

Quixotic Realism and the Romance of the Novel

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In *The Origins of the English Novel* Michael McKeon dismisses Henry Knight Miller's study *Tom Jones and the Romance Tradition* as a "misreading" of Fielding as part of an "older romance tradition" (438n112). The brusqueness of the dismissal is one indication that Northrop Frye, one of Miller's key points of critical reference, is defunct in a critical universe defined by Ian Watt, one of McKeon's key points of critical reference. However, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of both *The Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Rise of the Novel*, I would like to stage an imaginary debate between these two twentieth-century critical classics. Both seminal texts were published in 1957, and though they may have originally spoken past each other in mutually incomprehensible idioms, and though any debate between them is now, in our historicist moment, almost completely attenuated (so thoroughly have recent critics internalized Watt's mode of reading), I propose that thinking them side by side offers a way to begin to address a blind spot in some important recent accounts of the novel. I find much that is useful in both Miller's reading of *Tom Jones* and his (and Frye's) critical procedures, and I would argue that the self-conscious participation in an older romance tradition is integral to both Fielding's novels and the genre more generally.

I want to try to salvage romance by suggesting that it is one of the tools with which to understand the past that survives into the present and one of the ways history is self-consciously experienced. In briefly revisiting the protocols of reading sponsored by romance, I argue that modern, realist ways of reading fail to satisfy fully their own claims about the novel as a genre self-consciously located in history. The way the novel understands time and history cannot be explicated in exclusively historicist terms. Rather, novels self-consciously cycle through the divergent modes of reading named by Watt and Frye and show how each is necessary to the other, indeed how each can turn into the other. In self-consciously recycling anachronistic forms, novels don't simply supersede them but instead offer models of a literacy adequate to a history much longer and more active than historicism tends to allow. Bakhtin calls this long history "great time" (3-4), the context of works, or those aspects of works, that exceed their own epochs and gain significance from the echoes, repetitions, and adaptations that make up their lives, afterlives, or histories as texts. The recycling of the resonant forms developed in great time, a gesture found throughout the novel's two-thousand-year history, is the genre's answer to the modernity it is said to inaugurate.

For Watt and his critical descendents, the novel is the "quintessentially modern genre" (McKeon, *Theory* xv), a new form for a new world that offers a literary technology appropriate to the contemporaneity and historicity of modernity (Richetti 4; Hunter 39). The novel's formal innovation, what Watt calls its formal realism, registers the local, mundane social realities that enable a sense of historical time-

liness, a sense of living in a particular moment of history. It also, not incidentally, underwrites historicist critical practice. Watt's account of the novel's realist mode of representation, a "more largely referential" use of language (30), enables the contextual questions that organize its recent literary history: the "issue the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form [is] the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality it imitates" (11). Historicism reads with the methods that define the novel according to Watt. Realism authorizes historicism: the formal problem of the novel (its correspondence to its context) recurs as our critical procedure (showing how it fits in its context).

The gains of this kind of reading are significant and need no defense. We are now properly attentive to contextual specificities of the kind called for by J. Paul Hunter's cultural historicism (xix). But those gains were not made without costs. Recent work on the eighteenth-century British novel has tended to elide the scale of reference named by romance. But, as I have argued elsewhere, the question we should be asking is *how* novelists use the romance forms that not incidentally but integrally organize many of their works (see Black). Indeed, I would argue that the pleasures of romance and the kinds of reading associated with it—amused, wary, and self-conscious about the adaptation of self-consciously old stories—are integral to novels' other effects, however these are understood. The local social projects of novels, that is, often depend on the workings of literary forms like romance, which don't serve simply as epiphenomena of other forces but rather enable ways of thinking about—and thinking *with*—those historical artifacts. If we want to read literary texts in their full historical dimension, we have to learn anew how to read romance. To begin that project, I want to ask what is worth recycling from Frye and the protocols of reading of the "romance tradition."

For Frye, literature is structurally conventional, organized by a "self-contained literary universe" (*Anatomy* 118) that expresses the archetypes of myth, or what could be called the architecture of desire. Romance occupies a privileged place in Frye's criticism, and with its emphasis on the familiar structures and designs of myth it reverses the procedures of realism by looking for patterns and connections instead of trying to escape them (*Anatomy* 166; *Secular* 38, 60). In adopting familiar conventions, romance achieves an echoic resonance, a "sense that more is meant than meets the ear," which may be how history is actually experienced—felt in one's ear or along one's skin—or even, Frye suggests, how it is made (*Anatomy* 58–59, 184). Frye's mode of allusive reading works with a model of literary history as "displacement" in which older texts more directly express the innate structures of the human imagination. But if his critical procedures can be separated from this essentialist dynamic (and I think they can), Frye's mode of reading may help supplement the emphases of historicist criticism, deepening it in the sense that texts are allowed their allusive echoes as well as their illusive representations and lengthening it in the sense that history is allowed its past as well as our present.

I want to take from Frye his focus on a transhistorical context of literary forms that is visible at a certain range or distance of reading. In order to see the archetypal skeleton, Frye performs a critical procedure of "standing back" from the details of a work, as one stands back from a painting to get the big picture instead of the details of its production (*Anatomy* 140). By pulling back the range of critical

focus, one sees the long literary context and the deep structure expressed in the contingent particulars of mimetic verisimilitude that are the concerns of historicist criticism (*Anatomy* 97, 102). I would like to rethink those deep structures as cognitive processes, grounded in the dynamic circuitry of the literate brain rather than Freudian psychology (see Wolf 170, 16–17). And I would like to redefine those long strands as textual, grounded in the mechanics of writing, producing, and reading books rather than Jungian mythology. (These two are connected, of course, our cognitive architecture in continuous feedback with the transmitted stories that serve as the cultural software that wires the brain's circuitry; cultural memory depends on the realization of what it transmits in each of the memories of members of a culture.) But with these adaptations, I want to hold onto the important kernel of Frye's criticism, which is vital and valuable in reminding us of the force of reading he calls mythic. I take "myth" to be the name of the resonant feedback of books and brains, the felt force of their mutual structuring and restructuring that allows us to feel "an immense reverberating dimension of significance" (Frye, *Fables* 37) in the works that exploit the evolved pathways of meaning and pleasure, whether these are cognitive or textual—or, of course, both at once.

Fredric Jameson shares Frye's concerns with the diachronic reach of genre. But while Frye's mode of reading stresses continuity, recognition, and identity, Jameson's stresses difference and the discontinuities of the intertextuality that results from the survival of residual forms into new historical contexts (137). For Jameson, the novel is defined by its layerings of diachronic genres—or more specifically, residual ideologies preserved as genres—and in its sedimented form can be read the social contradictions of its particular moment (144). In the final analysis, Jameson's method returns to the local historical situation that is secondary for Frye. Jameson and Frye, then, look like the generative antitheses of each other, the other each must overwrite in order to write at all. But rather than choosing one or the other, I want to argue that the novel is a literary tool organized by just the tension of their disagreement. The novel exists to stage the productive debate between long time and local time and refuses to resolve it. If novels situate diachronic forms in synchronic contexts, it is not simply to resolve either form into history or history into myth but rather to stage a two-way conversation between them along the "beveled edge" that defines the genre. Novels are less sedimented forms than interactive fields, compost or humus that's still active, or available to be reactivated by the energy of reading.

I take the phrase "beveled edge" from José Ortega y Gasset's account of the moment when Don Quixote rushes the puppet stage (part 2, ch. 26), swept up in the thrill of Don Gaiferos's escape and inflamed with the chivalric impulse represented by the puppets (Ortega 136; Cervantes 747). This paradigmatic moment stages the meeting of the "two worlds" that structure Cervantes's novel, its oscillation between enchanted reading and disenchanting realism. And the scene offers a parable of the puzzle of the novel's form. If we accept the implicit critique of the rest of the audience, who watch in amazement as Quixote mistakes the show for reality, we imbue that audience with a putative reality or significance that does for these pages of the *Quixote* what Quixote himself does with the puppets. We blur the line between representation and reality, but this time by believing the

representation that figures the resistance to believing (other) representations. To respond with the rest of the audience to Quixote is to respond like Quixote—swept up by the force of the text as he is by the play, enchanted by your own response. But that may be the point: Quixote is not wrong to be moved, and his novel depends not only on realistic collapses of enchantment but also on the pleasures of enchantment, a transformation of the real that depends on the same effects his disenchantment critiques.

In Quixote's own version of the puppet-show scene, it is the fault, he says, of "those inchanters, by whom I am persecuted, [who] take pleasure in presenting realities to my view, and then changing and metamorphosing them into such figures and forms as they choose to bestow" (Cervantes 749). For Quixote, the material effects of what we would call disenchantment—the puppets or wine skins or barber's basins that remain when he wakes from his chivalric dreams—are themselves effects of enchantment. In Quixote's terms, (our) realism is not the disenchantment of the world but its re-enchantment. Reality is the enchanted precipitate of Quixote's mythos, his reading. This may be true for us as well, readers of the enchanting realism of Cervantes's novel. (Same process, different text: we learn to read our own reality with the sense of the real—a romance of realism—represented by the book's critique of other books' illusions.)

The beveled edge of Quixote's mind is the dynamic on which the *Quixote* too depends. The novel achieves its effects on the various edges—in both books and brains—on which different orders of reality meet. It depends on the puzzling turns between them, and even on their turning into each other. Realism depends as much as romance on the enchantments of epistemological confusion, taking puppets for people or characters as worthy of response. Indeed, even as his authority and exclusivity as a reader collapses (see Fuentes xiv), Quixote becomes a figure for the activity of reading, that strange activity suspended between myth and history, anachronism and realization, that we too undertake in reading his story. If the *Quixote* is modern it is not because Quixote's illusions are shattered but because they are realized and relayed to other readers who read them, and perhaps misread them, in turn. Modernity and history are represented not when the ideals of romance are swept away but when its procedures are self-consciously adopted and adapted, for play, for pleasure, and perhaps even for real.

The beveled edge, then, is not only a static feature of the novel's ability to measure representations against realities but a figure for how representations are realized, how they take hold of reality and sometimes even take hold *as* reality. The protocols of reading sponsored by "the romance tradition" offer terms for this kind of self-consciously double vision, what Miller calls a "double realm of value" (94). Attentive to the interaction of contemporary realities and the long legs and deep reach of their literary or "mythic" others, the synthetic pleasures of romance offer at once a succinct characterization of the act of reading and a name for the historical self-consciousness sponsored by the novel's recurrent and defining gesture of seeing double.

Finally, this kind of reading may indeed be a motor of history, though not merely in its realism and ability to make readers aware of their location in time and history. Rather, its anachronism dislocates readers and makes them aware of

their relation to other times and others' histories. John Winkler notes a strange fact about Hellenistic novels, a fascinating point that has less to do with their lost, hazy origins than the fact that they come from elsewhere. These novels are organized by stories of love in marriage that were imported from Asia and had no sociological referent in Greek culture; such stories were "a fully formed artistic entity" but one that had "virtually no representational value for the lives of its readers, and further—most strangely and importantly—[were] somehow prophetic of a social order to come" (36). Winkler calls this narrative pattern "a resident alien" in Greek culture (35), but one that will take root in the cultures that inherit this "Greek" culture. This point reverses the causality of historicism. Instead of reading back through literary or mythic accretions to get to the social reality they preserve and occlude, Winkler suggests that social realities may be effects of literature. In this instance, literature is not a product of its local culture; rather, culture comes to realize the ancient fantasies of foreign texts. The trash heap of history can start to look less like its past than its future.

If European culture is an effect of romance and grew into the shape of those transplanted stories, historical transmission seems to work like Quixote's reading. Quixote figures a cultural truth, weirdly, not in the way his misreading is corrected but in the way his reading is realized, the way he engages with "alien" texts that are at once mismatched to the world and come to be realized in it. The *Quixote* models a way to claim others' histories (or just history) as one's own. Kwame Anthony Appiah remarks: "One connection—the one neglected in talk of cultural patrimony—is the connection not through identity but despite differences. We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to 'our' art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art" (135). This kind of "cosmopolitan" literacy suggests that rather than reading for either trans-historical identity or historical difference, you may learn about yourself through others' histories or become yourself by mistake. If history too is organized by the mistakes of reading—and the pleasures of misreading—the claim of the novel to be an index of historicity rests on the genre's ability to register the irresolvable interplay of divergent scales of history (the long time of myth and the local time of realism), or—same thing—the genre's ability to model and provoke the anachronisms necessarily entailed in reading.

In the end, it may be the fact that novels do not refer simply to their local worlds that makes them historical at all. Novels explore the uses of past forms and others' forms, and in doing so they register a reality defined neither against books nor through them but rather by the weird relays between books and reality. Novels model the interplay of the many overlays that define a fully historical moment, one organized by the many and conflicting mediations that allow it to be understood at all. In negotiating the seams where various orders of representation meet, novels enable the reading requisite to cosmopolitan cultures, a mode of reading not simply adequate to any one place but attentive to the fact that we, like our books, are continually crossing from one place to another, borrowing others' forms, and recycling them as our own. In that self-consciousness about the anachronism of the present is the lesson of novels and romance on realism and history.

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