# THE NOVEL AND THE PROBLEM OF NEW LIFE

The novel since the nineteenth century has displayed a thorny ambivalence toward the question of having children. In its representation of human vitality it can seem to promote the giving of life, but again and again it betrays a nagging doubt about the moral implications of procreation. *The Novel and the Problem of New Life* identifies this tension as a defining quality of the modern British and European novel. Beginning with the procreative-skeptical writings of Flaubert, Butler, and Hardy, then turning to the high modernist work of Lawrence, Woolf, and Huxley, and culminating in the postwar fiction of Lessing and others, this book chronicles the history of the novel as it came to accommodate greater misgivings about the morality of reproduction. This is the first study to examine in literature a problem that has long troubled philosophers, environmental thinkers, and so many people in everyday life.

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*For my parents Jane and Howard*
*and my children Anya and Ilya*

Art always says 'And yet!' to life . . .

Georg Lukács,
*The Theory of the Novel*

# *Contents*

# *Preface*

This book is about the modern novel's ambivalence toward procreation. My subject is not the literary representation of children, or the ideology of the family in fiction, or literature's biopolitical interest in large populations and how they are managed. I mean instead a moral problem: whether or not we should create new life. The novel's struggle with this problem since the nineteenth century is the subject of this book.

The following chapters aim to show that rarely is the novel's attitude toward the question of having children purely laudatory or purely adverse. Most often it is ambivalent, a word I mean in the standard psychoanalytic sense: it has contradictory sentiments toward the same object. This is not to be confused with a more degraded contemporary usage of the word, which would have ambivalence mean tepid feelings merely. There is little that is tepid or moderate in the novel's attitude toward procreation; on the contrary, the novel has long been a vessel for intense but paradoxical feelings about the question of creating new life.

It is the very capacity to hold in suspension unresolved, even irresolvable, attitudes toward moral dilemma that has enabled the novel to be supple enough to represent the condition of uncertainty I am examining in this book. The novelists under discussion are generally realist novelists, working with the familiar novelistic units of contradiction: the irony of free indirect style; the counterpoint of point of view; the oppositions of dialogue. One of the main figures here, D. H. Lawrence, claimed that the novel was the "highest form of human expression so far attained" precisely because it "contains no didactive absolute." Mikhail Bakhtin taught us that the novel is dialogical and polyphonic, containing many voices and points of view. Friction and dissension swirl together like bacteria in the biome of the novel. Of all art forms it may be the best suited to dramatizing and channeling vacillation and ambivalence. The lesson not only of Lawrence but of all the major figures in this study – Flaubert, Hardy, Woolf, Huxley, Lessing – is that in place of certainty we are more likely to find tension and

paradox. This is true of many subjects in their novels, but none more than the representation of moral dilemma – of which the most persistent and the most complicated may be the dilemma of whether to have children.

If this claim sounds surprising – that this particular moral quandary has lurked for a long time within modern novels – then it may be because our long-standing emphasis on the marriage plot has exerted such influence over our reading of those novels. We have not been wrong to see the primary domestic plot as one involving courtship and marriage, and (as I will discuss in the coming chapters) that story brings with it an implicit procreation plot: marriage will lead to children. Other predicaments besides procreative doubt appear to occupy the marriage plot: should I marry this person or that person, or maybe no person at all? But those are dilemmas of association, of determining whom to affiliate with in the presently existing world, whereas the question I am tracing has to do with addition – with the creation of new persons. This is a plot that can work against the other one. For in its skepticism about procreation it can subtly undercut the regenerative premise of union; and in its doubts about the extension of the self through reproduction it can pose a challenge to the logic of fulfillment that so many novels would seem to assume.

This wariness of addition – this behavioral tendency of so many novels to resist increase in favor of austerity or retrenchment – suggests another reason for the novel's acute interest in this particular moral quandary. In their figurative way novels are routinely creating people: we call these characters, and much of the machinery of the books in which they operate is consumed with making them act and speak. I will not be arguing in this book for any equivalence between these forms of creation, between the invention of literary character and the biological conception of human life. But at times I will suggest a subtler correspondence between these two versions of animation. When the imaginary beings we encounter as novelistic characters are themselves mired in procreative deliberation and doubt we can detect a certain self-consciousness. Novelists are uncommonly attuned to the problem of vitality – a failure in generating an impression of life may doom their work – and so it is not surprising that they would understand the novel as an arena for contesting claims for and against procreation. Yet this can sometimes create a perverse effect, since when writers like Flaubert or Hardy summon imaginary beings, and then make them tremble before the prospect of having children, it can seem like a proxy for a much larger doubt about creating any new kind of matter, of adding anything to the world. The moral problem of procreation is also, for the novel, an aesthetic one. It is often a specifically formal one, for

(as most of the following chapters will show) a skepticism toward procreation can influence the very shape of a novel. How might the presumption or refusal of ongoing life determine the way narrative itself is structured and circumscribed?

Certainly there are novelists since the middle of the nineteenth century whose books give the impression of defending and even extolling fecundity: Dickens, Sand, Joyce. There are modern novels where erotic love retains its association with reproduction, where we can still detect the calculus of Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, for whom the idea of marriage to Beatrice amounts to a vision of future progeny: "The world must be peopled." The procreative-skeptical strain I am tracing here may be one particular strain. But I want to persuade the reader that it is the characteristic strain of the modern novel or, put another way, that there is something characteristically modern about this strain. As most chapters will make clear, it is significant that the modern novel grew up alongside the invention and diffusion of reliable birth control. The novel of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries could have increasing faith, in its representation of human relations, that heterosexual sex was not necessarily going to lead to children. Of the many transformations depicted in the modern novel, we cannot overstate the magnitude of people thinking about sex, and having sex, while preserving a certain idea of freedom from procreative responsibility. What is faint in Flaubert and Hardy becomes more perceptible in Lawrence and Woolf, then explicit in Huxley and Lessing. In contemporary fiction the matter of non-reproductive heterosexual sex can now be taken nearly for granted.

This is one reason why a procreative-skeptical novel can seem emblematic of modern literature, but it is not the only one. The sensibility of the modern novelist, as I will argue in the first chapter, is likely to be astringent, subtractive, and devoted to an ideal of order: such qualities have not just associative but direct connections to a resistance, even hostility, to the creation of new life. In pursuit of this question of sensibility, the chapters that follow frequently consider the lives of these novelists. Their letters, diaries, and notebooks reveal dispositions and experiences that eventually take novelistic form. In considering such documents, I am hoping we can agree that there is nothing gratuitous, unsophisticated, or unliterary in wondering why novelists did or did not have children. If we can consider the sexual orientation of writers, or their attitudes toward national identity, or their politics, there is no reason why we cannot ask about their experience of parenthood or childlessness, as long as this can be shown to have a real connection to their books.

This is not to suggest that such experience is uniform in the lives of the novelists under examination. These writers have been convened because their books share a tension around a common theme, but the biographical circumstances that helped produce those books are marked by difference – especially a difference of gender. The sections on Woolf and Lessing are the most explicit on the subject of women writers and the question of procreation, but it is a concern that arises throughout the book, including in the culminating chapter, on contemporary fiction. If there is an austerity or astringency that regularly marks the sensibility of these procreative-skeptical writers, it is not formed by the same conditions; the distinctive problem of reproduction for women novelists, and for feminist thought, will be considered at length in the following pages.

If one reason for the modern novel's chronic skepticism toward procreation is historical-contextual (the rise of birth control) and another is personal-constitutional (the modern novelist's usual astringency), then a third might be considered structural or elemental, going to the very matter of the kind of existence that modern realist fiction tends to represent. It has been nearly a verity, from Ian Watt to Roland Barthes to Catherine Gallagher, that both the realism and the fictionality of the novel have hinged upon the individual and individuated person: the novelistic character. This marks a break from earlier genres of epic and myth that could, as Bakhtin made clear, subordinate the individual to the generation, the open-ended present to the more structured past, and which could take for granted that the world was to be peopled. The production of offspring was in pre-novelistic epic not subject to the same vexation. The modern novel, on the other hand, does not automatically propose or accommodate the unit of the generation. It is more likely to focus on the idiosyncratic presentation of individual adults who are stand-alone integers in their own right, rather than being transitional presences along a generational infinity. A doubt about procreation, its desirability and even necessity, is far more plausible in these newer conditions.

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When I describe the scope of this study as the modern novel, I mean it expansively. This book ranges across mostly British novelists, with an essential French precursor, and a few other non-British writers along the way. But that means it takes in both the Samuel Butler of the 1860s and 1870s and the Doris Lessing of the 1960s and 1970s. It is this variety and span that give my book its skeleton and its logic. I mean this to be a kind

of history of the novel since 1850, one that tells the story of a preoccupation or worry that persists despite the changing face of the novel and the worlds it represents. The penultimate chapter provides one example of this obstinacy: we find Lessing's Martha Quest fretting about the doom to which each generation binds its offspring and vowing not to have children herself. The episode reprises a scene from Butler in *The Way of All Flesh*, which I consider in Chapter 2 – indeed it echoes multiple scenes from novels of the intervening century which I discuss in the sections in between. Modern novels have returned in a way that can seem compulsive to the scene of a particular quandary, like a criminal who cannot stop revisiting the scene of his crime.

And yet in Lessing's case the quandary is also a feminist one, involving the specific shackles of motherhood. For Lawrence it is a frequently environmental one – as it is overwhelmingly now, in contemporary fiction. To study the novel from the nineteenth century to the present is to encounter a variety of challenges to procreation: moral, feminist, aesthetic, environmental. I want to emphasize the novel's capaciousness and elasticity in tackling this persistent subject, while tracing its shifting guises. The feminist dilemma cannot be wholly separated from the aesthetic; the environmental predicament is also a moral one. This book's procedure is to read these novels closely but with the longue durée always in view; to consider difference and consistency together; to infuse granular analysis with an awareness of the arc of the novel since the middle of the nineteenth century. This procedure looks at small particles in order to detect regular pattern, rather in the mode of a kaleidoscope.

In describing the scope and approach of this book I should also explain what I do not mean it to be. Given its subject, it could be seen to open out onto a few prominent fields and disciplines in contemporary literary and philosophical scholarship; I will identify them here in order to clarify why they are different from my work. The first of these is the biopolitical approach to novel studies. This school has roots in Foucault, especially in the emphasis in *History of Sexuality* on the shift from "people" to "population." Certain studies of the masses have allowed us to see fiction's reckoning with the difficulty of representing multitudes.

But biopolitical criticism tends to show us little about how novels or people are made. Population, according to this school, is something that seems always to be there already, rather than an accretion of separate procreative cases originating in particular situations. Yet it is through that particularity that persons are produced, and this is how most novels actually conceive the problem. In citing Raymond Williams's famous

axiom – "There are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses" – we should recognize that it can be easily adapted into a similar recognition: there is no monolithic population, only individual acts of procreation. This book understands collective and personal action as always intertwined; the elevation of "procreation" (with its connotations of individuation) to the equal level of "population" (with its associations of impersonal collectivity) should, in my view, be a welcome revision to this mode of reading. The biopolitical school's advantage is to look from without, and from an often studious height, but this should not prevent us from also looking from within, and from up close. Before there is the management and administration of populations there is the fact of persons and their points of view.

A second proximate field is the particular strain of queer theory associated with Lee Edelman. His manifesto-polemic *No Future*, with its denunciation of "reproductive futurism," has come to stand for a certain negative posture toward futurity. Edelman's argument has been durable and influential, but one comes to regret the sense that his is the first book many people name when they hear about the subject of procreation and the novel. It tells us little about the moral complexity of procreation itself, and its lacunae are increasingly difficult to ignore. For one thing, the rise of gay parenthood and the revolutionary reproductive technologies associated with it may indicate to many of us that the association of queerness with anti-futurity has neglected a powerful wish for children that is not exclusively heteronormative. Equally reductive is the contrapositive of Edelman's logic: his argument suggests in its algebraic way that heterosexual people must by association want nothing more than to populate the world. His book has faced criticism from feminism (by Anca Parvulescu) and from within queer theory itself (by José Muñoz). I agree with these objections, but in fact my principal worry has to do with Edelman's understanding of our shared right-wing nemesis. His main argument is that the right forces an enslavement to the sacral idea of the child, and so the present is sacrificed to some future that rewards only heteronormative procreators. But today we should be so lucky to be governed by a conservatism that always has the future in mind. Instead we suffer under a right-wing ideology that does not (for example) even acknowledge global warming, and which therefore thinks never of futurity, only cheaply of the present. I will return to this problem in the last chapter. *No Future* reads more like a description of a past regime than like a polemic that speaks to us now in the Anthropocene. (The book's prominence should not occlude other works in queer theory that offer significant insight into questions of

generation or queer perspectives on the family. Barry McCrea's *In the Company of Strangers*, for instance, provides a much more nuanced perspective on reproduction, and a much finer attention to the novel.)

Last, and most important for this book, is contemporary analytic philosophy, namely the field of procreative ethics. I am grateful to have been influenced by this work, most of which traces its roots to Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. In the pages that follow, especially in Chapters 2 and 8, I test the many parallels and correspondences between philosophy and literature in their shared interest in procreation. I admire the rigor of procreative-ethical reasoning, its insistence on arguing consistently from principles. But often this proves to be a weakness. For too often the airless hypotheses of analytic philosophy, its speculations about which kind of reproduction is justified and when, reveal instead its decisive inflexibility: it wants to devise rules and guidelines when its premises call for nuance and contradiction. All the attention paid to hypothetical people in analytic philosophy would be better directed toward what I'd call "actual hypothetical people" – which is to say characters in fiction. Theories like Parfit's "repugnant conclusion" or David Benatar's antinatalism, which I will discuss in the coming chapters, are excellent points of departure. But they can be expanded, stretched into a more pliable form, when reimagined as Lawrence's quarrel with fecundity, or Flaubert's complex aversion to procreation. Novelistic cases such as these dissect the giving of life from within intricate imaginary lives – much more intricate than anything I have found in contemporary ethics. After studying these ideas for many years I've come to believe that our views concerning procreation derive more from disposition or temperament than from ideology or systematic reasoning; if true, this supposition makes a case for the novelist rather than the theorist or the philosopher. I hope this book is of interest to readers drawn to, but finally dissatisfied with, philosophy's treatment of the basic situation.

If there is one quality that distinguishes my approach from all these others, it is that I wish to ground their firm resolutions in the shifting terrain of the novel. My commitment is less to a restricted theory or method than to a wish to comprehend a behavior that has so obstinately troubled modern fiction that it risks hiding in plain sight. Why has the realist novel since Flaubert had such difficulty telling the story of procreative fulfillment, of a wish for children that is not perennially stymied by moral objection? In order to answer this question I believe we must carry with us the implements of philosophical and ideological inquiry but not let them govern our encounter with the novels in front of us. I am writing

here about frequently immoderate positions and ideas, and yet I want to emphasize the ambiguity and paradox in which they are housed.

But if we read for ambiguity we must still understand the urgency and scale of the theme. In their different ways the writers I am studying here all seem prescient of our current condition. One cannot be a present inhabitant of Earth without the moral obligation to think seriously about the dilemma of adding new persons to that distressed planet. That is the theme of my concluding chapter. I first became preoccupied with this subject because of the climate emergency, but I have discovered that the novel has been wrestling with versions of our contemporary predicament for a long time. Though we tend to think about procreative skepticism as a concern characteristic of the present, especially because of now widespread ecological anxiety, we might instead conclude that we have only just caught up with the modern novel. That doesn't mean that the novel has been consistently or even predominantly against new life; it means instead that it has been honest – more honest than we often are – that if we are to allow the bestowal of existence then we ought to be forthright about the moral complexity of this bequest. The "problem" of this book's title refers not to the certainty of error but to the recognition of a conundrum. If it is a conundrum that has troubled the novel since Flaubert, then I mean this book to provide a new way of understanding that complex inheritance.

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