

On *The Novel*

Countless are the novels of the world. So, how can we speak of them? *The Novel* combines two intersecting perspectives. First, the novel is for us a great anthropological force, which has turned reading into a pleasure and redefined the sense of reality, the meaning of individual existence, the perception of time and of language. The novel as culture, then, but certainly also as form, or rather forms, plural, because in the two thousand years of its history one encounters the strangest creations, and high and low trade places at every opportunity, as the borders of literature are continuously, unpredictably expanded. At times, this endless flexibility borders on chaos. But thanks to it, the novel becomes the first truly planetary form: a phoenix always ready to take flight in a new direction, and to find the right language for the next generation of readers.

Two perspectives on the novel, then; and two volumes. *History, Geography, and Culture* is mostly a look from the outside; *Forms and Themes*, from the inside. But like convex and concave in a Borromini façade, inside and outside are here part of the same design, because the novel is always commodity and artwork at once: a major economic investment and an ambitious aesthetic form (for German romanticism, the most universal of all). Don't be surprised, then, if an epistemological analysis of "fiction" slides into a discussion of credit and paper money or if a statistical study of the Japanese book market becomes a reflection on narrative morphology. This is the way of the novel—and of *The Novel*.

A history that begins in the Hellenistic world and continues today. A geography that overlaps with the advent of world literature. A morphology that ranges euphorically from war stories, pornography, and melodrama, to

syntactic labyrinths, metaphoric prose, and broken plot lines. To make the literary field longer, larger, and deeper: this is, in a nutshell, the project of *The Novel* (and of its Italian five-volume original). And then, project within the project, to take a second look at the new panorama—and estrange it. The essay on the Spanish Golden Age develops its historical argument, and then: “Wait. Why was that magical season so short?” Stating the “facts,” then turning them into “problems.” At the beginning of the historical arc, we wonder whether to speak of “the” Greek novel—or of a cluster of independent forms. At the opposite end, we explain why it is that the best-known African novels are not written for African readers. And so on. The more we learn about the history of the novel, the stranger it becomes.

To make sense of this new history, *The Novel* uses three different registers. Essays, about twenty per volume, are works of abstraction, synthesis, and comparative research: they establish the great periodizations that segment the flow of time, and the conceptual architecture that reveals its unity. “Readings” are shorter pieces, unified by a common question, and devoted to the close analysis of individual texts: *Aethiopica*, *Le Grand Cyrus*, *The War of the Worlds* (and more) as so many prototypes of novelistic subgenres; *Malte Laurids Brigge*, *Macunaíma*, *The Making of Americans* (and more) as typical modern experiments. Finally, the sections entitled “Critical Apparatus” study the novel’s wider ecosystem, focusing, for instance, on how the semantic field of “narrative” took shape around keywords such as *midrash*, *monogatari*, *xiaoshuo*, *qiṣṣa*—and, why not, *romance*.

Countless are the novels of the world. We discuss them in two volumes. Quite a few things will be missing, of course. But this is not Noah’s ark: it is a collective reflection on the pleasures of storytelling, and their interaction—at times, complicity—with social power. Now more than ever, pleasure and critique should not be divided.

F.M.