

MICHAEL BELL

Introduction: The novel in Europe 1600–1900

A history of European novelists from Miguel de Cervantes to Milan Kundera could be told in many ways, all of them partial.¹ While the present volume is not a continuous history, the introductory and concluding essays, along with the Index, offer coordinates for linking the chosen writers' contributions not just to the novel, but to the idea of the novel, in Europe as it acquired a growing consciousness of itself as a distinctive artistic genre and as providing the most complete, complex and intimate form of self-inspection for modern social man.

This is a question of truth claims as much as subject-matter, and the nature of its own truth-telling has been a constant preoccupation of the form. The novel grew partly from non-literary genres, such as letters, memoirs and histories, with which it has maintained an ambiguous relation. Even while progressively defining itself as artistically distinct, the novel has repeatedly stolen the clothes of these non-literary forms. It has continued to invoke other sources of authority, whether scientific, historical or philosophical, even as it has affirmed its own special value as fiction. Honoré de Balzac's declaration in the opening chapter of *Le Père Goriot*, 'All is true', expresses this ambition in a bold, but elusive, formula. Hence, the problematic, if unavoidable, term 'realism' denotes not a single mode of representation so much as a complex, shifting ambition to give fiction a weight of historical or sociological insight. An inevitable starting-point for the truth-telling ambitions of the form is the fraught relation of 'realism' to 'romance'.

Realism versus romance?

As the new genre of the novel became self-conscious over the course particularly of the eighteenth century, it continued to be defined most notably in relation to romance; a term with multiple aspects which variously had an impact on the novel. In one interpretation, Cervantes, the father of the

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modern novel, had laughed away the chivalric romance to found what Henry Fielding called a 'new province' of writing from which the 'marvellous' was banished (*Tom Jones*, bk II, ch. 1; bk VIII, ch. 1). Yet, as Edwin Williamson shows (20), Cervantes appreciated romance and, in J. L. Borges's view, Don Quixote's mad illusions were a way of continuing to enjoy its spell in 'a secret, nostalgic farewell'.²

In this latter reading, Cervantes rather inaugurated the radical ambiguity of the new genre; an ambiguity encapsulated in the contrast of the English word 'novel' with the French and German *roman* and *Roman*. Is the novel opposed to romance, or a cunning means of preserving it? As Ian Watt noted long ago, if the new genre adopted the protocols of 'realism of presentation', Fielding's rejection of the marvellous, that did not necessarily guarantee 'realism of assessment'.³ Hence Fielding's distrust both of Samuel Richardson's Pamela and of his *Pamela*. For what he saw as the heroine's seductive manipulation of her would-be seducer Mr B was equally a feature of Richardson's narrative mode: its emotionally fraught 'writing to the moment' (Keymer, 57) was a way of entrancing the reader's feelings. And Fielding was right in so far as romance, in the sense of emotional wish-fulfilment, became a popular staple of the genre, but the great novelists would use it as a point of contrast and departure as Richardson was to do in the tragic drama of *Clarissa* (1748) and Fielding himself in the emotional ordeal of *Amelia* (1751). In this sense of the word, Jane Austen created the most artful combination of the emotional power of romance with sharp assessment and unillusioned worldliness.

But as well as this ground bass of popular wish-fulfilment in the new genre, the word romance also refers to a deeper emotional formation in the European tradition. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau added to his *Julie* (1761) the last-minute subtitle *the New Eloisa*, he linked the contemporary vogue of sensibility, the period's upward evaluation of feeling, to a suggestive precedent. The tragic figures of Héloïse and Abelard had a mythic power partly because their story enacted the underlying structure of medieval romance. Medieval romance was the literary embodiment of an enormous, but enigmatic, cultural shift: the spiritualisation of sexual love in a way that had no precedent in classical antiquity. The high value now placed on romantic love was such that it transcended the values of this world. Its prototypical object, the lord's lady, is unobtainable within the moral requirements of worldly existence: romantic passion is illusory and destructive. This development has attracted speculative explanations of which two now venerable classics illuminate the subsequent history of the novel in Europe.

C. S. Lewis's *The Allegory of Love* (1936) traced a distinctively English and Christian tradition through Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, William

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Shakespeare and John Milton whereby romantic love is reconciled with, indeed irradiates, the marriage relation. By contrast, the francophone Denis de Rougement's *Love in the Western World* (*L'Amour et l'occident* 1938) saw romantic love as a destructive illusion for which Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* indicates the continuing power. Rougement concludes with a highly rational argument in favour of marriage as the necessary form of social order and continuity for which romance must be sacrificed. René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, whose dual thrust is more sharply indicated in its original title *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961), similarly sets the illusion of romance against the sober, social truth of the novel. Taken together, these books invite the reflection that man is a mythopoeic animal, and most crucially so when least aware of it. For they each express deep structures of feeling, indeed assumptions about feeling itself, which run through their respective traditions of the novel. Whereas the line of major English novelists, from Fielding, through Austen, George Eliot and Charles Dickens, tends to focus on the education of the heart whereby it finds its proper fulfilment in social assimilation, the French novel, from Mme de Lafayette, through Rousseau, Choderlos de Laclos, Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert and Marcel Proust to Jean-Paul Sartre, harbours an abiding distrust of romantic feeling even when it is still acknowledged as the supreme good. The dual recognition, that romantic passion is both illusory and yet the highest value in human life, provides the emotional structure of 'romantic irony', most notably in Stendhal, and its internal tension underlies the philosophical clarity and formal command that characterise the French novel.

Besides the ambiguous persistence of its emotional structures, romance survived at the level of form. The supposed banishing of the 'marvellous' was always something of a feint: it affirmed an important principle but one which took its meaning from a partly rhetorical opposition. Fielding was concerned to remove magical and supernatural causalities which were incompatible with the Enlightened modes of understanding to which the novel aspired. His pre-eminently social intelligence, however, was not best adapted for exploring the inner lives of individuals, and for this purpose the novel continued to draw on the power of romance but now only as that was transposed and internalised; as Cervantes had begun to do in the episode of the Cave of Montesinos (Williamson, 29). The popularity of the Arabian Nights, and the rise of Gothic fiction in the eighteenth century, both represent a contrast with the ambitions of the realist novel, yet these supposedly contrasting worlds were constantly porous to each other. Throughout its history, the novel has needed the romance both to define itself against, and as an emotional experience to be assimilated. For example, in Anne Radcliffe's Gothic tale, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the young heroine's sensibility is excited and distressed by

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mysterious events which are finally given a rational explanation. The heroine is a proxy for the reader's licensed indulgence in the thrill. But in so far as the Gothic thrill requires an individual sensibility as its medium, it is from the outset an expression of the character's inner state. And if the character is unaware of projecting an internal condition as Gothic thrill, that only increases its dramatic potential as a notation of the unconscious. By the mid nineteenth century, Charlotte and Emily Brontë had internalised the Gothic motifs as psychological symbolism. Likewise, Balzac and Dickens, while impelled by motives of social and moral critique, and honouring the protocols of formal realism, drew on metaphorical and poetic powers.

In Chapter 23 of *Dombey and Son* (1848), for example, Dickens enforces the potentially destructive effect on Florence Dombey of her effective abandonment by her father after the death of her brother, Paul, by repeating for several pages that she was threatened by no evil, supernatural powers. Precisely by these denials he builds a vivid sense of the emotional danger and desolation to which the child is subjected: 'There were not two dragon sentries keeping ward before the gate of this abode, as in magic legend are usually found on duty over the wronged innocence imprisoned.' Dickens's sentence encapsulates in miniature how the power of the marvellous is invoked within its supposed erasure. At the same time, a literalistically inclined reader might wonder if Florence was really left in this expensive townhouse without a retinue of servants, and there were other novelists, such as William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope, who disapproved of what they saw as the Dickensian tendency to moral melodrama. In this respect, Chapter 42 of *Vanity Fair* (1848) provides an instructive comparison with the Florence Dombey episode as Thackeray uses the literal features of the domestic setting to express the desolate life of Jane Osborne living alone with her father after the death of the spoiled son, George. Where Dickens overrides literal considerations for a psychological insight, Thackeray derives his emotional power from the felt reality of the external world. The creative tension, then, between realism and romance occurs across different traditions of the novel as well as internally to particular works. But if 'realism' and 'romance' represent in some degree the orders of external and internal truth, two other polar genres likewise live on within the novel, constantly reframing the meaningfulness of its experience. These are epic and drama, two genres which variously affect the sense of time.

Epic and drama, history and temporality

Behind romance lies the older form of the epic which provided in the eighteenth century a classically educated perspective on contemporary

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society and illuminated the new genre of the novel by placing it within a larger sweep of cultural evolution. Hence, Fielding, a man of the law as well as the theatre, in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) called it a ‘comic epic-poem in prose’ and, although his masterpiece *Tom Jones* (1749) had a dramatic tautness of structure, and many other theatrical features, it developed above all the summative sweep of the epic as the embodiment of its moral generality. In 1774, however, just before Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, Friedrich von Blanckenburg argued, in his *Essay on the Novel*, that the novel stands to modern society as the epic stood to the ancient heroic community. He contrasted these genres particularly over the question of the individual. In the ancient world, in which the success, indeed the survival, of the community depended on heroic values, the individual was ultimately subordinate to the social whole. By contrast, in the post-Cartesian, post-Rousseauian world dominated by commercial enterprise, and historically formed by Christianity, the individual was becoming a more intrinsic, if not a supreme, value. And one might add that the individual was not just an enhanced centre of value but an ontological claim. Rousseau broke with his former friend Denis Diderot partly over this question: whereas Diderot saw man as an essentially social being, Rousseau believed there was something in the individual which was irreducible to social explanation. Goethe’s *Werther* is Rousseau’s individual as man of feeling so that, when defending a young man who has committed a crime of passion, he feels his own identity to be at stake in resisting the socially principled arguments of his friend Albert, and especially so when these have the institutional support of a magistrate.

Moreover, the rising importance of the individual is reflected in the form itself. The novel gradually internalises the world by transposing it into the stuff of consciousness until it is assimilated into the modernist ‘stream of consciousness’. This aspect of the novel’s history begins with the picaresque, the episodic narrative form which was popular throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which shared the structural looseness of the romance. The picaresque, derived from the Spanish *picaro*, adopted the viewpoint of the low-life outsider who lives off, and finds entertainment in exploiting, the vulnerability of his fellow beings (Williamson, 18–19). Yet although the *picaro* provides both social satire and entertainment, and can be the basis of a wide social purview, he usually has little inner life, so that the episodic narrative can continue indefinitely until it comes to some arbitrary conclusion such as death or a rich marriage. *Tom Jones*, however, was an artful adaptation of the picaresque. The action appears to spill over the countryside with a constant succession of chance encounters on the way, but the narrative threads prove to have secret connections and the entire

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action has an unconscious symmetry: six books set in the Allworthy country seat, six on the road and six in London, with the philosophical tale of the 'Man of the Hill', a counter-image of the whole book, placed at its exact centre. And so the final socialisation of Tom, the concluding addition of 'prudence' to his 'lively parts', is enacted in the narrative dynamic rather than in his consciousness; a method which aptly endorses Fielding's essentially social view of man.

Writing some decades later, Goethe had a greater commitment to the notion of the individual, although he was taken aback that readers identified with Werther, reading his story as a romantic tragedy rather than as a novelistic critique of the Rousseauian man of feeling. Yet Goethe's 'sympathetic' narration from Werther's viewpoint was crucial to an internal critique of the sentimentalist individualism he represented. Perhaps to escape this dilemma, Goethe adopted for his next novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796), Fielding's overt irony and picaresque expansion. But Wilhelm is an artistically inclined intellectual with cultural curiosity and ambitions, so that, in his case, the apparently random process of the narrative is drawn together not just by narrative manipulation but by the development of his self-understanding, which is itself connected to his deeper understanding of his chosen art of theatre.

It might be noted here that Rousseau's commitment to the value of the individual was based on a pre-modern conception of it as preceding society. Society, in his view, derived from the willing collaboration of pre-existing individuals. The German Enlightenment, by contrast, was forming the more modern recognition that the very category of the individual is a late and fragile development from an initial collective, or primordial herd. In that light, it is not surprising that social understanding through the individual should also be a late development in the history of fiction. Goethe's internalising of the picaresque as individual development, and his experience of contemporary social developments through the eyes and mind of the individual, were perhaps among the features that led Friedrich Schlegel to rank *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* with the French Revolution and J. G. Fichte's philosophy as one of three crucial events of the period.⁴ Only in the mind and feelings of a suitable individual could the extensive social purview of the novel be given experiential depth and *gravitas*. Yet Schlegel appreciated above all the peculiar artistic self-consciousness of the novel which Goethe had adapted partly from Fielding.

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship was the defining instance of the *Bildungsroman*, a term which has acquired in the anglophone academy the loose meaning of any novel in which a young person matures through socialisation. The usage is broad enough to cover most European fiction and

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Goethe's achievement was indeed significant for this wider tradition. But the German term refers more specifically to the attempted acquisition of an Enlightenment conception of rounded humanistic culture derived from such thinkers as Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schiller as well as Goethe himself. The works in this tradition often foreground their own fictive status, partly because they are philosophical reflections on the educational process, but also to emphasise its fragility. Indeed, Goethe, who most strikingly embodied the ideal of humanistic *Bildung*, actually rejected it in the sequel novel *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Travel* (1829). The German *Bildungsroman*, which was to suffer seemingly terminal critique in the twentieth century, had harboured from the outset a radical self-irony. It is a familiar theme that the German tradition, which had most overtly theorised a commitment to an ideal of humane culture, produced the moral catastrophe of Nazism. But the theme is even more poignant for the fragility which its great thinkers had always recognised within this ideal.

Since Goethe was writing just after the French Revolution, and was always highly conscious of the historical transitions through which he lived, it is especially fitting that his theme of a young man committed to the social importance of theatre should be narrated in the form of a novel. Throughout the eighteenth century, and still for Goethe and Schiller, theatre would seem to be the primary imaginative form in which society sought to view or express itself. Moreover, the social culture was itself highly theatrical, with ordering principles expressed in rigid dress codes and ceremonial, while personal identity was largely, and properly, conceived in terms of social position and function. But this order is disintegrating in Goethe's novel and the new post-revolutionary world was indeed to shift to more internal or intrinsic conceptions of personal value, for which the form of the novel, at once more private and more broadly historical, became the primary vehicle. Thomas Keneally's *The Playmaker* (1987), set in 1789, ingeniously embeds a theatrical production in a 'novel' assembled from historical sources and catches the moment when the novel begins to take over as the central form of social self-reflection.

The contrast between narrative and drama is discussed in Book v, Chapter 7 of Goethe's novel: the characteristic power of drama is said to be concentration, bringing matters to a crisis, whereas narrative, commonly called 'epic' in the German tradition, is extensive and reflective so that it requires a central character who delays the action. This raises a large question about how experience is conditioned by time; a question which was to become central to the novel both at the micro level of personal temporality and the macro level of history. The polar possibilities in this regard are strikingly

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exemplified in Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Dostoevsky typically concentrates the impact of several life stories into moments of crisis, whereas Tolstoy diffuses the intensity of a moment into a lifetime. In *The Possessed* (1871) by Dostoevsky, Lisa Tushin says she has given her ‘whole life for one hour’ with Nicholas Stavrogin and is ‘content’ (pt III, ch. 3), while in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1876), it is said of Kitty Shtcherbatsky, when Vronsky, newly entranced by Anna, fails to respond to her loving look, that she felt ‘an agony of shame’ that lasted ‘long afterwards – for several years afterwards’ (pt I, ch. 23). This indicates an intense hurt, but also its eventual passing. What, then, is the true ‘meaning’ of an experience: its intensity at the time, or its assimilated impact when virtually forgotten? Although there is no answer to this question, it animates all extended fiction. And the same applies to the macro level of history, for Goethe’s historical sense also anticipated another imminent shift in the novel.

Alongside the Enlightenment commitment to the universality of reason, there was growing awareness of the historical relativity of human cultures. The pressures for social change, which were both aroused and disappointed by the French Revolution, were only one element in a deepening historical consciousness. Another was to be the nineteenth century’s dawning awareness of the age of the earth, and the consequent evolution of the human. G. W. F. Hegel, in many estimates the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century, saw not just that human experience is historical, but that the very modes of human understanding are themselves subject to historical development. Indeed, his masterwork on the intellectual evolution of man, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), invokes the form of a *Bildungsroman*. At a more popular level, Walter Scott picked up the Gothic fascination with an exotically conceived past and spawned two genres which continue to this day. One was the costume drama, a staple of popular narrative. The other was the historical novel.

In his first novel, *Waverley* (1814), Scott, another man of the law, revisited the 1745 Jacobite rebellion which had been a significant threat to social order in Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. By a kind of historical compression, Edinburgh, one of the most advanced centres of Enlightenment thought, was adjacent to the pre-modern world of the Scottish Highlands and, in the anxiously oppressive period in Britain following the French Revolution, Scott was able both to indulge and to distance the dangerous fascination of the clans. As Susan Manning recounts, Scott’s incorporation of historical consciousness transformed the novel. It was not just that so many of the major novelists of the nineteenth century wrote a historical novel set in the past, but that their perception of the present was radically historicised in all their fiction. Of course, what history meant was a matter of interpretation,

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whether conscious or not: it may be an oppressive weight; a Burkean resource and guide; a blindly careering juggernaut; a tissue of romantic illusions; a tale of progress, or of decline. Most human beings have some implicit conception of history, even if it is never brought explicitly to consciousness, and the novel provides a rich field for testing a range of such models. Following Blanckenburg, we may say that if historical scholarship is modernity's *replacement* of the epic, historical fiction is its *equivalent*.

Cervantes had reflected on fiction and history with his device of the Arab historian, Cide Hamete Benengeli, in *Don Quixote*, but this was when history was still thought of as a source of moral examples, like Shakespeare's history plays, so that there was a proper overlap of truth claims between history and fiction. But, as the modern discipline of history developed truth claims defined precisely by their contrast with fiction, so the novel was increasingly obliged, as with the romance, to negotiate its relation with a necessary other. For one can no more remove all the history from the novel than all the narrative interpretation from history. Hence, while the novel's power derives largely from its combination of fictional and historical insight, the internal tension of its truth claims was variously resolved or suppressed through the eras of nineteenth-century historicism, early twentieth-century modernism and late twentieth-century postmodernism.

Meanwhile, just as history was developing its distinctive truth claims, so too was fiction. The conscious artifice and poetry already noted in Goethe and Dickens are part of a larger shift in the novel between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: it becomes more conscious of its integrity as an imaginative genre.

In the early eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe's fictional memoirs had an air of reality so compelling as to be illusionistic. This arose largely from the pragmatic and acquisitive outlook of his narrators: the world was typically seen through eyes concerned with survival, utility or gain. When Robinson Crusoe ends the list of items washed up after his shipwreck with two shoes that 'were not fellows' the persuasive detail of his observation includes their uselessness. For quite different reasons, the mid-century literature of sentiment, as in Richardson and Rousseau, also cultivated a literalistic illusion of reality. This was to arouse the feelings of the reader. For the optimistic Enlightenment myth of moral sentiment, a belief that the moral life could be based on the feelings, encouraged intensity, immediacy and identification in the reader's emotional response. Moreover, it was thought that consciously fictive objects might diminish, or even invalidate, such a response as Rousseau insisted in his *Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre* (1757). Hence, the literalistic psychology of moral sentiment encouraged a literalistic conception of fictional response.

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Fielding, of course, reacted against this by baring the artifice of fiction, and Laurence Sterne was later to sophisticate the sentimental response with narrative games. But Sterne was still playing essentially within a literalistic conception, and the true influence of Fielding took a while to be felt creatively. For the late eighteenth-century recognition of the aesthetic, most notably in Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), was a slow process partly generated by the need to overcome the literalism of the period. It was in the new century, therefore, that the novel developed a more robust confidence in its own moral authority as fiction. Yet even as this happened, the novel also sought confirmation in another form of authority, natural science. Once again, there is an ambiguity of truth claims.

The novel and science

If the novel is a romantic genre, in an indissoluble marriage with history, its great love affair, lasting through most of the nineteenth century, was with science. There had always been a quasi-scientific dimension to the novel in so far as it sought to conduct experiments on human nature. Rousseau introduced into *Émile*, a treatise on education, the imaginary figure of Émile so as to base his argument on a 'real' instance with a demonstrative and generalisable value. If Rousseau uses fiction here while eliding the categories of fiction and educational treatise, his contemporaries used their fiction in a related spirit. Richardson's Lovelace attempts to seduce Clarissa for philosophical as much as erotic motives. When he finally drugs and rapes her, this is at one level an acknowledgement of his failure to conquer her will, yet it still makes sense as part of his desire to show the purely material being of woman. Most notably, Valmont, in Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*, 1782), shows his demonstrative motive by writing in advance how the women he seduces will behave. At the same time, what those examples also have in common is a framework of religious belief, and the tradition of Protestant self-examination was a powerful current in eighteenth-century fiction, while, in the anglophone world, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651) were widely read by the same reading public. It was only over the course of the nineteenth century, then, that natural science rose in prestige to become the paradigmatic form of truth statement, and novelists began widely to invoke its authority.

Balzac, for example, is credited with introducing the scientific term 'milieu' into general usage in his attempt to register the effects of socio-economic environment on the individual. This did not mean, however, that religion ceased to be a significant motive as well. It is rather that the novel is