

FRANCO MORETTI

THE NOVEL:
HISTORY AND THEORY

THERE ARE MANY ways of talking about the theory of the novel, and mine will consist in posing three questions: Why are novels in prose; Why are they so often stories of adventures; and, Why was there a European, but not a Chinese rise of the novel in the course of the eighteenth century. Disparate as they may sound, the questions have a common source in the guiding idea of the collection *The Novel*: 'to make the literary field longer, larger, and deeper': historically longer, geographically larger, and morphologically deeper than those few classics of nineteenth-century Western European 'realism' that have dominated the recent theory of the novel (and my own work).¹ What the questions have in common, then, is that they all point to processes that loom large in the history of the novel, but not in its theory. Here, I will reflect on this discrepancy, and suggest a few possible alternatives.

I

Prose. Nowadays, so ubiquitous in novels that we tend to forget that it wasn't inevitable: ancient novels were certainly in prose, but the *Satyricon* for instance has many long passages in verse; the *Tale of Genji* has even more (and crucially so, as hundreds of *tanka* poems stylize sadness and longing throughout the story); French medieval romances had a prodigious early peak in verse with Chrétien de Troyes; half of the old *Arcadia* is eclogues; Chinese classic novels use poetry in a variety of ways . . . Why did prose eventually prevail so thoroughly, then, and what did this mean for the form of the novel?

Let me begin from the opposite side, of verse. Verse, *versus*: there is a pattern that turns around and comes back: there is a symmetry, and symmetry always suggests permanence, that's why monuments are symmetrical. But prose is not symmetrical, and this immediately creates a sense of im-permanence and irreversibility: prose, *pro-versa*: forward-looking (or front-facing, as in the Roman *Dea Provorsa*, goddess of easy childbirth): the text has an orientation, it leans forwards, its meaning 'depends on what lies ahead (the end of a sentence; the next event in the plot)', as Michal Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea have put it.² 'The knight was defending himself *so bravely that his assailers could not prevail*'; 'Let's withdraw a little, *so that they will not recognize me*'; 'I don't know that knight, but he is *so brave that I would gladly give him my love*'. I found these passages in a half page of the prose *Lancelot*, easily, because consecutive and final constructions—where meaning depends so much on what lies ahead that a sentence literally falls into the following one—these forward-looking arrangements are everywhere in prose, and allow it its typical acceleration of narrative rhythm. And it's not that verse ignores the consecutive nexus while prose is nothing *but* that, of course; these are just their 'lines of least resistance', to use Jakobson's metaphor; it is not a matter of essence, but of relative frequency—but style is *always* a matter of relative frequency, and consecutiveness is a good starting point for a stylistics of prose.

But there is a second possible starting point, which leads, not towards narrativity, but towards *complexity*. It's a point often made by studies of *dérimage*, the thirteenth-century prosification of courtly romances which was one of the great moments of decision, so to speak, between verse and prose, and where one thing that kept happening, in the transfer from one into the other, was that the number of subordinate

¹ This article was given at the conference 'Theories of the Novel', organized by *Novel*, at Brown University, in the fall of 2007. Except for a couple of passages, expanded in the light of the discussion that followed, I have left the text more or less as it was, only adding a few footnotes. I am very grateful to Nancy Armstrong, who persuaded me to write the paper in the first place; and to D.A. Miller and William Warner, with whom I have discussed it at length. The sentence from *The Novel* comes from the brief preface ('On *The Novel*') that can be found in both volumes of the Princeton edition (see footnote 2), on p. x.

² Michal Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea, 'The Prose of the World', in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, vol. II, Princeton 2006, p. 245. On this topic, I have also learned a lot from Kristin Hanson and Paul Kiparsky, 'The Nature of Verse and its Consequences for the Mixed Form', in Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, eds, *Prosimetrum. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, Cambridge 1997.

clauses—increased.³ Which makes sense, a line of verse can to a certain extent stand alone, and so it encourages independent clauses; prose is continuous, it's more of a construction, I don't think it's an accident that the myth of 'inspiration' is so seldom evoked for prose: inspiration is too instantaneous to make sense there, too much like a gift; and prose is not a gift; it's work: 'productivity of the spirit', Lukács called it in the *Theory of the Novel*, and it's the right expression: hypotaxis is not only laborious—it requires foresight, memory, adequation of means to ends—but truly productive: the outcome is more than the sum of its parts, because subordination establishes a hierarchy among clauses, meaning becomes articulated, aspects emerge that didn't exist before . . . That's how complexity comes into being.

The acceleration of narrativity; the construction of complexity. Both real: and totally at odds with each other. What did prose mean for the novel . . . it allowed it to play on two completely different tables—popular and cultivated—making it a uniquely adaptable and successful form. But, also, an extremely *polarized* form. The theory of the novel should have greater morphological depth, I said earlier, but depth is an understatement: what we have here are stylistic extremes that in the course of two thousand years not only drift further and further away from each other, but turn *against* each other: the style of complexity, with its hypothetical, concessive, and conditional clauses, making forward-looking narrative seem hopelessly simple-minded and plebeian; and popular forms, for their part, mutilating complexity wherever they find it—word, sentence, paragraph, dialogue, everywhere.

A form divided between narrativity and complexity: with narrativity dominating its history, and complexity its theory. And, yes, I understand why someone would rather study sentence structure in *The Ambassadors* than in its contemporary *Dashing Diamond Dick*. The problem is not the value judgment, it's that when a value judgment becomes the basis for concepts, then it doesn't just determine what is valued or not, but what is *thinkable* or not, and in this case, what becomes unthinkable is, first, the vast majority of the novelistic field, and, second, its very shape: because polarization disappears if you only look at one of the extremes, whereas it shouldn't, because it's the sign of how the novel participates in social inequality, and duplicates it into cultural inequality. A theory of the novel should account for this. But to do so, we need a new starting point.

³ See, for instance, Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose. An essay in prosaics*, Minneapolis 1987, pp. 34ff.

‘Veblen explains culture in terms of kitsch, not vice-versa’, writes Adorno in *Prisms*, disapprovingly:⁴ but it’s such a tempting idea. Taking the style of dime novels as the basic object of study, and explaining James’s as an unlikely by-product: that’s how a theory of prose should proceed—because that’s how *history* has proceeded. Not the other way around.

Looking at prose style from below . . . With digital databases, this is now easy to imagine: a few years, and we’ll be able to search just about all novels that have ever been published, and look for patterns among billions of sentences. Personally, I am fascinated by this encounter of the formal and the quantitative. Let me give you an example: all literary scholars analyse stylistic structures—free indirect style, the stream of consciousness, melodramatic excess, whatever. But it’s striking how little we actually know about the genesis of these forms. Once they’re there, we know what to do; but how did they get there in the first place? How does the ‘confused thought’ (Michel Vovelle) of *mentalité*, which is the substratum for almost all that happens in a culture—how does messiness crystallize into the elegance of free indirect style? Concretely: what are the steps? No one really knows. By sifting through thousands of variations and permutations and approximations, a quantitative stylistics of the digital archive may find some answers. It will be difficult, no doubt, because one cannot study a large archive in the same way one studies a text: texts are designed to ‘speak’ to us, and so, provided we know how to listen, they always end up telling us something; but archives are not messages that were meant to address us, and so they say absolutely nothing until one asks the right question. And the trouble is, we literary scholars are not good at that: we are trained to listen, not to ask questions, and asking questions is the *opposite* of listening; it turns criticism on its head, and transforms it into an experiment of sorts: ‘questions put to nature’ is how experiments are often described, and what I’m imagining here are questions—put to culture. Difficult; but too interesting not to give it a try.

II

All this lies in the future. My second point lies in the past. Novels are long; or rather, they span a very wide range of lengths—from the 20,000 words of *Daphnis and Chloe* to the 40,000 of Chrétien, 100,000 of

⁴ Theodor Adorno, ‘Veblen’s Attack on Culture’, in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA 1990, p. 79.

Austen, 400,000 of *Don Quixote*, and over 800,000 of *The Story of the Stone*—and one day it will be interesting to analyse the consequences of this spectrum, but for now let's just accept the simple notion that they are long. The question is, How did they get to be that way, and there are of course several answers, but if I had to choose a single mechanism I would say: adventures.⁵ Adventures expand novels by opening them to the world: a call for help comes—the knight goes. Usually, without asking questions; which is typical of adventure, the unknown is not a threat here, it's an opportunity, or more precisely: there is no longer any distinction between threats and opportunities. 'Who leaves the dangerous path for the safe', says Galessin, one of the knights of the Round Table, 'is not a knight, is a merchant': true, capital doesn't like danger for its own sake, but a knight does: he has to: he can't accumulate glory, he must renew it all the time, so he needs this perpetual motion machine of adventure . . .

. . . perpetual, especially if a border is in sight: across the bridge, into the forest, up the mountain, through the gate, at sea. Adventures make novels long because they make them wide; they are the great explorers of the fictional world: battlefields, oceans, castles, sewers, prairies, islands, slums, jungles, galaxies . . . Practically all great popular chronotopes have arisen when the adventure plot has moved into a new geography, and activated its narrative potential. Just as prose multiplies styles, then, adventure multiplies stories: and forward-looking prose is perfect for adventure, syntax and plot moving in unison, I'm not sure there is a main branch in the family of forms we call the novel, but if there is one,

⁵ If I had to choose a single mechanism . . . And if I could choose two: adventures—and love. One mechanism to expand the story, and one to hold it together: a conjunction that is particularly clear in the ancient novels, where love is the one source of permanence in a world where everything else is scattered by fortune to the four winds, and acts therefore as a figure *for the social bond in general*: the freely chosen union from which, in antithesis to the adventures despotically imposed by Tuche, a larger organism can somehow be glimpsed. But this balance between love and adventure breaks down in chivalric romances, as errant knights start to actively *look* for adventures (the Quest), and new figures for the social contract emerge (the Court, the Round Table, the Grail). In this new situation, love becomes functionally subordinated to adventure—and the theme of adultery, which immediately arises, is at once the symptom of its abiding strength, and of its newly problematic position. This redistribution of narrative tasks, from which love has never fully recovered, is the reason why I decided to focus exclusively on adventures; besides, love has long been recognized by the theory of the novel (especially in the English tradition), and I wanted to shift our attention towards the historically broader phenomenon.

it's this: we would still recognize the history of the novel without modernism, or even without realism;⁶ without adventures in prose, no.

Here, too, the novelistic field is profoundly polarized between adventures and the everyday; and here, too, the theory of the novel has shown very little interest (aside from Bakhtin, and now Pavel), for the popular side of the field. But I won't repeat that aspect of the argument, and will turn instead to the odd *narrowness* that—in spite of all its plasticity—seems typical of adventure. A social narrowness, fundamentally. The whole idea had been 'a creation of the petty nobility of penniless knights', for whom "*aventure*" was a way to survive—and possibly, to marry a heiress', writes Erich Köhler, who was the great sociologist of this convention.⁷ But if knights needed adventures, for other social classes the notion remained opaque. 'I am, as you see, a knight seeking what I cannot find,' says Calogrenant to a peasant at the beginning of *Yvain*: 'And what do you want to find?' 'Adventure, to test my courage and my strength. Now I pray and beseech you to advise me, if you know, of any adventure or wonder'. 'I know nothing of adventure, nor have I ever heard about it' (ll. 356–67). What a reply; only a few years earlier, in the *chanson de geste*, the nature of knightly action was clear to everybody; not any more. Chivalric ethos has become 'absolute . . . both in its ideal realization and in the absence of any earthly and practical purpose' writes Auerbach in *Mimesis*: 'no political function . . . no practical reality at all'. And yet, he goes on, this unreal ethos 'attained acceptance and validity in the real world' of Western culture for centuries to come.⁸ How could it be?

For Köhler, the reason was that adventure became 'stylized and moralized' in the much wider ideal—launched by the Crusades, and sublimated by the Grail—of 'the Christian redemption of the warrior'.⁹ Which sounds

⁶ Hopefully, modernism (that is to say: the host of centrifugal experiments—Stein, Kafka, Joyce, Pilniak, De Chirico, Platonov . . .—attempted in the years around World War I) will play a larger role than realism in any future theory of the novel, as a cluster of incompatible extremes should reveal something unique about what a form can—and cannot—do. So far, however, this has not been the case.

⁷ Erich Köhler, 'Il sistema sociologico del romanzo francese medievale', *Medioevo Romano*, vol. 3, 1976, pp. 321–44.

⁸ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton 2003, pp. 134, 136. On this, see also Erich Köhler, 'Quelques observations d'ordre historico-sociologique sur les rapports entre la chanson de geste et le roman courtois', in *Chanson de geste und höfischer Roman*, Heidelberg 1963, *passim*.

⁹ Köhler, 'Il sistema sociologico', p. 326.

right, but in its turn opens another problem: how could these starkly feudal coordinates of adventure, not only survive into the bourgeois age, but inspire all of its most popular genres?

III

Before I attempt an answer, some thoughts on the third question, the Chinese–European comparison. Until well into the nineteenth century, almost the end in fact, East Asian and West European novels developed independently of each other; which is great, it's like an experiment history has run for us, the same form in two . . . laboratories, it's perfect for comparative morphology, because it allows us to look at formal features not as givens, as we inevitably tend to do, but as *choices*: and choices that eventually add up to alternative structures. Beginning, for instance, with how often the protagonists of Chinese novels are, not individuals, but *groups*: the household in the *Jin Ping Mei* and *The Story of the Stone* (or *Dream of the Red Chamber*), the outlaws in *The Water Margin*, the literati in *The Scholars*. Titles are already a clue—what would European titles do without proper names—but here, not even one; and these are not just random novels, they are four of the six ‘great masterpieces’ of the Chinese canon, their titles (and their heroes) matter.

So, groups. Large; and with even larger character-systems around them: Chinese critics have identified over 600 characters in *The Scholars*, 800 in *The Water Margin* and the *Jin Ping Mei*, 975 in *The Story of the Stone*. And since size is seldom *just* size—a story with a thousand characters is not like a story with fifty characters, only twenty times bigger: it's a different story—all this ends up generating a structure which is very unlike the one we are used to in Europe. With so many variables, one would expect it to be more unpredictable, but the opposite is actually more often the case: a great attempt at *reducing* unpredictability, and re-balancing the narrative system. Let me give you an example from *The Story of the Stone*: after six or seven hundred pages, the two young undeclared lovers, Bao-yu and Dai-yu, have one of their many fights; Dai-yu leaves, and Bao-yu, left alone, falls into a sort of trance; his maid Aroma arrives, but he doesn't notice her, and in his dream-like state proceeds to express for the first time his love for Dai-yu; then he ‘awakes’, sees Aroma, is bewildered, runs away, and one can imagine all sorts of sequels here: Aroma has been sleeping with Bao-yu for some time, and

could feel wounded; or she could side with Dai-yu, and tell her what Bao-yu has just said; or she could betray her to the other young woman who is in love with Bao-yu . . . Many ways of making the episode generate narrative (after all, we've been waiting for this declaration of love for hundreds of pages); and instead, what Aroma immediately thinks is 'how she could arrange matters so as to prevent any scandal developing from those words'. *Preventing* developments: that's the key. Minimizing narrativity. *The Story of the Stone* is often described as a Chinese *Buddenbrooks*, and they are certainly both stories of the decline of a great family, but *Buddenbrooks* covers a half century in five hundred pages, and *Stone* a dozen years in two *thousand* pages: and it's not just a matter of rhythm, here (although that is obviously also the case), but of the hierarchy between synchrony and diachrony: *Stone* has a 'horizontal' dominant, where what really matters is not what lies 'ahead' of a given event, as in 'forward-looking' European prose, but what lies 'to the side' of it: all the vibrations that ripple across this immense narrative system—and all the *counter*-vibrations that try to keep it stable. Earlier, I pointed out how the breakdown of symmetry allowed European prose to intensify irreversibility; irreversibility is present also in Chinese novels, of course, but instead of intensifying it they often try to *contain* it, and so symmetry regains its centrality: chapters are announced by couplets that neatly divide them into two halves; many important passages are couched in the wonderfully named 'parallel prose' ('Every evening devoted to the pursuit of pleasure; Every morning an occasion for deluded dalliance'); in the novel's overall architecture there are blocks of ten, twenty, even fifty chapters that mirror each other across hundreds of pages . . . It's really an alternative tradition.

Alternative, but *comparable*: up to the eighteenth century, the Chinese novel was arguably greater in both quantity and quality than any in Europe, with the possible exception of France. 'The Chinese have novels by the thousand, and already had them when our ancestors were living in the forests', said Goethe to Eckermann in 1827, on the day he coined the concept of *Weltliteratur* (while reading a Chinese novel). But the figures are wrong: by 1827 novels by the thousand existed in France, or Britain, or indeed in Germany—but not in China.

Why?

IV

When we discuss the destinies of eighteenth-century core areas, writes Kenneth Pomeranz in *The Great Divergence*,

we should make our comparisons . . . truly reciprocal . . . that is, look for absences, accidents and obstacles that diverted England from a path that might have made it more like the Yangzi Delta or Gujarat, along with the more usual exercise of looking for blockages that kept non-European areas from reproducing implicitly normalized European paths . . . view both sides of the comparison as ‘deviations’ when seen through the expectations of the other, rather than leaving one as always the norm.¹⁰

The European rise of the novel as a deviation from the Chinese path: as soon as you start thinking in these terms, it immediately leaps to the eye how much more *seriously* the novel was taken in China than in Europe. Despite all the attacks by the Confucian literati, by the early seventeenth century Chinese culture already had a novelistic canon; Europe wasn’t even thinking about it. For the epic or tragedy it had one, or the lyric; not for the novel. And the canon is just the tip of the iceberg: there was in China an immense investment of intellectual energies in the edition, revision, continuation, and especially *commentary* of novels. These were already very long books, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, 600,000 words, the inter-lineal commentary made it almost a million—but it added so much ‘to the enjoyment . . . of the novel’, writes David Rolston, ‘that editions without commentary . . . went out of circulation’.¹¹

‘The novel has less need of . . . commentary than other genres’, writes Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*,¹² and for Europe he’s right. But Chinese novels needed them, because they were seen as—art. Since at least the *Jin Ping Mei*, around 1600, ‘Chinese *xiaoshuo* went through an . . . extended aesthetic turn’, writes Ming Dong Gu: ‘a self-conscious emulation and competition with the dominant literary genres . . . a poeticization’.¹³ We should look for absences that diverted the European novel from the Chinese path . . . and here is one: the aesthetic turn of the European

¹⁰ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton 2000, pp. 7–8.

¹¹ David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary. Reading and Writing Between the Lines*, Stanford 1997, p. 4.

¹² Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Berkeley 1957, p. 30.

¹³ Ming Dong Gu, *Chinese Theories of Fiction. A Non-Western Narrative System*, New York 2006, p. 71.

novel occurred in the late nineteenth century, with a delay of almost three hundred years.¹⁴

Why?

V

For Pomeranz, one reason for the great divergence was that in eighteenth-century Europe ‘the wheels of fashion were spinning faster’,¹⁵ stimulating consumption, and through it the economy as a whole; while in China, after the consolidation of the Qing dynasty, consumption ‘as a motor of change’ came to a halt for over a century, not triggering that ‘consumer revolution’ McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb have written about. Revolution is a big word, and many have questioned the extent of consumption before the mid-nineteenth-century; still, no one really doubts that ‘superfluous things’, to use a Chinese expression, multiplied during the eighteenth century, from interior decoration to mirrors, clocks, porcelain, silverware, jewelry—and concerts, journeys and books. ‘In any consideration of leisure’, writes Plumb, ‘it would be quite wrong not to put cultural pursuits in the foreground’.¹⁶ So: what did ‘the birth of a consumer society’ mean for the European novel?

¹⁴ The divergence of the two models is well illustrated by the role played by *Don Quixote* and the *Jin Ping Mei*—two novels that were written in the same years, and are often compared to each other (more by sinologists than by hispanists, it must be said)—in their respective traditions: for at least two centuries, if not longer, the *Jin Ping Mei*’s influence on the theory and practice of the novel in China was incomparably greater than that of *Don Quixote* in Europe. A similar parting of the ways occurs in the late eighteenth century, when the peak of the Chinese aesthetic turn (*The Story of the Stone*) could have found its match in an incredibly gifted generation of German poet-novelists (Goethe, Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Von Arnim, Brentano)—if only they hadn’t been roundly ignored by European readers (except for Goethe, of course; but even Goethe kept the ‘poetic’ first version of *Meister* in a drawer, as if sensing that it wasn’t the right book for the times). Incidentally, that the *Jin Ping Mei* could be hailed as the masterpiece that would change the Chinese novel is another striking instance of the difference between the two traditions: that European culture could produce—and appreciate!—an erotic corpus as explicit as the Chinese one is quite unimaginable.

¹⁵ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, p. 161.

¹⁶ J. H. Plumb, ‘The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century England’, in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society. The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Bloomington 1982, pp. 265–6.

First of all, a giant quantitative leap. From the first to the last decade of the century, new titles increased seven times in France (even though, in the 1790s, the French had more to do than write novels); fourteen in Britain; and about thirty in the German territories. Also, by the end of the eighteenth century print runs had become a little larger, especially for reprints; many novels that are not included in the standard bibliographies were published in magazines (some of which had a very wide audience); the strengthening of family ties encouraged reading aloud at home (providing the training ground for Dr. Bowdler's vocation); finally, and most significantly, the diffusion of lending libraries made novels circulate much more efficiently than before, eventually leading to the imposition of the three-decker on writers and publishers alike, so as to lend each novel to three readers at once. Hard though it is to quantify these various factors, if all of them combined increased the circulation of novels between two and three times (a conservative estimate), then the presence of novels in Western Europe would have gone up between thirty and sixty times in the course of the eighteenth century. For McKendrick, the fact that consumption of tea rose fifteenfold in a hundred years is a great success story of the consumer revolution. Novels, increased more than tea.

Why? The answer used to be, Because readers did. But the current consensus—which is slippery, like all that has to do with literacy, but has been stable for a few decades now—is that between 1700 and 1800, readers doubled; a little less than that in France, a little more in England, but that's the horizon. They doubled; they didn't increase fifty times. But, they were reading *differently*. 'Extensive' reading, Rolf Engelsing has called it: reading a lot more than in the past, avidly, at times passionately, but probably more often than not also superficially, quickly, even a little erratically; quite different from the 'intensive' reading and re-reading of the same few books—usually devotional ones—that had been the norm until then.¹⁷ And Engelsing's thesis has often been criticized, but with novels multiplying so much more quickly than readers, and readers behaving like the famous John Latimer, of Warwick, who from mid-January to mid-February 1771 borrowed a volume a day from Clay's circulating library,¹⁸ it is hard to imagine how the whole process could have worked without a major increase in—let's call it distraction.

¹⁷ Rolf Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser. Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500–1800*, Stuttgart 1974, esp. pp. 182ff.

¹⁸ Jan Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford 2006, p. 113.

Let's call it that, because, even though Engelsing never mentions Benjamin, extensive reading looks very much like an early version of that 'perception in a state of distraction' described at the end of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility'. Distraction in that essay is *Zerstreuung*—absent-mindedness, and entertainment: the perfect mix for novel-reading—and for Benjamin it is the attitude that becomes necessary at those 'historical turning points' when the 'tasks' facing 'the human apparatus of perception' are so overwhelming that they can't be 'mastered' by way of concentrated attention:¹⁹ and distraction emerges as the best way to cope with the new situation—to keep up with those 'faster-spinning wheels of fashion' that have so dramatically widened the market for novels.²⁰

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', 1935, in *Selected Writings III: 1935–1938*, Cambridge, MA 2002, p. 119. The passage returns virtually unchanged in the third version of the essay, in 1939.

²⁰ As I hope is clear, my focus on consumption, fashion and distraction is not meant to erase capitalism from literary history, but to specify which of its aspects play a more direct causal role in the novel's take-off. Unquestionably, capitalist expansion as such created some key general pre-conditions: a larger, more literate population; more disposable income; and more free time (for some). But since new novelistic titles increased four times faster than printed matter in general during the eighteenth century (even including the flood of pamphlets at the end of the century: see James Raven, *The Business of Books. Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450–1850*, New Haven, CN 2007, p. 8), we must also explain this different rate of growth: and that peculiar exaggeration of consumer mentality embodied by distraction and fashion (and which seems to play a lesser role for drama, poetry, and most other types of cultural production), seems to be the best explanation we have found so far. That consumption could play such a large role in the history of the novel depends, in its turn, on the fact that the suspicion towards reading for pleasure was beginning to fade, in line with Constant's idea of the Liberty of the Moderns as 'the enjoyment of security in private pleasures' (Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, Cambridge 2007, p. 317). Pleasure, by the way, is another blindspot of the theory of the novel: though we 'know', more or less, that the novel was from the very beginning a form of 'light reading' (Thomas Hägg, 'Orality, literacy, and the "readership" of the early Greek novel', in R. Eriksen, ed., *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative*, Berlin and New York 1994, p. 51), we still work as if reading for pleasure were basically the same as reading 'for serious reasons—religious, economic, or social' (J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels. The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction*, New York and London, 1990, p. 84: one of the few to pose the problem in an interesting way). This is yet another issue on which specific historical studies are well ahead of theoretical reflection: the dramatic enlargement of the ancient novelistic field, for instance, would have been impossible without a shift towards popular, light, and even vulgar forms of writing.

What did the birth of a consumer society mean for the European novel? More novels, and less attention. Dime novels, not James, setting the tone of the new way of reading. Jan Fergus, who knows more about lending libraries' records than anyone else, calls it 'desultory' reading: borrowing the second volume of *Gulliver's Travels* but not the first, or the fourth, out of five, of *The Fool of Quality*. And Fergus then hails this as 'readers' agency, their power of choice'²¹—but, frankly, the choice here seems to be, giving up all consistency, in order to be always somehow in touch with what the market has to offer. Leaving the TV on all day long, and watching it every now and then—that's not agency.

VI

Why was there no rise of the Chinese novel in the eighteenth century—and no European aesthetic turn? The answers mirror each other: taking the novel seriously as an aesthetic object slowed down consumption—while a quickened market for novels discouraged aesthetic concentration. 'When reading the first chapter, the good reader has already cast his eyes towards the last', says a commentary to the *Jin Ping Mei* (which is two thousand pages long); 'when reading the last chapter, he is already recalling the first'.²² This is what intensive reading is like: the only true reading is *re-reading*, or even 'a *series* of re-readings', as some commentators seem to assume. 'If you don't put your pen into action, it cannot really be considered reading', as Mao once put it. *Study*; not one-volume-per-day consumption. In Europe, only modernism made people study novels. Had they read with pen and commentary in the eighteenth century, there would have been no rise of the European novel.

VII

Typically, the great theories of the novel have been theories of modernity, and my insistence on the market is a particularly brutal version thereof. But with a complication, suggested by another research project I'm engaged in at present, on the figure of the bourgeois, in the course of which I have been often surprised by how *limited* the diffusion of

²¹ Fergus, *Provincial Readers*, pp. 108–16, 117.

²² Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction*, p. 126.

bourgeois values seems to have actually been. Capitalism has spread everywhere, no doubt about that, but the values which—according to Marx, Weber, Simmel, Sombart, Freud, Schumpeter, Hirschmann . . . —are supposed to be most congruous with it have not, and this has made me look at the novel with different eyes: no longer as the ‘natural’ form of bourgeois modernity, but rather as that through which the *pre-modern* imaginary continues to pervade the capitalist world. Whence, adventure. The anti-type of the spirit of modern capitalism, for *The Protestant Ethic*; a slap in the face of realism, as Auerbach saw so clearly in *Mimesis*. What is adventure doing in the modern world? Margaret Cohen, from whom I have learned a lot on this, sees it as a trope of expansion: capitalism on the offensive, planetary, crossing the oceans. I think she is right, and would only add that the reason adventure works so well within this context is that it’s so good at imagining *war*. Enamoured of physical strength, which it moralizes as the rescue of the weak from all sorts of abuses, adventure is the perfect blend of might and right to accompany capitalist expansions. That’s why Köhler’s Christian warrior has not only survived in our culture—in novels; films; videogames—not only survived, but dwarfed any comparable bourgeois figure. Schumpeter put it crudely and clearly: ‘The bourgeois class . . . needs a master.’²³

It needs a master—to help it rule. In finding distortion after distortion of core bourgeois values, my first reaction was always to wonder at the loss of class identity that this entailed; which is true, but, from another perspective, completely irrelevant, because hegemony doesn’t need purity—it needs plasticity, camouflage, collusion between the old and the new. Under this different constellation, the novel returns to be central to our understanding of modernity: not despite, but *because* of its *pre-modern* traits, which are not archaic residues, but functional articulations of ideological needs. To decipher the geological strata of consensus in the capitalist world—here is a worthy challenge, for the history and the theory of the novel.

²³ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, socialism and democracy* [1942], New York 1975, p. 138.