medium. And although the novel is an intensely social object, to think of it as form and medium is to open up deep questions of what that ontological status is—questions that ask what underlies the volatility of a term like “genre” with its sensitivity to markets and social pressures. It is, perhaps, not surprising that a number of our contributors go back to structural questions about narrative form and the nature of stories invoked by earlier twentieth-century theorists of narratology (Victor Shklovksy and Gérard Genette) as well as the uses of realism to understand historical forms (Georg Lukács).

The essays in this issue invite us to consider that forms may be both familiar and strange. We may recognize a novel when we see it but that recognition is in a process of constant mutation. In his recent *Human Forms: The Novel in the Age of Evolution*, Ian Duncan shows that even as it delineated an identifiable narrative form, for example the

Bildungsroman, the European novel contained its own internal destabilization of that form. Bildung itself (and the novel more generally in Duncan's study) is "always in formation, surging toward an unrealized future; it is the genre of infinity, not totality" (24).

There are many forms—form as narrative shape, as evolutionary stage, as material condition. And form and medium are of course interdependent. This volume thinks about form as shape and form as matter—though it is not always possible to differentiate between the two. We speak of "reading matter" as a body of texts to be consumed or referred to—an abstract quantity that precedes any individual reading. But matter is also the medium through which we read texts in the present. So Rajeswari Rajan explores the relationship between the novel and the medium of the museum, as both are constructed by Orhan Pamuk; Garrett Stewart's essay places the work of imagination through reading in a confined space alongside the apparent expansiveness of Virtual Reality technology in his astute account of Richard Powers's novel *Plowing the Dark*; Kent Puckett sees the novel form at work in political documents; Phillip Harper shows how the inclusion of photographs in Ishamel Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* forces us to think about the form and political function of the African-American novel; and Deidre Lynch turns to scrapbooks to loosen the novel's formal grip in a way that blends its conceptual with its material status.

In order to think through questions of form and medium we must address a further distinction between *forms* and *form*. To return to Duncan's evolutionary modeling (an idea picked up by Yoon Sun Lee in this volume), an understanding of form itself is necessary to read a novel even where individual forms are elusive. Form, after all, exists everywhere. In her recent book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine makes the case for what she calls the "affordances"—the political actions or uses—that are "latent in materials and designs" (6); form of all kinds (literary, philosophical, socio-political) contains the potential to exert and undertake political work. In any specific literary text or, say, social

institution, there is never one dominant form; instead multiple patterns compete with one another, unravelling claims to semantic or political priority. For Levine, attentiveness to form, with its diverse shapes and collisions, is central to a literary criticism that seeks to engage with the possibilities of effective social change. Levine's work has generated much discussion and disagreement (see, for instance, the essays collected in *PMLA* 312.5 (2017)); but for the contributors to this special issue of *NOVEL*, the questions it raises remain, consciously or otherwise, a central provocation. What is the relationship between the literary form of the novel and its potential political valences? How does the novel's form—with its endless flexibility, its refusal to finally, formally, stabilize—respond to the challenges posed by other, especially digital, media, so as to be able to claim an ongoing relevance for itself? How does—indeed, can—the novel generate alternative structures of knowledge and meaning beyond the page, in the face of technology's apparently all-pervasive phenomenological force?

In our opening essay, Levine explores the ethical work of novels as it is given in narrative form. She revisits the idea of the happy ending, and asks us to reconsider the idea that these are necessarily conservative or reductive. These questions are at once formal and political. In our present age of precarity—whether in terms, say, of labor or the environment--the forces of neo-liberalism and the open-endedness of narrative fiction sit in an uneasy relationship. Levine notes that “[t]he only truly radical conclusions, for most critics working over the past century, are the determinate negation and the open-ended pause.” But what happens if we return to, for example, the nineteenth-century novel and think about its plotting in terms of the material lives of its protagonists? Why should we, as critics, deny Oliver Twist or Jane Eyre the financial security that might the lives of orphans and single women less precarious? On this view, the notorious Victorian endings of the inheritance or marriage plots can seem less like closure and more like “a hinge between plotted instability and the

repetitive pleasures of reliable food, sleep, and study.” Closure here is really continuity—the nineteenth-century novel imagines a future for its precarious protagonists.

James Draney’s essay finds itself in implicit dialogue with, and departure from, many of the premises of Levine’s piece. He explores the impact of digital technology—the assumption that we exist in transparently readable, and therefore controllable, textual spaces—as a form that threatens the very foundations upon which the novel has historically constructed itself. He focuses on novels by J. M. Coetzee and Tom McCarthy to think through the ways in which fiction grapples with the economic and social forces created by surveillance capitalism and big data, as diagnosed recently by writers such as Shoshanna Zuboff and Antoinette Rouvroy. If the realist novel took up the challenge of interpreting a world which “presumed lawlessness, disharmony, and sheer contingency,” how, in our contemporary digital moment is it possible “to narrate or describe a world that already diagrams and archives itself in dizzying detail”? Draney wonders where the novel might find the necessary oppositional strategies to counter a social and political environment of diminishing freedom and privacy. Coetzee and McCarthy offer two test cases for considering the question: “what is the oppositional intellectual to do?”

David Seargent similarly considers the relationship between new technologies and economic and political forms as these manifest themselves in novels by Dave Eggers and Kim Stanley Robinson. The extent to which the novel is able to position itself as a counterforce—what Seargent describes as “the constructive potential of aesthetic form in relation to forms in the world”—lies at the heart of this essay. Seargent carefully unpicks the political assumptions that underwrite Eggers’s *The Circle*, to reveal the ways in which the valorization of “individual embodied life” as the site of resistance aligns the politics of the novel with the novel form itself, as it has been understood in its privileging of the bourgeois self. As Seargent succinctly summarises this position: “Fictional narrative exemplifies the

kind of contingent, interweaving, embodied existence that is both the main redoubt against the corporation's takeover, and the main example of what would be lost by its victory."

Politics of this kind, he argues, ends up merely repeating the processes of atomization and fragmentation that capitalism requires, such that the form of the novel itself is divested of any revolutionary power. In contrast, Robinson's novel *Red Moon* places an emphasis more squarely on the exploration of historical process as the object of reading, with, as Seargent reminds us, "the added injunction that reading carries with it the necessity of acting, of taking part in the collective composition of history."

Yoon Soon Lee breaks down the relationship between "form" and "type" and with it addresses a theme that recurs in the volume—how we distinguish form in flux. Lee gives us another reading of the novel as a way of recognizing something that is demonstrated and the novel as an unfolding process that generates, rather than reflects, a world to the reader—what she calls "an aura of the empirical." Lee charges her argument with two different ways of thinking of about form: the debates about the relation of the individual to the species in evolutionary discourse, and the historicist work of the novel in the theory of George Lukács. In the former, types are an *a priori* given, but their identification is a cognitive act of continual examining and re-examining forms for similarities and differences. For Lukács there is the possibility that the novel can capture the historical moment, in all its volatilities in the midst of temporal flow—the typology of history contains contradictions that the novel must make available even where these are not easily apparent in everyday life. By focusing on not what is observed but how, in a phenomenological sense, observation takes place, Lee shows how typicality in the novel is a more than a cognitive event: "types make themselves felt not as an abstract or disembodied pattern to be positioned within a system of knowledge but through a heightened observation conveyed by the narrative and as a more intensely experienced sort of appearance." Directing these ideas to a study of Balzac and Austen, Lee

shows how these novels produce types through affective reactions. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, we can easily identify the literary type of the sexually vulnerable female, but Lee shows how this typology is not static. Readers are not presented with moral judgement, but rather experience this typicality through the unsettled affective reactions of other characters. As Lee puts it: “types make themselves felt not as an abstract or disembodied pattern to be positioned within a system of knowledge but through a heightened observation conveyed by the narrative and as a more intensely experienced sort of appearance.”

Phillip Brian Harper’s essay engages with the question of allegorical form, as this pertains to the construction and political context of the African American novel. He suggests that “what makes the African American novel allegorical is not necessarily the way it is written, but the way it is read,” such that the form establishes what Harper calls a “correspondential parallelism” across different historical instances of racial oppression. Through a reading of Ishmael Reed’s novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, he shows how, in the book’s deployment of a mixture of past and present tense, its racial politics conjoin both the historical setting of the narrative and our time of reading of it. Reed’s bravura use of anachronism, likewise, scrambles our temporal co-ordinates, and the inclusion of photographs in the novel (and these vary, depending on which edition we are reading) creates visual analogues that may place us in very different historical moments to those with which the novel is primarily concerned. The fact that these images can be substituted for others, Harper suggests, is “a gesture of textual renovation that implies the novel’s perennial ‘nowness’ and this suggests that the themes it explores through its 1920s setting are in fact *always* germane, not just in the 1970s or in the 1980s, but *forever*.” Harper’s claim, then, is that the African American novel is always available for this kind of allegorical translation across time and space.

In *Romantic Capabilities* Mike Goode addresses the relationship between form and history in our approaches to the novel: “Whereas the newest versions of formalist literary scholarship may provocatively set aside questions of *what and why* texts mean in order to consider *how* they mean ... such scholarship has insufficiently reckoned with many forms’ capacities to re-form, deform, and even fall apart on account of their openness to new medial use” (2). Deidre Lynch’s essay in our volume explores the full potential of what this might mean in a meditation on the many forms of “dispersive reading” that congregate around the work of Walter Scott. Lynch uses Scott to dispel the idea that the novel—even the realist novel—can “contain” a story world. Scott’s novels open in all directions that place characters, author and readers in a Möbius strip of making and unmaking to tap what Lynch calls the “fissiparous energy that is lodged within codex form.” Interspersing the *Waverley* novels with the practice of scrapbooking and commonplacing, whereby extracts from the novels were repurposed by their readers, Lynch shows how Scott’s texts, with their multiple narrators, quotations and epigraphs, were both prized as the pinnacle of literature, and knocked off that pinnacle by the reader-users in a practice of “detaching, decontextualizing, and recycling lines, characters, and incidents” for their scrapbooks. Setting Lynch’s essay alongside Levine’s we can trace two different ways of thinking about the ethics of novel reading and the question of closure. Lynch’s identification of actual readers (or their anonymous traces) shows how the users of the *Waverley* novels—mainly women—were able to act as co-creators in ways that they understood as “dividing up, remixing, and sharing out the literary wealth” in a form of moral economy.

Kent Puckett’s essay takes as its point of departure from Leslie Gelb’s characterisation of the *Pentagon papers*, for which he acted as co-ordinator, as an act of historicizing to compare with the narrative of “chance, free will and necessity” that he saw in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Puckett approaches the idea novel from both ends—at the end the

cultural forms and shapes into which famous novels fit, and at the beginning the textual witnesses that make up the text in the first place. *Moby-Dick* challenges the idea of narrative itself—it is both a metaphor for the act of history and, as Puckett puts it, something that “that both encourages and thwarts metaphor, allegory, narrative.” The difficulty of reading the *Pentagon Papers* is one that also faces the textual scholar, sifting through the witnesses of what Jerome McGann famously calls social text. At the same time, to read the heterogeneous assemblage of the *Pentagon Papers*, and the three published versions in which they exist, as narrative is to call upon the novel as praxis, albeit a very unstable example. Puckett asks what a “*novelistic* model for thinking about a relation between history, agency, and character” would look like, and explores the different states of the *Pentagon Papers* as an “institutional crisis of representation”—that is, a way of thinking about the work of narrative in a political situation where knowledge was at best questionable. The *Papers* are the loosest and baggiest of monsters, proliferating like the hydra in response to guess-work about the reality of a political situation that had been opaque at the time, and in the writing present could only be represented by multiple narratives of increasing complexity. As Puckett puts it (using the terms of narrative theory that recur throughout this issue): “there were *too many* narratives, too many discourses and not enough story, too much form and not enough content.” We don’t (or we don’t only) read novels to find out what happened. We also read in them the relation between history, agency and narrative. Puckett’s account makes a claim for literary practices of reading—both textual and narratological—to unfold the material of the *Pentagon Papers* as a massive and contested textual object that tells us less about the Vietnam War than it does about the impossibility and, sometimes, the mendacity of political explanation.

Rajeswari Rajan explicitly addresses the question of form and medium in his discussion of Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The Museum of Innocence* and its unique cultural afterlife. Following publication of the book in 2008, Pamuk opened a museum in 2012 of the

same name containing artefacts from daily life in Istanbul in the second half of the twentieth century, a period that coincides with the temporal scheme of the novel and reproduces the project of one its central characters. Rajan's essay considers "what may have led verbal description in a novel to find incarnation in actual material objects in an actual material museum, and what implications they might have for the novel in our times." Our sense of the novel's endless iterability, its resistance to formal closure, is made tangible in Pamuk's decision to extend the world of his story beyond the formal contours of the text - "narrative incompleteness," Rahan suggests, would seem "to demand expression in a museum or its analogue to fill it," becoming "a necessary element for the novel's completion."

Our final essay, by Garrett Stewart, returns us to, and contests, some of the premises mapped out by Caroline Levine in her book *Forms*. In his detailed reading of Richard Powers's *Plowing in the Dark* he considers the degree to which the form of the novel—and indeed literary form itself—might be said to be characterized by "shapings, linguistic and often figurative" that precede any attempt on the part of the reader to locate these structures within political and ideological contexts. What he calls "the undergirding circuitry of narrative wording" exists in advance of our interpretative moves to read politically; Garrett thereby resists the easy conflation of, or equivalence between, "literary and political design, novelistic architecture and imposed structures of governance." Powers's novel might seem an unpromising text through which to make this claim, given its focus on forms of technological-capitalist expansion (Virtual Reality) and the impact of terrorist incarceration. Yet Stewart shows how the formal devices of prose have "no true parity with existing imperialist structures or military forms of control": verbal enactment has "a scale all its own."

We must end this introduction on a sad note. Laura Marcus, who was to have contributed an essay, passed away on September 22, 2021. She was not only one of the most outstanding

modernist scholars of her generation, but a former colleague and dear friend of the editors. Laura's essay was titled "Time Pieces: Encounters between the Contemporary Novel and Film" and was to have considered the interrelations of the moving image and novelistic form in contemporary fiction. We deeply regret the loss of what would have been a wonderful essay, but we were fortunate that Laura was able to give the annual Susan Manning Memorial Lecture at the University of Edinburgh in May 2021 on "The Noise of Time: Autobiography and History in the 1930s." We dedicate this volume to Laura's memory and end with the final quotation from her Manning Lecture, where she turned to Walter Benjamin and his recognition of the urgency and intensity of memories charged by the friends encountered in real times and spaces:

I think of an afternoon in Paris to which I owe insights into my life that came in a flash, with the force of an illumination. It was on this very afternoon that my biographical relationships to people, my friendships and comradeships, my passions and love affairs, were revealed to me in their most vivid and hidden intertwinings.

(Benjamin 614)

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