



Democracy and the Novel in Nineteenth Century

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The modern publishing industry, which thrived in the era stretching from the spread of literacy education to the invention of 20th-century media like radio and cinema, helped establish the novel as the dominant literary genre of the modern world. It's been said that it's hard to think about the novel without also thinking about the modern world, and that thinking about modernity may require giving some thought to the novel as well.

Democracy is a crucial concept of modern thought, and reflecting upon it in conjunction with the novel entails exploring the many facets of a complex relationship, particularly since the word used to have a wider meaning than it does today. In the 19th century *democracy* referred not only to the form of government or to the manner of electing officials, but to a gradual change in society during which many old social distinctions disappeared. As the traditional social distinctions fell away, however, there was a counter-tendency that frantically produced fresh ways of differentiating individuals, as well as the signs that made these new distinctions socially manifest.

How does the novel relate to the awareness of this change? How and why has it become the genre *par excellence* of modern democratic society? Has it become successful because it conforms to the democratic paradigm, or because it dissents from it? Is it the genre of social integration into a society of individuals, or the genre of defiant individuality in mass society? Are narrative forms of subjectivity (psycho-narration, *style indirect libre*, etc.) and systems of characterization (hierarchies, the relationship between the protagonist and secondary characters) the result of a compromise between the necessities of individualism and the post-revolutionary imperative of "fabricating social cohesion" (Moza Ozouf)?

The modern form of the novel, often called the *realist* novel both for its sociological and psychological dimensions, seems unthinkable without, on the one hand, the development of individualism, liberalism, and the scientific critical mentality (such is the theory of Ian Watt), and without, on the other hand, the feelings of massification, of the loss of social distinctions, of living in a standardized society,—feelings that gave birth to the solitary romantic rebel and the naturalist anti-hero. The *Bildungsroman* bears witness to this ever-increasing tension between individual freedom and socialization, between the great expectations of an individual and the necessities of the social order.

From a historical point of view, two notable —though quite different— modern theories of literary genres have discussed the novel in conjunction with democracy. Mikhail Bakhtin thought of the novel as a polyphonic space, where the multiple voices of society intertwine and intercommunicate in an immense dialogue representing not only the social differences inherent in speech, but also the impossibility of speaking of the world without confronting the language of the other. Erich Auerbach, on the other hand, linked the novel and democracy through his theory of the separation of styles (*Stiltrennung*), and considered the realist novel to be the result of the crisis of this separation. Subject matters traditionally addressed by comic genres are pulled by the realist novel toward high-minded seriousness and even tragedy. One couldn't laugh at the working-class laborer as one could at the valet of the traditional comedy. Genres, styles and subject matters had become mixed together, in the anti-hierarchical spirit that would henceforth characterize democracy. These theories, these still-open questions, deserve to be discussed again, in the context of a conference that will gather together European and American specialists in Paris, in October 2012.

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