

JOHN BRENKMAN

Innovation: Notes on Nihilism and the Aesthetics of the Novel

Can we define innovation in the novel? It obviously has something to do with modernism and postmodernism. The idea of modernism implies innovation: Make it new. *Il faut être absolument moderne*. The idea of postmodernism—after, beyond, newer than the new—also implies innovation. A bad start on definitions.

Opposing ways out of this confusion have been proposed by Peter Bürger, Fredric Jameson, and Jean-François Lyotard. According to Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the early twentieth-century avant-gardes were genuinely innovative because they challenged the separation of art and life, until modernism institutionalized innovation and thereby killed it. He answers the confusion with a historical paradox: earlier artists made it new, newer artists do not. After futurism and surrealism, twentieth-century art is the afterglow or half-life of a failed project. Bürger mounts a principled defense of this position. But that is the problem, for to evaluate our era's art on the basis of the principle of fusing art and life assumes that the intellectual-aesthetic powers of the contemporary critic have somehow escaped the intellectual-aesthetic fate of contemporary artists. It is doubtful.

Jameson arrives at a similar embarrassment in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, starting out from the perspective that realism, modernism, and postmodernism correspond to the phases of capitalism, respectively: industrial, imperialist, and global (or developing, developed, and "late"). He preserves both the later Lukács's understanding of realism: the realist novel represents, despite ideological refractions, the total class structure of society, as well as Adorno's understanding of modernism: the modernist work represents, negatively, the individual's estranged relation to the (now hidden) truth of the social totality. Jameson then looks to adduce the comparable relation between late capitalism and postmodern art. As consumer society drives individuals ever further into the privatized world of commodities and as globalization disperses economic exploitation beyond anyone's tangible grasp, art begins to lose its very ability to represent. Insofar as postmodernism merely relishes the loss of representation, it is the symptom (the "cultural dominant") of this historical process. Can there then be a postmodern art that matches the knowledge embodied in Lukács's realism and the negative protest of Adorno's modernism? In

answering that question, Jameson puts himself as literary critic in a position as awkward as Bürger's: rather than criticizing his society *through* the literature it produces, he calls for a literature that would represent the society he already, in theory, knows: "the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time as it achieves a breakthrough to some unimaginable new mode of representing this last."¹ Critics have frequently stimulated new artistic movements by denouncing the limitations of existing ones, but Jameson's call for the missing aesthetic of "global cognitive mapping" is epochal in scope. It is deduced from his theoretical premise about the nature of late capitalism and its "cultural dominant." Is the missing aesthetic a utopian-critical hypothesis or the alibi of the original premise? The issue is at best undecidable.

Lyotard, in contrast to Bürger and Jameson, sees permanent avant-garde revolution everywhere, right up through postmodernism: genuine art continually negates what came before. He revives the spirit of early-twentieth-century formalism's account of the avant-garde's defamiliarization of conventions and breaks with tradition. Art pursues "the unrepresentable" and "dissension"—on principle. Since artworks do eventually become understood by a public (that is, become "institutionalized" in Bürger's sense), Lyotard solves the innovation puzzle with a purely logical rather than historical paradox: every genuine artwork is postmodern before it is modern, the *postmodern* always *precedes* the modern.

Reliance on a singular principle or logic of artistic innovation leads to impasse, impasses that are all the more striking in these three theorists because their work is otherwise filled with interpretive insights and guided by deeply thought-out historical and aesthetic perspectives. This fact underscores how troublesome, and seductive, the keywords *avant-garde*, *modernism*, and *postmodernism* truly are. Meanwhile, journalistic as well as scholarly literary criticism now dispenses with the complexity and contradictoriness of aesthetic trends and typically divides the past century of literature into a "modern" and a "postmodern" half. Before the divide, literature affirms the self, aesthetic unity, and Enlightenment; afterward, it does not. The modern is foundationalist, totalizing, and universalist; the postmodern is not. An era of criticism that began under the inspiration of Derrida, Barthes, and de Man by excoriating binary oppositions and sneering at linear narratives today uses a half-dozen binaries and two periods to sum up all of twentieth-century art.

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 54.

The modernist/postmodernist plot thoroughly distorts the history of the novel and the state of contemporary world fiction. Our era's fiction does not fall into two symmetrical halves; it unfurls in dizzying spirals of modern epics and language experiments, surrealisms and realisms, colonialist adventures and postcolonial tragedies, male mythologies and feminist rewritings, fictional autobiographies and documentary novels, not to mention the steady flow of romances, detective stories, and science fiction.

The reigning view of the novel tells, instead, a tidy little story: in the beginning was realism (naïve nineteenth-century representations of vulgar social reality); in the middle was modernism; in the end, postmodernism. Anti-realism becomes the defining feature of twentieth-century fiction: modernism supersedes realistic representations with stream-of-consciousness and formalistic rigor, and then postmodernism fractures or deconstructs representation, consciousness, and form. Accordingly, innovation removes the novel ever farther from realism.

But is any of this true?

The most important developments and innovations in recent fiction have come from novelists like Christa Wolf, Toni Morrison, Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Norman Mailer, Carlos Fuentes, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, and Nadine Gordimer. The imperatives of realism—to illuminate individual life histories in the flow of collective histories, to represent how time and impersonal forces move through individual experience and intimate relationships, to assess the boundaries of moral action—are manifest across these writers' diverse projects and varied styles. The realist imperative is ingrained in the very innovations that get labeled "modernist" or "postmodernist." Take Morrison. She incorporates reconstructed folk narratives, disjointed narrative voices, and layered temporalities not in order to overthrow realism but to get at the shape of experiences belonging to very precise times and places: a segregated community in northern Ohio in the early 1960s on the cusp of its awareness of the civil rights movement in *Song of Solomon*; an isolated community of escaped slaves in southern Ohio in the 1850s under the regime of the Fugitive Slave Law in *Beloved*; the streets and apartments of 1920s Harlem in the grip of migration and renaissance in *Jazz*; a black township in Oklahoma in the 1970s whose century-long memories and mythologies are torn apart by incoming fragments of Vietnam, the counterculture, and Black Power in *Paradise*.

My thesis, then: realism and innovation are a double imperative in the contemporary novel. To rethink what is meant by innovation in light of this thesis will require a skeptical reconsideration, though not a wholesale rejection, of all the other keywords in the discussion: *modernism*, *postmodernism*, *avant-garde*, *modernity*. I will return to these terms intermittently as I try to

measure contemporary theory against the artistic achievements of the contemporary novel.

First, though, it is necessary to clarify how I understand the realist imperative of the novel. Forget the commonplace that what makes a novel realistic is its intent to mirror a stable reality. That idea has never been more than a caricature of the aesthetic of nineteenth-century realism. It helped justify the twentieth-century novel's new points of departure; it seemed to explain the stakes, for example, when the author of *Dubliners* undertook to write *Ulysses*. But realism never was a mirror, and reality was hardly more stable in the nineteenth century than today. When Stendhal famously said that a novel is a mirror moving down a roadway, his metaphor had nothing to do with picturing a stable reality. On the contrary, it evoked the upheaval, mobility, and uncertainty of social life and called upon the novel to find the artistic means of referring to that unstable reality.

Novels do not reproduce reality; they refer to it, with deep awareness of its elusiveness. Novelists are also attuned to the myriad other discourses that refer to reality, whether to flee it or master it: the discourses of romance, myth, religion, ideology, science. Novels thus make reference to reality by making reference to other discourses. That was Mikhail Bakhtin's great insight. There are only angles on reality. The perspectivalism that modern thought thinks it inherited from Nietzsche has been the vocation of the novel since its modern rebirth in Rabelais, Cervantes, and Grimmshausen. (That Nietzsche disdained the novel as an empiricist illusion of the modern herd mentality is another story, a very intriguing one.) Even the most private perspectives intersect with shared ones, whether those of classes or sects, scientists or ideologues, parties or subcultures, believers or infidels. The novel is charged with disclosing the individual's fateful encounters at those crossroads. Its vocation ultimately arises perhaps from its impossible dual allegiance to skepticism and imagination; the novelist invents worlds to unmask the world. Yeats was as unreceptive to the novel as Nietzsche, and probably for the same reasons, but the calling he attributed to art in general surely fits the novel's demystifying, questioning, fabricating, perspectival habits: against the rhetorician's deceptions and the sentimentalist's self-deceptions, the novel "is but a vision of reality."

"To name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep."² Salman Rushdie gives these

² Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1988), 97.

words to the satirical poet Baal of Jahilia, who lends them back to define the aesthetic of *The Satanic Verses*. The novel invents in order to question, fantasizes in order to expose, disputes in order to designate . . . unnamable reality.

"I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discovered the infinite in every thing."³ William Blake gives these words to the prophet Isaiah, and one of Rushdie's protagonists reads them in his lover's "long-unopened copy" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Isaiah is explaining to the enthralled Blake that he never in fact *heard* God; rather, his own righteous indignation *was* the voice of God. The biblical revelation was humanly inspired; the prophet was a poet. Isaiah's words too lend themselves to Rushdie's aesthetic. The satanic-satyrical-satirical inversion of a sacred text is a poetic reimagining of the religious imagination.

The challenge posed to readers of *The Satanic Verses* is that its realist imperative is borne on the wings of worldly satire and sacred parody. Moreover, the novel mixes several distinct discourses, each with a purpose of its own:

- a fantastic tale of metamorphosis to signify the simultaneity of incommensurate worlds in the migrant's experience, and in the postimperial metropolis;
- a Dickensian satire to expose the seething wounds of urban life in Thatcherite England;
- a parody of the sacred text of the Quran to interrogate the paradox that today's religious fundamentalisms, far from being a return to pristine beliefs and traditions, are an utterly contemporary form of mass politics; and
- a tragicomic tale of rivalry, madness, and revenge to unfold the inner torment of two privileged expatriates, the novel's protagonists, Saladin Chamcha (the Anglophilic toady who impersonates a thousand voices in commercials) and Gibreel Farishta (the movie star who plays numberless deities in Indian "theologicals").

The Quranic parody takes up the novel's second and sixth chapters, "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia." Raucous, irreverent, and profound, it is looped into the Saladin-Gibreel story with a simple premise and complex effects. Gibreel has always been filled with religious imaginings, from Ovid's tales of Jovian and human metamorphoses to the reincarnations and multiple gods of Hinduism, and he is captivated by Islam's primary, and dueling,

³ Ibid., 304.

angels: Shaitan, the fallen angel, and Gibreel, the voice emitting Allah's truth to Mohammed. The cinematic "portrayer of gods" begins dreaming he *is* the angel Gibreel, and the dream slowly bleeds into his waking life and becomes delusion. The two chapters of parody are his dreams, an oneiric retelling of how Mahound (Mohammed) converts, with negotiations and threats, the polytheistic people of Jahilia (Mecca). That is the simple premise: Gibreel dreams the parody of the Quran.

As a literary feat, however, the parodic chapters abjure psychological realism. Even the dreams of a psychotic could not unfold in a prose so luminous and allusive and penetrating—not to mention in the same style as the rest of the novel. The dream device serves another purpose in *The Satanic Verses*; it links, loosely but richly, an array of altered states of consciousness: dreams, psychotic delusions, mystical visions, the Prophet's receiving the Recitation, the hysteria of crowds, the mass appeal of cinematic fantasias. Gibreel's dream is in the tradition of Lucian's satires, an occasion to throw the divine and profane, realities and fantasies, into a large bag and shake them up into an exuberant rearrangement that questions all manner of secular and sacred certainties.

The Quran's episode of the satanic verses is the weak knee of that textual monolith. Islamic tradition reckons that an allusion in the Quran to some demonic tampering with the Prophet's receptivity to Gibreel's Recitation—"Never have We sent a single prophet or apostle before you with whose wishes Satan did not tamper"⁴—refers to another episode in which Mohammed apparently rescinds his offer to grant legitimacy to three goddesses worshiped by the people of Mecca, whom he is trying to convert. If the Prophet was deceived by satanic verses once, why not twice? Often? Always?

According to the Quran, the goddesses Al-Lat, Al-Uzzah, and Manat "are but names . . . invented . . . vain conjectures . . . whims of [the unbelievers'] own souls."⁵ Every monotheism hews to its own divinely revealed truth by accusing other religions of being the work of the human imagination. Monotheists were the first religious skeptics. That's what the Quran's episode of the satanic verses is all about: fallible man created the goddesses, and the Prophet himself is fallible. With that, the Quran opens the way to parody. To explain the flawed Recitation, Salman Rushdie invents Salman the Persian, Mahound's scribe. As the tranced prophet repeats the verses he hears from the angel Gibreel, Salman writes them down but makes devilish

⁴ The Koran, "Pilgrimage" (22:52), trans. N. J. Dawood (New York: Penguin, 1974).

⁵ The Koran, "The Star" (53:22).

changes in the text because he suspects that Mahound climbs Mount Cone and induces an imaginary Gibreel to tell him what he wants to hear and then is a bit too distracted to remember exactly what he dictates to Salman. It is a reversal worthy of Blake's Isaiah: "I saw no God, nor heard any."

Rushdie, however, does not share Blake's apocalypticism. He has a novelist's eye for mundane dramas underneath the heroics. As Gibreel Farishta dreams Salman the Persian's travesties and betrayals, he himself becomes a paranoid angel whose demonic adversary is Saladin Chamcha. Saladin too is infected by angel-devil scenarios and blames his troubles on Gibreel, the cinematic angel whose stardom and erotic conquests mock him with everything he himself lacks. He hatches an Iago-like plot to drive Gibreel into a jealous frenzy against his lover Allie Cone (yes, Cone, whose 27,000-foot ascent of Mount Everest to see the face of God is reversed in Saladin and Gibreel's 27,000-foot fall from an exploding airliner into the living inferno and waking nightmare of the Thatcherite metropolis at the beginning of the novel).

There is indeed an apocalyptic conflagration, an urban riot in which both demonized immigrants and police provocateurs are the arsonists. Saladin's wife Pamela and her lover Jumpy Joshi perish. Gibreel walks through the fires of Brickhall blowing an angelic trumpet, convinced he is creating the flames, and he saves Saladin from a burning building: "so that on a night when the city is at war, a night heavy with enmity and rage, there is this small redeeming victory for love."⁶

That edifying, reassuring denouement is short-lived. To use Rushdie's beloved *Arabian Nights* idiom, *it was so and it was not*. A few months later, back in Bombay, Gibreel's Saladin-induced jealousy is still raging, and he murders Allie and kills himself. The small victory of love saves only Saladin—the false self, the coward, the evildoer. "In spite of all his wrongdoing, weakness, guilt—in spite of his humanity—he was getting another chance. There was no accounting for one's good fortune, that was plain."⁷ Reconciled with his dying father, inheriting a fortune, and reunited with his secret lover Zeenat Vakil, Saladin is led away from the final carnage by Zeenat, who is filled with dubious plans to reconcile him with India and transform him into a political activist. There the story stops.

"In spite of his humanity." Here we touch on the true mainspring of this novel. It took me more than one reading to see the centrality of the Saladin-Gibreel story and the puzzle posed by Saladin's survival. When *The Satanic*

⁶ *The Satanic Verses*, 468.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 547.

Verses was honored as the first selection of the Ayotollah's Book Club, the author was terrorized and vilified (and not only by Islamic fundamentalists), and the novel itself became the most famous unread book on the planet. Those who did read it were unavoidably preoccupied by the Mahound chapters. Blasphemy was denounced in the name of revealed truth, in the name of multicultural sensitivity, in the name of anti-ethnocentrism, and, implausibly, in the name of Marxism. Or it got an understandably muted defense on the grounds that the satirical romp through the Quran is Gibreel's dream and psychosis.

But the genius of this novel lies in the moral questioning that interweaves the Quranic parody and the mundane revenge tragedy. Rushdie tempers the apocalyptic possibilities of Blake's enlarged senses with Kant's enlarged mentality, the capacity "to put ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else."⁸ Or, more precisely, with the novelistic version of the enlarged mentality: the web of perspectives, identifications, and empathies by which the "standpoint of others" is made palpable—and more stubbornly plural and unreconciled than Kantian universalism would wish. Unlike the monotheist who rejects all other religions as mere human creations, the novelistic parodist—puncturing, inverting, desacralizing sacred texts—affirms a human-all-too-human creativity, including humanity's prodigious invention of its many gods, angelic voices and burning bushes, redeemers, miracles, and taboos.

Saladin's metamorphosis into a goat incarnates his dehumanization at the hands of immigration cops and so expresses, unambiguously, Rushdie's satirical social commentary on British racism, but Saladin recovers from his metamorphosis only when envy causes him to imagine that Gibreel is the source of all his suffering: "Mr Saladin Chamcha himself, apparently restored to his old shape, mother-naked but of entirely human aspect and proportions, *humanized*—is there any option but to conclude?—by the fearsome concentration of his hate."⁹ He is ready for revenge. Is his "falsity of self" the source of his evildoing?

No! Let's rather say an even harder thing: that evil may not be as far beneath our surfaces as we like to say it is.—That, in fact, we fall towards it *naturally*, that is, *not against our natures*.—And that Saladin Chamcha set out to destroy Gibreel Farishta because, finally, it proved easy to do; the true appeal

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1966), 140 (sec. 40).

⁹ *The Satanic Verses*, 294.

of being evil being the seductive ease with which one may embark upon that road.¹⁰

The brutalized being recovers his humanity in concentrated rage; suddenly humanized, he slides effortlessly into the banality of evil. Is our humanity forever caught in this vacillation? The novel asks that question in each of its intertwined tales. It asks it of Saladin and Gibreel, of the brutalized crowds that rise up in rage and burn their own neighbors, of prophets who conquer infidels, of visionaries large and small who dream of leading a revolt of the masses. The novel does not furnish an answer. It tries to make the question stick, most uncomfortably in the survival of Saladin, the story's least heroic character.

Salman Rushdie yokes together exuberant imagination and tragic realism as few other writers in our time. That is the form-giving innovation of his writing. To what does it give form? The answer lies I think in Rushdie's own cultural formation—a *Bildung* rare and yet resonant with the unsettled world of our time. Rushdie was brought up in the monotheism of Islam, but his imagination was quickened by the polytheism of Hinduism; he was torn from his beloved India by sectarianism and partition; ill-adapted to Pakistan, he adopted England to nurture his intellectual curiosity and artistic ambitions.

Monotheism and polytheism have ancient histories and modern avatars, East and West. Max Weber located the origins of capitalism in the ascetic monotheism of Protestantism and then saw the ultimate destiny of the West in the secular polytheism of our world of technical, economic, and bureaucratic rationalities, which dissolve all supreme values and leave only the plurality of human projects and aims. Rushdie's sensibility has traversed, is traversed by, the harsh monotheism and luxuriant polytheism of the Indian subcontinent and the profane polytheism of the West endlessly rocking between rationalism and nihilism: it is the experience of that unnamable reality that his novels shape and name.

Isn't *The Satanic Verses* an example of metafiction? And, if so, does that not make it quintessentially postmodernist? It is worth dissecting the term *metafiction* and the claim that it epitomizes postmodernism. Many American critics consider Thomas Pynchon the representative practitioner of

¹⁰ Ibid., 427.

metafiction. In keeping with the modernist/postmodernist plot, they define fictions-about-fiction as a final break with the suppositions of realism. Metafiction defamiliarizes all mimetic conventions and lays bare the devices of fiction-making.

Pynchon's solipsistic heroes vainly search for meaning in a world of paranoically total order and conspiratorial power, rendering the realist hero's quest absurd and debunking the modernist hero's rich inner life. The narrative whips back and forth between the hero's paranoia and the system's conspiracy until it reaches its comic-apocalyptic finale. According to such readings, *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Gravity's Rainbow* is a philosophical fable of fractured consciousness and totalitarian terror told as self-conscious fabulation. I find such readings persuasive, but I do not find the fable very compelling and therefore do not find Pynchon's novels themselves very persuasive.

There are two problems. The first comes to light in Pynchon's readers themselves. What they claim to value, even identify with, is the Pynchonesque hero's inability to secure a grasp of himself or of the sinister world that keeps undoing his search for meaning, identity, knowledge—and that is clearly the theme of the novels. But the enjoyment that his most avid readers exhibit demonstrates just the opposite: the novels furnish the initiate with a completely ordered view and encyclopedic knowledge of the world of the novels themselves. Pynchon readers are fans; the novels are the arcane but unmysterious knowledge of a literary lodge. Hence the second problem. What makes Pynchon's novels unpersuasive to anyone except a fan is that their diagnosis of our society and culture is very thin. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, the historical and social references are potentially rich: Los Angeles and Southern California, real estate speculation, the new partnership of science and capital, right-wing extremism, Hollywood, suburbia, and the automobile and freeways. And yet the themes of solipsism and paranoia are not enough to organize all these elements into a social commentary.

But is it a social commentary? Am I not responding to the novel's social content rather than its metafictionality? Am I not looking for referentiality instead of textual reflexivity? Yes. But not because I am misreading the text. I want now to turn the tables on the theorists of metafiction by reclassifying Pynchon's writing. Consider its stylistic features: an improbable premise enabling satirical commentary, learnedness, the oscillation between lyrical and grotesque, philosophical and scatological styles, the heterogeneity of social types, lists and inventories, the stylized voice (drugged, frenetic, parodic), the juxtaposition of different types of discourse. *The Crying of Lot 49* and

Gravity's Rainbow are instances of Menippean satire, the genre that, as Bakhtin and Northrop Frye have both shown, has accompanied the main lines of development of the novel at least since *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Tristram Shandy*. Thomas Pynchon writes Menippean satire, bad Menippean satire.

I am not making this genre argument just to badmouth Pynchon. By reclassifying his writing we can see the resemblance to other Menippean satirists, many of whom he has influenced. For Menippean satire is a significant trend in contemporary writing. Among its most effective practitioners are Günter Grass, Orhan Pamuk, and Salman Rushdie. Rushdie pays homage in *The Satanic Verses* to one of the ancient originators of the form, Apuleius, "Moroccan priest, AD 120–180 approx., colonial of an earlier Empire,"¹¹ whose *Golden Ass* furnishes the model for Saladin's transformation into a goat. Rushdie and others succeed where Pynchon fails precisely because of the relevance and depth of *their* social diagnoses. The Menippean satire is a mode of social commentary, not pure metatextuality. Pynchon's philosophical preoccupations are part of the form's tendency to present, in Frye's words, "a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern." Though paranoia is a single intellectual pattern par excellence, it is insufficient to the task of diagnosing American society.

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, introduces the hybrid category of "historiographic metafiction" with reference to E. L. Doctorow and others in an effort to link metafictional reflexivity and political consciousness. Her effort draws too close a connection between politics and parodic mimesis-breaking devices, as though the disruption of literary conventions were intrinsically a challenge to inequalities of gender, race, and class. The axiom that literary experiment and radical political consciousness are organically linked is an avant-gardist inheritance. The programmatic ambitions of the historical avant-gardes and Russian Formalism's fertile idea of defamiliarization have bequeathed to criticism the assumption that the innovative artwork makes a radical break with previous art, ideally with all previous art. This assumption has exhausted its critical power. The fatigue shows in critics' repetitive use of words like *rupture*, *disruption*, *deconstruction*, *undoing*, *dismantling*, and *overturning* to describe all manner of stylistic trends.

When contemporary criticism equates innovation with form-breaking, it typically projects, as in its characterization of nineteenth-century realism, a caricature of the forms supposedly being broken (unified text, monologism, stable mimesis, integrated consciousness, and so on). However, innovation

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

is not in essence form-breaking, because innovative artworks are form-making and actively create conventions. Startling formal inventions can seldom be explained by their break with literary tradition or assault on readers' expectations.

In a penetrating analysis of *Ulysses*, Franco Moretti shows in *Modern Epic* that Joyce's innovation of stream-of-consciousness was neither the first nor most radical attempt among writers of the period, but it is the one that survives. "And it survives because the selection process does not reward novelty as such . . . , but *novelty that is able to solve problems*. Moving beyond the horizon of expectations of the period, in itself, is of little interest. Constructing a new perceptual and symbolic horizon: this is indeed a comprehensible undertaking, and one with clear social value."¹² Every formal invention in Moretti's account is a cluster of existential, formal, and historical imperatives and possibilities that the writer wrings into a stylistic transformation. Its actual effects on readers and writers are in turn affected by later literary and social history. Nothing in Bürger's idea of modernism as institutionalization or in Lyotard's of postmodernism as unrepresentability and dissension approaches the subtlety of such an analysis.

Add to this the fact that novelistic innovation is not always a matter of formal invention. Novelists also resuscitate older forms, as with Menippean satire in Grass, Rushdie, and Pamuk, and infuse them with new intentions. Milan Kundera develops the persuasive thesis in *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed* that several twentieth-century innovators—Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz, and, today, Fuentes, Rushdie, and himself—reach back to the novel before the nineteenth century and find in Cervantes, Rabelais, Sterne, and Diderot formal and technical possibilities that answer to their own imperatives in a way the aesthetic of the nineteenth-century realists could not. "The point of this rehabilitation . . . is not a return to this or that retro style; nor is it a simple-minded rejection of the nineteenth-century novel; the point of the rehabilitation is more general: to *redefine* and *broaden* the very notion of the novel; to resist the *reduction* worked by the nineteenth century's aesthetic of the novel; to give the novel its *entire* historical experience for a grounding."¹³

Kundera's account of the spiraling history of the novel provides a rich alternative to the idea that twentieth-century literature is a series of breaks

¹² Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Verso, 1996), 178.

¹³ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 75.

with tradition or that it was innovative only in its avant-gardist moments. He also eschews the modernist/postmodernist plot, breaching the great divide by identifying a continuity that runs from Kafka to Rushdie, while leaving open the inquiry into other strands that would bring out other continuities and conflicts in the 'past century of the novel. Such an inquiry rejects the search for a single principle of artistic innovation or a single aesthetic that would be the cipher of society as a whole.

Once innovation in the novel is seen to include both formal innovations and renovated forms, the concept of innovation no longer fits the avant-gardist and formalist account of making-it-new. Nonetheless, there is experimental fiction, and this strand too has to be included in any account of the history and aesthetics of novelistic innovation. Moreover, there is no doubt that newness is an intrinsic part of modern aesthetic experience. To rethink what newness is requires, then, a conception that will include formal invention, renovation, and experiment—and at the same time recognize the persistence of the realist imperative.

Innovations produced by experimental fiction profoundly influence the development of the novel without necessarily being part of vanguard political-artistic movements and without constituting *the* source or epitome of innovation. Without Borges, Beckett, Cortázar, and Calvino the contemporary novel would not be what it is. Their experimentalism does not reject or break with novelistic traditions so much as it interrogates them. These writers analyze the art of the novel novelistically, probing its techniques, means of representation, and forms.

Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, published in 1958, the same year as *The Unnamable*, contains thirteen short texts each of which limns the outer boundary of some aspect of storytelling. In "Text for Nothing 4," it is the relation of author and character that Beckett x-rays. Creating characters is so essential to making a novel that it might define the genre, as it does for Kundera: "NOVEL. The great prose form in which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some great themes of existence."¹⁴ Although the methods of creating character are infinite (at least in the sense that, historically speaking, they have not yet proved to be finite), the process seems to oscillate between two poles. Novelists sometimes stress

¹⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 142.

a sense of identification—as when Flaubert says, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi"—as though the writer's own subjectivity "goes into" the making of a character. At other times writers testify that their characters are hardly known to them until the novel takes shape or that characters acquire a "will of their own" in the course of the writing, as though their acts and speech emanate from within themselves.

Identification and estrangement, projection and autonomy—Beckett's experimental text exposes this oscillation by reversing the relation between author and character. The nameless first-person narrator denounces the author's invention of him. The author is reduced to *he*, like a third-person character, while the character, in the role of the speaking *I*, protests, "If at least he would dignify me with the third person, like his other figments":

Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me? Answer simply, someone answer simply. It's the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist, in the pit of my inexistence, of his, of ours, there's a simple answer. It's not with thinking he'll find me, but what is he to do, living and bewildered, yes, living, say what he may. Forget me, know me not, yes, that would be the wisest, none better able than he. Why this sudden affability after such desertion, it's easy to understand, that's what he says, but he doesn't understand. I'm not in his head, nowhere in his old body, and yet I'm there, for him I'm there, with him, hence all the confusion. That should have been enough for him, to have found me absent, but it's not, he wants me there, with a form and a world, like him, in spite of him, me who am everything, like him who is nothing. And when he feels me void of existence it's of his he would have me void, and vice versa, mad, mad, he's mad. . . . He thinks words fail him, he thinks because words fail him he's on his way to my speechlessness, to being speechless with my speechlessness, he would like it to be my fault that words fail him. He tells his story every five minutes, saying it is not his, there's cleverness for you. He would like it to be my fault that he has no story, of course he has no story, that's no reason for trying to foist one on me.¹⁵

Identification ("he wants me there, with a form and a world, like him . . ."). *Estrangement* ("It's the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist, in the pit of my inexistence . . ."). *Projection* ("He would like it to be my fault that he has no story . . ."). *Autonomy* ("Forget me, know me not, yes, that would be the wisest").

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 91–92.

To reveal these contradictory moments inherent in creating character, Beckett experiments with the linguistic possibilities latent in what structuralism called “shifters.” “He wants me there”: *me* refers to the object of the action in the *énoncé* (the narrated event) but at the same time indicates the subject of the *énonciation* (the speech event), while *he* refers to the subject of the *énoncé* but is an object of the *énonciation*. The shifters keep straight the relation between the speaker and everyone else in the tale. Literary convention permits us to respond to a first-person narrator *as though* (that is why it is a convention) he chooses his own words while we remain perfectly aware that the actual subject of the linguistic act is the author. By twisting the narrator-writer relation one more turn, making the narrator the writer and the writer the character, Beckett does not deconstruct this literary artifice so much as exploit its ability to disclose the emptiness around which his own novels churn: the writer’s desire for his own project to wear itself out in speechlessness is endlessly thwarted, while the characters—who are without being or speech—keep speaking and existing.

In Beckett’s aesthetic, words and figments deconceal a void they cannot stop concealing in words and figments; the sense of predicament is made to pervade the elemental workings of language and storytelling. This aesthetic has influenced novelists as diverse as Carlos Fuentes and Paul Auster, Kazuo Ishiguro and Raymond Carver, without creating imitators. Therein lies the rich, twofold legacy of experimental fiction: it brings to light means and techniques of expression that prove indispensable to other novelists’ work, while challenging those novelists’ most intimate relation to the practice of writing.

Borges, Cortázar, and Calvino have similarly stirred wonder and alarm in the world of literature. Borges’s mastery of textual paradox is well known, but just as significant perhaps is his fascination with the labyrinth as a metaphor for the workings of narrative; allusions to the Arab world abound in his stories, and he takes the intertwining structure of *The Thousand and One Nights* as a model for his minimalist marvels. The arabesque structure also organizes Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, a novel of permuting stories that is at the same time a work of narrative theory as playful as Roland Barthes’s *S/Z*. Cortázar, like Beckett, picks up his linguistic needle and treads the story line back through itself, as in “The Night Face Up,” the story of a man knocked unconscious in a motorcycle accident who awakes from surgery having dreamed he is an ancient Indian hunted down for sacrifice only to discover that he is in fact lying on the sacrificial altar and “that the marvelous dream had been the other, absurd as all dreams are—a dream in which he was going through the strange avenues of an astonishing city,

with green and red lights that burned without fire or smoke, on an enormous metal insect that whirred away between his legs.”¹⁶ It is not hard to imagine how the narrative labyrinths of Borges and Calvino or the oneiric loop-the-loop of Cortázar might well have found their way to Rushdie’s gargantuan satirical arabesque.

I couched my description of Beckett’s prose in structuralist terms, not because they necessarily provide the best linguistic account, but rather because of the affinity between structuralism and literary experiment. Since early in the twentieth century, writers and theorists alike have discovered ways of alienating language—creatively as well as analytically—from its embeddedness in everyday speech and social discourses. The connection was overt in the case of Russian formalism and the early avant-gardes and, later, with Barthes and the *nouveau roman*. Leaving aside Bakhtin’s formidable challenge to structuralist procedure, the very capacity to alienate *langage* into *langue* is a definitive achievement of twentieth-century thought and literature. It is an enabling alienation. Formalism is an intrinsic possibility of twentieth-century literature, linguistics, and criticism.

Having said that, I do not think that formalism can explain formalism. The estrangement of language from its concrete uses is the continuation of a process inaugurated in Western culture as far back as the Renaissance, namely, the separation of artistic materials and techniques from their birthplace in ritual and religion and their foster home in theology and metaphysics. T. W. Adorno, elaborating on Max Weber, called this complex tendency “aesthetic rationality.” I stress that it is a tendency because it was not a punctual event historically and, more important, is ongoing, first, because the artistic process never fully separates itself from nonartistic imperatives and, second, because every realized artwork sets itself back into the heterogeneous world from which its creation separated it. Beckett’s work underscores this last point: his writing alienates the techniques of storytelling to an extreme, not in order to produce a pure form but to interrogate the being and the void of literary creativity.

Modernity is the vexing term behind the debate over postmodernism. As much as the debate has enlivened philosophy and social theory since the mid-1980s, it bogs down in efforts to define modernity by means of some intrinsic

¹⁶ Julio Cortázar, *End of the Game and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 76.

norm or substantive characteristic. There is irony in this, since almost all parties to the debate begin with the idea that modernity is postmetaphysical culture in the sense that modern society does not cohere through some shared mythology or religion as premodern societies do. Modernity is a world without an essence.

In 1915, Georg Lukács introduced *The Theory of the Novel* with a poignant description of the distance between the worlds of modern Europeans and ancient Greeks:

The circle whose closed nature was the transcendental essence of their life has, for us, been broken; we cannot breathe in a closed world. We have invented the productivity of the spirit: that is why the primaeval images have irrevocably lost their objective self-evidence for us, and our thinking follows the endless path of an approximation that is never fully accomplished. We have invented the creation of forms: and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete. . . .

Our world has become infinitely large and each of its corners is richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks, but such wealth cancels out the positive meaning—the totality—upon which their life was based.¹⁷

Lukács took Greek culture as the counterpoint to modernity, following a tradition of enlightened German thought that runs from Goethe and Schiller to Weber and Freud, in order specifically to account for the fact that the modern novel inherits its form from ancient epic but at the same time creates form in a no longer “rounded world.”¹⁸ Lukács interprets modern aesthetic rationality in these postmetaphysical terms: “Art . . . has thus become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models are gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed.”¹⁹ He then advances the thesis that has resonated in novel theory ever since: “The novel form is, like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness. . . . The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God.”²⁰

Lukács soon turned away from the consequences of nihilism originally explored in *The Theory of the Novel*, saying later that the book “was written

¹⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 33–34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41, 88.

[in 1914–15] in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world.”²¹ The October Revolution dissipated that despair in 1917. Marxism furnished Lukács with a new interpretation of modernity: capitalism is but the first phase of the modern productivity of the spirit, creating unlimited wealth with its means of production and at the same time alienating and impoverishing man with its relations of production. And Leninism furnished him with a substitute for the lost metaphysical roundness: proletarian class-consciousness, imputed to the masses but firmly possessed by the Leninist party, is a standpoint from which society in its alienated totality can be known and its transformation into a new, integrated whole envisioned. Armed with an ideology to replace myth and religion, Lukács then reread novelistic realism: the novel’s artistically created totality does reflect the world’s totality, like ancient epic, while transcendence, in the modern guise of utopian expectation, resides in the Future rather than with the gods. For this later Lukács, the novel’s cognitive mapping is the hedge against nihilism.

I am a partisan of the early Lukács. The despair that motivated him to write *The Theory of the Novel* does not attenuate his insights. On the contrary, it enabled him to begin thinking through the relation between nihilism and the aesthetics of the novel. Since modern society lacks myth, religion, or theology to bind its members together, since it leaves values and ideals to the individual’s inner psychological world, the outside world is unable “to find either the form of a totality for itself as a whole, or any form of coherence for its own relationship to its elements and their relationship to one another: in other words, *the outside world cannot be represented*. Both the parts and the whole of such an outside world defy any forms of directly sensuous representation.”²² Lacking intrinsic meanings and purposes, the social totality cannot be represented in its human dimension; it does, to be sure, attain lifeless representation in the empirical and statistical discourse of the social sciences, which, as Lukács learned from Max Weber, separate fact from value. But how can the parts and whole of outside reality attain a living human representation? How can they be represented “sensuously,” that is, artistically, in image and story? “They acquire life only when they can be related either to the life-experiencing interiority of the individual lost in their labyrinth, or to the observing and creative eye of the artist’s subjectivity: when they become objects of mood or reflexion.”²³ Romanticism epitomized

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*, 79 (my emphasis).

²³ *Ibid.*

the latter course; the novel realized the former. The outside world is made apparent in novelistic representation, according to Lukács, only in the jagged, contradictory, contrapuntual resistances that the protagonist encounters as he attempts to realize his own meanings and purposes. The "inner form of the novel" allows social reality to be, to use one of his favorite words, *glimpsed*. The novel is not a cipher, mirror, or cognitive map of totality. *The outside world cannot be represented*. That is why we have novels.

The novel's inner form belongs to the nihilism of modernity. The later Lukács looked to Marxism to overcome nihilism; the early Lukács faced nihilism, but he approached it in nostalgic counterpoint to Greek antiquity. Is it possible to face nihilism without looking to overcome it? to understand it without nostalgia for a lost world of meaning and purpose? to interpret the nihilism of modern culture as something to be embraced in philosophy and politics, not transcended?

I am going to suggest the direction of that effort by taking up a few themes in Heidegger that are relevant to aesthetic innovation in the novel, beginning with how he rethinks what newness is in art. Heidegger makes a breakthrough in aesthetic theory when he shifts the focus away from form in itself in accounting for the demand for newness implicit in aesthetic judgment. Kant inaugurated modern aesthetics by arguing that the judgment "this is beautiful" does not result from measuring an artwork's form against an existing standard; on the contrary, we always have to derive the "rule"—what makes this beautiful—from the particular artwork. The beautiful appears unexpectedly, gratuitously, unprecedentedly. Heidegger rethinks the origin of this unprecedentedness. He attributes it to the power of the artwork to make an "entity" present for the first time, to show the hitherto concealed "truth" of a being. The artwork is an event rather than mere form or representation. The god in ancient Athens does not exist before it is made present in the temple hewn from stone. The truth of the peasant's shoes, the essence of their usefulness in the world and experience of the peasant, comes into being only in Van Gogh's painting. Restated in less grand terms, the artwork lets something appear—lets something be seen, heard, told—for the first time.

An aesthetic judgment that intrinsically demands newness is a decidedly modern experience, yet Heidegger's elegant examples in "The Origin of the Work of Art" conjure up premodern worlds: the ancient dwellings of the

gods, the rounded world of the peasant.²⁴ What is behind Heidegger's hesitation? Gianni Vattimo sheds light on this question. According to him, there is an ambivalence in Heidegger's project of overcoming metaphysics and of understanding Being without recourse to some transcendental realm where Being (Platonic Ideas, God, Supreme Values) resides. On the one hand, this task seems to go against the grain of modern nihilism, which for Heidegger stems from modern technology's "reduction of Being to values"²⁵ as it turns the earth and human beings themselves—that is, the whole of beings—into material for production and objects of calculation. Here Heidegger associates modernity and technology with metaphysics, Man's long-standing endeavor to reduce Being to a being (in the sense, for example, that theology reduces Being to the entity God the Father or the Creator). On the other hand, the nihilism of technology seems to be the "planetary event" that, like Heidegger's own philosophical project, *is* overcoming metaphysics, which is why, Vattimo argues, the later Heidegger keeps looking for a way to distinguish techno-calculative thinking from the philosopher's "meditative" thinking and yet not set them in antagonistic opposition to one another.

Giving a Marxian twist to Heidegger, Vattimo says that nihilism is "the reduction of Being to exchange-value";²⁶ then, giving a Heideggerian twist to Marx, he says that this reduction cannot be reversed: the dream of revolutionizing society into a realm of use-values and unalienated labor is mythic. Philosophy's new bearings must, Vattimo argues, give up the desire to rescue Being from its dissolution in exchange-values. Nihilism "reaches its extreme form . . . by consuming Being in value. This is the event that finally makes it possible, and necessary, for philosophy today to recognize that nihilism is our (only) chance."²⁷

Novelists long ago jumped into the abyss where philosophers hesitated to leap. Kundera suggests that Heidegger missed something in not seeing that "the founder of the Modern Era is not only Descartes," who initiated modern philosophy's "forgetting of Being," but also Cervantes, "with [whom] a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being." And precisely as regards the "great existential themes

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 17–87.

²⁵ Gianni Vattimo, "An Apology for Nihilism," in *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

Heidegger analyzes in *Being and Time*—considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy,”

with Cervantes and his contemporaries, [the novel] inquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine “what happens inside,” to unmask the secret life of feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man’s rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explores the *terra* previously *incognita* of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it focuses on the intrusion of the irrational in human behavior and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions. Et cetera. Et cetera.²⁸

Kundera in effect turns the theme of the “forgetting of Being (*Sein*)” against the later Heidegger’s anti-Humanism, loaded up as it is with listening for the footstep of the disappearing gods, and takes it back to Heidegger’s earlier analysis of *Dasein* (human existence) to affirm the pluralistic lowercase humanism and messy individualism of the novel.

Earlier I hijacked Heidegger’s idiom in saying that the aesthetic of Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* lies in the venturing of words and figments to deconceal the void they conceal. Beckett pushes Heideggerian aesthetics farther than Heidegger himself. Heidegger wrenches a premodern, perhaps anti-modern attitude from his own radically modern aesthetics. In the Van Gogh interpretation, the painting deconceals the truth of “equipment,” that is, the pure use-value of the peasant’s shoes as they bind the rural lifeworld to the earth it husbands. (I note in passing the marvelous deflation of this interpretation by the art historian Meyer Schapiro, who demonstrates that the painter was actually portraying his own very urban boots lying on the floor of his Parisian studio!) Heidegger values modern art insofar as it reappropriates the fading echoes of a meaning-endowed World. In the same vein, his extraordinary interpretation of Hölderlin and Rilke puts poetry outside the reduction of Being to exchange-value: “Their song does not solicit anything to be produced.”²⁹

Things are different with the novel. The novel in its origins is liberated from the expectation that a meaning-imbued world could inspire and nourish its form-making, yet its primary imperative is to refer to the world, render

²⁸ Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 4–5.

²⁹ Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 138.

it artistically, represent it sensuously (according to the various idioms of modern aesthetics).

Moreover, its very coming into the world is attended by a nihilistic midwife. The novel is commodity form and artistic form wrapped in one, the first type of artwork in which the object the artist creates (the novel) is indissociable from the object manufactured to be sold (the book). In making that argument about “print capitalism” in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson shows, though it is probably not his exact intention, how the novel confounds the use-value/exchange-value distinction developed by Marx and implicit in Heidegger.³⁰ The novel enters the world as “use-value” and “exchange-value” at the same time. Its public always manifests itself at once as a readership and a market. Its aesthetic validity cannot therefore lie purely in negating exchange-value, since “the reduction of Being to exchange-value” enables the creation of the artistic form itself. The art of the novel is not some pure countermovement to nihilism and reification, which helps explain the antipathy toward the whole genre shared by Heidegger, Adorno, and the historical avant-gardes.

The novel thrives on the impurity of its forms. And as the scope of Beckett’s influence—extending to minimalists and Menippeans, postcolonial fabulators and trailer-park realists—attests, the novel also thrives on the plurality of its practitioners’ lifeworlds and intentions. Impure forms and plural uses do not sit well with fundamental ontology, or neo-Marxism. Heidegger and Adorno both cast the poet’s purposes as *in essence* at odds with the engineer’s, the scientist’s, and the entrepreneur’s. Peter Sloterdijk knocks the props from under this philosophical distinction. Starting from the claim that “everyone today can easily observe the increasing role of the artificial in the existential universes of modern times,” he argues that the philosophical tradition has always been unsettled by the artificial, because “one cannot say in a language of Being what machines, sign-systems, and artworks are ‘by nature.’ It seems to be in their nature to break with what nature typically is.”³¹ From this perspective, “inventors, artists, and entrepreneurs” share in the spirit of modernity; their projects are “an unwinding of the void.”³² “Nature and Being have lost their ontological monopoly: they have found themselves

³⁰ Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), 37 ff.

³¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *L’heure du crime et le temps de l’oeuvre d’art*, trans. Olivier Mannoni (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2000), 29–30. (I have translated from this French translation of Sloterdijk’s German text.)

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

challenged and replaced by a series of artificial creations coming from the void and by the emergence of a postnatural world issuing from the will. . . . Nihilism, as known to us now, represents but the flip-side of creativity and the faculty of willing—and what modernity would accept being denied its birthright to a creative life and projects born of the will?”³³

Contemporary thought keeps returning to the nihilism of modernity, perhaps because its “essence” must forever escape our grasp. I have returned to Lukács’s theory of the novel ninety years later because it captures better than most later theories the relation between innovation and nihilism in the novel. Kundera returns to the early Heidegger to affirm that novelistic explorations of human existence embody the “wisdom of uncertainty” better than philosophy does; Sloterdijk and Vattimo return to the later Heidegger in search of an “accomplished nihilism” that can assert values without needing a supreme value and judge meanings without hearing the voice of God. In a sense, we keep reinventing the wheel that Max Weber invented a little before Lukács and Heidegger, with tools supplied by Nietzsche: modernity inaugurates a world of projects without a metaphysical compass, a world at once nihilistic and polytheistic. “The strength of permanent modernity,” writes Sloterdijk, “lies in the impossibility of exhausting the void.”³⁴

How, then, do we understand innovation in the novel? The modern aesthetic imperative to innovate seems to combine two forces that are difficult to distinguish except hypothetically: on the one hand, innovation is art as will-to-power (making-it-new, a project, the unwinding of the void); on the other hand, innovation is a crisis-ridden search for the means of expressing the relentlessly changing reality of a world devoid of meaning (exploration, experiment, glimpse, deconcealing). My refusal to privilege any one aspect of novelistic innovation—formal invention, the rediscovery of early forms, or experimental writing—is meant to acknowledge this perpetual ambivalence in the source of innovation. Aesthetic judgment—valuation—cannot rely on the newness of forms as such because their newness can only be judged in relation to what it is they “glimpse” or “deconceal.” Nor can aesthetic judgment and criticism anchor in the supposition that genuine art is inherently antagonistic to technology, reification, or commodification; the novel befuddles the very attempt to separate artistic value and exchange-

³³ Ibid., 36–37.

³⁴ Ibid., 40.

value because its artistic form *is* its commodity form, its readership *is* a market.

Literary criticism has to learn to pursue all its essential activities—understanding, judging, and valuing—without a metaphysical compass. Historical analysis and social criticism face a similar predicament. Two images come to mind to suggest what is at stake. The first involves the stars, the second junk.

“Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars.”³⁵ Thus begins Lukács’s meditation on the rounded world of the ancients. We too have the stars, but our scientific knowledge contradicts, and alters, our perception of them; the stars are not simultaneous in the sky, since the lights arriving to our eyes come from stars “separated by incalculable epochs.”³⁶ This image is the basis of the extraordinary passage with which Carlos Fuentes concludes *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. The passage I am about to quote is in the second person—you is Artemio Cruz. Who is speaking? The voice is indeterminately the protagonist’s own conscience, the author’s sometimes aggressive taunting of his protagonist, and the lost voice of the individuals and masses whom the protagonist has crushed in his relentless pursuit of power. The amalgamated voice addresses Artemio Cruz, the seventy-year-old man lying on his deathbed and the adventurous thirteen-year-old boy staring at the sky six decades earlier:

The light you view is ancient, not that which in the now of star-time is racing away from the star: you have baptized the star with your stare. Dead in origin, it will still be alive in your eyes. Lost, calcined, fountain of light that now has no place of birth yet will nevertheless go on traveling toward the eyes of a boy who will live in the night of a different time, another time. Time that fills itself with vitality, with actions, ideas, but that remains always the inexorable flux between the past’s first landmark and the future’s last signpost. Time that will exist only in the reconstruction of isolated memory, in the flight of isolated desire. Time that, once it loses the opportunity to live, is forever wasted.³⁷

What makes this image of temporality pertinent to our reflection is that it is a condensation of Fuentes’ novel’s entire structure. The significant chapters

³⁵ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 29.

³⁶ Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, trans. Sam Hileman (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964), 302.

³⁷ Ibid., 302–3.

in Artemio Cruz's life are told in extended third-person narratives, each titled by the date of the central episode and presented out of chronological order (1941: July 6; 1919: May 26; 1913: December 4; 1924: June 3; etc.). In chronological order, they narrate an individual life that stays in step with each political victor in twentieth-century Mexican history; in their achronological order, they ramify the second-person fragments of "conscience" and first-person fragments of the dying man's final interior monologue. This structuring principle transforms the linear history of modern Mexico into a fractured star-time whose separated moments reach the corrupt old man as though simultaneously; conversely, it transforms the man's dying self-perception into the continual echo of all those who were defeated and lost in the ruling party's rise to total power and illegitimate wealth. The novel finds form without the guidance of the starry sky's constellations. Rather, the "inexorable flux" of memory and desire gives the novel its form—and at the same time its force as social commentary.

The second image is of junk. Sloterdijk likens our attempt to understand contemporary history to contemplating a metropolis today: the city is a site of ceaseless inventions, projects, investments, and at the same time it is layer upon layer of the ambiguous achievements, detritus, and garbage of past projects. History cannot be deciphered via any of the metaphysical schemes: not by the discredited myths of progress, rationalist or avant-gardist; not by Schelling's reassuring idea that everything that exists bears witness to past human freedom; not by the utopian expectation that the new society is gestating in the womb of the old; not by the hope of mastering the creativity-nihilism of modernity. Historical understanding and social criticism have to peer into the present's stratified temporality and judge what to save in the midst of the relentless launching of new, unmasterable projects.

So, junk and the stars—both images suggest the nihilism and polytheism of the modern world, a world made of creativity and debris, an unsheltered world unguided by transcendent values. These images also suggest that human history is unmastered time, indeed the temporality of nonmastery. Once again my argument has spiraled back to the early Lukács, for was not *that*—the temporality of nonmastery—his very definition of the novel? He came to see it as his untenable despair; we are beginning to see it as our only chance.

Important as the philosophical reflection on modernity is, it is not sufficient to explain modernity. Modernity as nihilism has to be matched by another, more historical and sociological sense of modernity. The empirical face of

modernity is *modernization*, and its salient features can be readily identified: industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of the masses. The concept of modernity will lapse back into fruitless abstraction unless we recognize that there is no model modernity. Modernization has befallen and transformed Nigeria and Mexico, France and Russia, Indonesia and China, but they do not experience modernity in the same way. The economic-political regime that directs—or forces—modernization has historically been as varied as liberal capitalism, state-socialism, Western colonialism, and communist imperialism, and today includes postcolonial democracies and dictatorships, postcommunist nationalisms, and even Islamic fundamentalism. Yet almost inevitably the novel emerges in this process as an important literary genre, responding to the experience of crisis and transformation. The challenge faced by novel theory is to establish a cogent, open field of inquiry into *comparative modernities*.

Consider Fuentes and Chinua Achebe. Measured by their impact on the literature of their respective continents and on world literature, they are unquestionably innovators in the contemporary novel. And yet *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1962 and 1958, respectively, cannot possibly be lumped together as regards their style, form, or purpose. Add to this, if evidence is still needed that the modernist/postmodernist plot falsifies the history of twentieth-century fiction, the fact that 1958 also saw the appearance of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* and *The Unnamable* and the American publication of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Achebe does not, like Fuentes, draw lessons from Joyce and Faulkner; he shares none of Beckett's or Nabokov's textual playfulness. What then makes *Things Fall Apart* such an extraordinary achievement? Paul Valéry gave a succinct formula for the goal of criticism: "to discover which problem the author posed himself (knowingly or not) and to find whether he solved it or not." So, what problem does Achebe pose for himself?

He sets out to chronicle how the Igbo people and their culture underwent the inaugural catastrophe of colonization with the arrival of British missionaries, armed forces, and administrators. His chronicle has to be written against the grain of British chronicles. At the very end of the story, Achebe signals, with restrained irony, his work's contentiousness: the District Commissioner intends to write a memoir, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, and chronicle—"Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. . . . One must be firm in cutting out details"³⁸—the curious story of Okonkwo's suicide. As Achebe explains in

³⁸ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 148.

the recently published lectures *Home and Exile*, he wrote his novel against the massive tradition of British literature on Africa, exemplified for him by Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, which happened to be the school assignment that prompted him and his classmates to their first intellectual rebellion against falsehoods about their own people. As a "beginning of the reclamation of the African story,"³⁹ *Things Fall Apart* wryly avoids direct encounter with Europe's storytellers; instead, the colonizers' garrulousness is boiled to the District Commissioner's one ignorant paragraph about the rich and tragic story the reader has just finished.

To create that story Achebe, like every historical novelist, faces the problem of reconstructing a world and experience he knows only indirectly. His distance and bond have a specific shape. In *Home and Exile* he tells of his family's return in 1935, when he was five, to his father's native town of Ogidi; a Christian convert and missionary, the father had left in 1904. Achebe recalls the many "conversations and disagreements" during visits from his father's friends and largely non-Christian family, from which "I learned much of what I know and have come to value about my history and culture," including the traditional society's cosmology and gods.⁴⁰ Okonkwo, the tragic protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, belongs to Achebe's grandfather's or great-grandfather's generation, while the story of Okonkwo's son Nwoye has the broad outlines of Achebe's own father's religious conversion and estrangement from the cosmological patrimony. The young novelist bridges the historical gap by melding narrative forms that no one before him had imagined could be put together: the wisdom narratives of African proverbs and folktales; the story line of Greek tragedy; the discourse of Western ethnography; and the psychological realism of a son's rejection of his father's world.

The ethnographic discourse reflects, I think, Achebe's own estrangement (by religion, schooling, and language) from the ancestral world of sixty or seventy years before, yet it also enables him to explore and convey the life-world of the Igbo, the fabric of their practices—farm and household, bride bargaining and marriage, meals and medicines, oracles and ceremonies, meetings and markets—all of which are told in the ethnographer's mixed idiom of observer and participant. For example: "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to

³⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors."⁴¹

Beyond ethnographic recording, Achebe uses the grammar of Igbo practices and symbols as the expressive vehicle of his psychological realism. Okonkwo's inner life is explored in the community's proverbial and sacred languages. For example: "He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on to a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation."⁴² All the actions that determine Okonkwo's destiny are likewise endowed with significance in the clan's symbolic world; they are offenses against the Mother Earth: he kills Ikemefuna, the young captive whom he has raised as a son, even though warned not to participate in the oracle-mandated sacrifice; he beats his wife during the Week of Peace; his gun explodes during Ezeudu's funeral, killing the dead man's son; and his own suicide is "an abomination . . . an offence against the Earth"⁴³ that prevents his burial.

Like the heroes of Greek tragedy, Okonkwo overvalues an essential communal value; his hard-earned masculinity as a wrestler, warrior, and farmer—intensified by the fear of being like his weak and lazy father—drives him to devalue and ultimately violate the clan's equally important feminine values. His fate, in that sense, is fully comprehended within his people's cosmology. But the rounded world of the villages of Umuofia faces another kind of force and violence that their symbolic order cannot comprehend—"the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The white man's courthouse and church tear at the communal fabric, until Okonkwo, shaken by his son's conversion and humiliated after he and five other leaders are taken before the District Commissioner's tribunal in handcuffs, finally rises up in rage and beheads the Commissioner's messenger. His action is questioned by the others, and Okonkwo, now knowing his clan "would not go to war,"⁴⁴ hangs himself.

Though Okonkwo has the role of ancient tragic hero, his actions propel his son Nwoye into living a modern drama. In Nwoye's eyes, the killing of Ikemefuna, who had become his closest companion and brother, remains

⁴¹ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 85.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

incomprehensible. He does not find help in interpreting it through the communal cosmology, but suffers it as a wounding alienation: "As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something gave way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow."⁴⁵ It reminds him of the chill he felt when he "heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest."⁴⁶ When the missionaries first approach the people of Umuofia, the father laughs off "the mad logic of the Trinity,"⁴⁷ but the son is attracted to the new stories and symbols because they give meaning to his own inexplicable wound: "The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul."⁴⁸ Nwoye soon joins the missionaries, and Okonkwo repudiates him.

Nwoye embodies the looming dissolution. In the words of one of the leaders, "All our gods are weeping. . . . Our dead fathers are weeping. . . . The sons of Umuofia . . . have broken the clan and gone their several ways."⁴⁹ Nwoye is also the figure in the story who links the writer—symbolically and autobiographically—to the broken history of the Igbo. Achebe honors the son's rebellion and at the same time exposes his complicity in the devastation. The novelist's vision of reality holds the two stories in one. "There is no story that is not true," says one of the characters reflecting on a murky old tale of "albinos" massacring a village in revenge for a killing. "The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination among others."⁵⁰

The aesthetic value of *Things Fall Apart* lies in its artistic solution to the problem it poses itself: to affirm Okonkwo's story and Nwoye's, without letting either one negate the other, in order to bestow their contrary truths on "the reclamation of the story of Africa." The emergence of the Nigerian novel on the eve of independence gave Achebe's artistic achievement its moral-political value as well; *Things Fall Apart* expressed how a people divided against themselves by their forced march into modernity might gather themselves together, understanding their history even as they saw that it

⁴⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 99.

could not be undone. Achebe is today painfully aware how difficult that project has proved to be in forty years of independent Nigeria, making all the sharper his recollection in *Home and Exile* that his own commitment to the uniqueness of the individual and the relativity of every community's beliefs—a commitment that is necessary to the building of democracy and that Western liberals mistakenly proclaim a unique feature of Western modernity—was something he learned from Igbo tradition itself.

Achebe peers into the debris strewn by British imperialism and the novelties, salvaging from the living and remembered fragments of the Igbo cosmos values to affirm on the unlighted path of Nigerian modernity; neither a sentimentalist nor a rhetorician, the novelist does not offer a reassuring ledger of good and evil but reveals how they unfold in the experience of a tragic elder losing all he holds dear and a rebellious youth seeking uncertain redemption in the dissolution of tribal bonds. Like Rushdie, Achebe pulls on the contradictory threads of his own education and cultural formation—his *Bildung*—with its unique mix of languages and myths, of monotheism and polytheism, to weave from that skein of disparate discourses some new artistic form. *Things Fall Apart* weaves its "created totality" from African wisdom narratives, Greek tragedy, Western ethnography, and psychological realism; *The Satanic Verses* weaves its from social satire, Quranic parody, Aupeleian-Hindu-cinematic metamorphoses, and a comic revenge tragedy.

Innovations in the novel are a response to the unprecedented experiences and situations of human life in its varied modernities. The innovations themselves are therefore varied—in the artistic problems and solutions the novelists pose for themselves, in the imperatives that drive their creativity, and in the forms they wrest from the contradictory materials of their society and culture. When the early Lukács declared that modernity is "richer in gifts and dangers" than the ancient world, his own *Bildung*, like that of other classically educated Europeans in 1915, taught him to revere the ancient world of the Greeks and to find in his image of that lost world the measure of modernity. Rushdie and Achebe's learning has taught them to revere other worlds and seek other images to measure their modernities.

Novelists often do face the anguish and wisdom of uncertainty with suppler tools than philosophers. The postmodernism debate in philosophy has been plagued by the problem of knowing how to hold the gifts and dangers of modernity in a single conceptual glance. The modern era inaugurated the possibilities of Enlightenment, democracy, and collective responsibility for the future, and it gave rise to racism, slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust. The impulse to attribute all the catastrophes of the modern era to

antimodernity is no more convincing, though it is far less reckless, than the view that the catastrophes are the inevitable consequence of modernity and Enlightenment. Both views seek a philosophical anchor for a world without essence, as though the abyss were not bottomless, as though politics and art were not, of all human practices, the richest in gifts *and* dangers.

ESPEN AARSETH

Narrative Literature in the Turing Universe

It's text. You READ it.

No buttons. No links. No hyper-crap. Just because we got a grant to publish things in electronic format don't you go thinking that we're all charmed to pieces by this digital incursion.

—JOHN McDAID, *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*

Novels of Silicon

Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Book of Sand" tells of a mysterious book, a monstrous volume of innumerable pages, without beginning or end. Page numbers make no sense, as page 999 is next to 40,514. The book is written in many different, strange languages, and the same page is never opened twice. The protagonist, having spent months in obsessive isolation trying to study this impossible object, finally gives up and decides to destroy it. But how? He could burn it, but a book of infinite pages might burn forever and therefore suffocate the earth with smoke. Finally he hides it on a random shelf in the National Library in Buenos Aires, a sure way to make a book disappear.

Some years ago, a joke started circulating on the World Wide Web: A web page proclaimed:

You have reached
the very last page
of the Internet.
We hope you have
enjoyed your browsing.
Enjoy the rest of your
life.

This Web joke seems to make the inverse point of Borges' story: Just as Borges' book could never exist as a bound volume in the real world, the real World Wide Web cannot have a finite number of pages. Even at a given