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Untheories of Fiction
Literary Essays from Diderot to Markson

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CHAPTER 1

So, Whose Theory of the Novel Is It, and Is It Important Anyway? Prologue I

Abstract *Untheories Of The Novel Literary Essays From Diderot To Markson* takes a closer look at the diversity of fiction writing from Diderot to David Markson and by so doing calls into question the notion of a singular "theory of fiction," especially in relation to the novel. Unlike Forster's approach to "Aspects of the Novel," which implied there is only one kind of novel to which there may be an aspect, the text deconstructs how one approach to studying something as protean as the novel cannot be accomplished, hence the notion of an "untheory" of the novel that brings to the fore the undeniable creative expansiveness of the novel. To that end, the text uses Diderot's *This Is Not A Story* (1772) and David Markson's *This Is Not A Novel* (2016) as a frame and between them are essays on De Maistre's *Voyage Around My Room*, Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs Of Brás Cubas*, André Breton's *Nadja*, and Elizabeth Smart's *Grand Central Station I Sat Down And Wept*.

Keywords Criticism • Canon • Margin(ality) • Institution • Publishing • Diversity

On a dark and stormy night, *while I pondered weak and weary*, over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten literary criticism, I decided to count how many "theories of the novel" were actually on my bookshelf

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and I came up with a smattering that included, but was not limited to, the following:

Aspects of the Novel, Forster, 1927;
Rise of the Novel, Ian Watt, 1957;
Towards a Sociology of the Novel, Lucien Goldmann, 1964;
For a New Novel, Robbe-Grillet, 1965;
The Theory of the Novel, Philip Stevick, 1967;
Theory of the Novel, John Halperin, 1974;
The Theory of the Novel, Lukács, 1974;
Critical Theory and the Novel, David Suchoff, 1994;
Theory and the Novel, Jeffery Williams, 1999;
Theory of the Novel, Michael McKeon, 2000;
The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000, Dorothy Hale, 2005;
The Novel After Theory, Judith Ryan, 2014; and
Theory of the Novel, Guido Mazzoni, 2017.

So, for almost a century (or more according to Hale) critics have been writing about the "theory of the novel." The one thing all these critical texts have in common is the phrase, "the novel." Not the short novel or the long novel or the novella or the novelette or the epistolary novel or any other permutation of the phrase, but "the novel." It's an engaging idea that one can include in that phrase novels as disparate as *Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy, Tom Jones, Werther, Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas, Mrs. Dalloway, Finnegans Wake, By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept, Watt, Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and *Rayuela*, not to mention anything by Pessoa or Perec or Brooke-Rose or Leopoldo Marechal or Macedonio Fernandez *ad astra*. How is it possible to write a theory of **THE** novel when all of those novels are so uniquely unalike?

In the latest of these excursions into novel criticism, Guido Mazzoni, alluding to both Bakhtin and Schlegel, writes, "For Bakhtin, the changeability of the novel descends from its supposedly comic and popular origins; for Schlegel, it represents instead the literary correlative of the right to creative freedom and personal idiosyncrasy, the cult of the particular on which was founded the epoch that Schlegel called the Romantic and we call modern" (Mazzoni, 14–15). Mazzoni then goes on to write, "What is the novel today? If we were looking for a concise formulation that belonged to neither Schlegel or Hegel nor Bakhtin but that neatly encapsulated an

idea central to their theories, we might say this: *Starting from a certain date, the novel became the genre in which one can tell absolutely any story in any way whatsoever*" (Mazzoni, 16). Right. It is an engaging definition, but dissecting it creates more questions. What date is a "certain date"? If it became a genre, then why aren't all novels alike? And if it is a genre, then how can one tell any story in any manner? This is the conundrum: one is confronted in trying to homogenize the novel into some specific form about which one can then theorize. In some ways, Mazzoni would have been better off stating his definition and then forgetting the rest since critics have been constantly theorizing about a subject (i.e. *the* novel) that, by etymological definition, refuses to be theorized. On the face of it, it would seem patently obvious one cannot talk about *Finnegans Wake* and *Eugene Onegin* or *Le Père Goriot* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *As I Lay Dying* and *The Museum of Eterna's Novel* or *The Fall and Rise of Malcolm Malarkey* as if they all belonged to a single genre labeled, *The Novel*. Perhaps, that's why there have been so many Sisyphean efforts to write critical books about it.

Could it be instead of writing about *a theory of the novel*, one might be more inclined to write about *an un-theory of the novel* for those novels that are novels, but not novels? Viktor Shklovsky attempted to circumvent talking about a theory of the novel by writing his classic work, *Theory of Prose*, which skirts the issue. It is a conundrum. So, perhaps, the best place to begin is with the word *theory* itself. The word "theory" comes from the Late Latin *theoria*, from Greek *theōria*, from *theōrein* which means, "speculate." The word "speculate" comes from the Latin *speculatus*, past participle of *speculari*, "to spy out, examine," and it is often used to mean "to meditate on or ponder on something." By virtue of how it is defined, one is confronted with something that is very subjective. In other words, a theory of a text does not extrapolate logically into all theories of all texts. So, when one reads a book titled THE THEORY OF FICTION one needs to be skeptical for there is no one theory of fiction or one theory of a novel; there can only be theories of fiction and to a great extent those theories are contingent on the writer who's doing the writing. On September 3, 1968, Nicholas Garnham interviewed Nabokov at the Montreux Palace for *Release*, BBC-2. The interview was faithfully reproduced in *The Listener*, October 10, of the same year: a neat and quick job. I have used its title for the present collection.

You have mid your novels have "no social purpose, no moral message." What is the function of your novels in particular and of the novel in general?

"One of the functions of all my novels is to prove that the novel in general does not exist. The book I make is a subjective and specific affair. I have no purpose at all when composing my stuff except to compose it. I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn—so much the better. Art is difficult. Easy art is what you see at modern exhibitions of things and doodles. Your use of the word 'reality' perplexes me. To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials. Now if you mean by 'old reality' the so-called realism of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D.H. Lawrence—to take some especially depressing examples—then you are right in suggesting that the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring and that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. When my fancies will have been sufficiently imitated, they, too, will enter the common domain of average reality, which will be false, too, but within a new context, which we cannot yet guess. Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture."

Nabokov is not necessarily addressing the notion of an anti-novel since by novel definition alone there can't be an anti-novel unless one stipulates what type of novel one is working against. For many years, the entire notion of an anti-novel (led by critics such as Frank Kermode and even Malcolm Bradbury) were totally myopic to the novels written in Latin America by writers such as Marechal or Arlt or Fernandez or Onetti whose approaches to the novel ran particularly against the Realist novel. Likewise, in Franco Moretti's work, *Distant Reading*, he writes, "There are many ways of talking about the theory of the novel, and mine will consist in posing three questions: Why are novels in prose? Why are they so often stories of adventures? And, why was there a European, but not a Chinese rise of the novel in the course of the eighteenth century?" (Moretti, 160). His is a puzzling statement from the outset since one immediately recognizes (or should) that Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin* was not written in prose and Moretti cites several other works that weren't written in prose; second, who's counting the novels that are adventure stories (certainly not Macedonio Fernandez); and third, why specify Chinese novels as opposed to any other country? His index is absolutely barren of Latin American novelists except, thankfully, Machado de Assis, the Cervantes of Latin

America. All this to say, how then does one write a "theory of the novel" when novels by their very nature are so protean? Eric Hayot, in his essay, "New Theories of the Novel," makes a comment that is clearly puzzling: "You still want a new theory of the novel. *Assume you know what a novel is.* (My italics) Now it's just a matter of choosing a reasonable number (and spread) of examples." (Hayot) His statement clearly dodges the question. Machado de Assis' *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* is a novel, Macedonio Fernandez's *The Museum of Eterna's Novel* is a novel, Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece* is a novel, and none of them are the same, so "What's a novel?"

For the most part, the critical texts I've listed here more or less address texts associated with what has been generally called the "literary canon." To that extent, how might one define the literary canon? And specifically, what does it take to gain membership? Can anyone gain entrance or does one need some kind of special permission? Who then might be part of the literary canon?

It would appear that the canon is (and has been) an institution, mainly composed of male Slavo-Euro-Anglo-American writers, who have gone through a kind of rite of passage to be allowed entrance. It has been said the modern canon exists only to "conserve existing institutional practices and definitions; transmission of time-honored platitudes; favors a privileged set of writings that alone constitute literature" (Gorak, p. 3). If that is true, then what might constitute narrative marginality? That is, those writers writing on the margins and how may those things be allied to the notion of the canon?

Before one can begin talking about un-theories of fiction, we have to establish what margins are and when one begins to discuss margins, the notion of borders (both literary and territorial) come to mind. In speaking of borders, one also recognizes, or should, the fact that borders are markers, standards by which something is measured. In terms of measurement, we are talking about areas; in terms of territory, we are talking about clearly defined limits which bring us once again to borders, to margins. It is not coincidental that the notion of the "canon" fits neatly into this paradigm, for the origin of the word canon comes from the Greek *kanon* which means "any straight rod or bar" and which was first associated with building and which evolved into a standard or a rule, but from Plato to Aristotle, the Greeks tended to look at the canon as something flexible and its ability to adjust to human subjects (Gorak, 12). Though the canon itself was firm, Aristotle was against rigidity and what the canon could

become (i.e. nomos/law) and emphasized the unwritten, adaptable properties of the canon.

Aristotle tended to mitigate the effect of the "hegemonic" canon by emphasizing (1) practical usefulness of canons and (2) the need to shape canons to the needs of the people. The Greek notion of canon evolved into sacred canons in which the ultimate authority became divine rather than human, natural, or instrumental; it became more than a rule or formula, but a total narrative in a sacred book; a closed narrative with a providential plot; a plot that governs every aspect of work, thought, public and private life in the religious community. This type of canonizing became the basis for everyday life, and while canonization meant adhering to acceptable standards, it implied negation of other standards. In the Catholic Church, scripture was less important than authority, authority sanctioned by its own canons and rules.

Like Judaism, Christian canon points in two directions:

1. Word of God and recorded narratives and
2. Rites and rituals based on an organized, institutionalized form

By the time one gets to St. Augustine, we have a closed canon of uniquely privileged texts; outside the canon, there is only dissent and misery; inside the canon, the sole hope for certainty and salvation (Gorak, 44). These views, as you can see, are diametrically opposed to Aristotle's views of the canon as a flexible measuring rod for human activities.

So, what one has is a Greek interpretation of the canon as being flexible and the Judeo-Christian canon as being inflexible. After Christianity takes hold of it, the notion of the canonical book assumes a prominence unknown in the period of Aristotle for which the canon was a disposition to frame rules according to circumstance, mistrusting the absolutes of law and revelation alike versus the Augustinian notion of it being a closed set of sacred texts open to inexhaustible figurative application and interpretation on political, social, and intellectual life (Gorak, 44).

For someone like Goethe, the canon was something that valued what was foreign and did not bind to some particular thing as a model. For Eliot, the canon was associated with a blind submission to unquestioned authority that the canon means "acceptable standards of value authorized by superseded critical practice" (Gorak, 78). On the one hand, we have Shklovsky writing that literary history was a process of perpetually

canonizing the marginal in that "new forms in art are created by the canonizing of peripheral forms" (Gorak, 54).

On the other hand, we get the view that conformity is the price of canonical acceptance that can bring us up to twentieth- and twenty-first-century notions of the canon.

So, now we appear to be stuck between what does and what does not constitute a canon. But the question has to affect itself: How does one create a canon? For some, like the critic Hugh Kenner, "One way to make a canon has been by explicit homages: imitation, translation. Pound made pedagogic lists of dead authors and translated their texts. To the suggestion that he tended to list what he had translated he replied that on the contrary he translated what he thought alive enough to list" (Kenner, 60). This implies that, at least at one time, writers had a hand in establishing the canon and choosing who might be included. However, significantly, there was not much of a literary canon when Shakespeare was alive (and his authority is still in doubt) nor was there a need for one.

So, where has the canon arisen in terms of literature? The canon has really arisen with the institutionalization of literature within the walls of academe designed for members of a ruling elite, primarily by white, middle-class males for other white, middle-class males and that institutionalization has also been influenced by the hegemony of the English language and the rise of commodified texts.

To the former, we can say there is an institutional frame of reference for the canon derives a special support from Thomas Kuhn's view of intellectual activity as a pattern of conformity to institutional expectations. Viewed from a Kuhnian perspective (in his *Structure of Scientific Revolution*), canons function as stamps of approval in an endlessly repeated circle of institutional validation. Institutions serve as sponsors, regulators, and ultimate guarantors of intellectual activity and achievement. To that end then, those who teach only "classics of European letters" (and here I mean specifically French, German, and, by extension, British) involve the academy in the tacit suppression of monuments venerated by other cultures. To that end, even in European letters there is a hierarchy associated with the political rise of the English language (as well as French and German) and the rise of the publishing industry.

Raymond Williams has written, to "implicate the canon in the crisis, presenting it as an institutional device of the intellectual classes to shrink a culture into a few valued monuments, to restrict access to those monuments and to limit the ways in which they can be apprehended" (Gorak,

191). By doing this, marginalized society and marginalized writers become lost in the oblivion of academic power. The critic Edward Said who writes that the canonical work survives through institutional repression confirms this notion of a kind of hegemonic institutionalization; the history of literary criticism follows a pattern of scriptural interpretation that corresponds to the institutional history of the Church. What happens is that the canon=classic and a classic=something within the curriculum that should be read. Said writes in *The World, the Text and the Critic* that "in a genealogy of texts there is a first text, a sacred prototype, a scripture, which readers always approach through the text before them, either as petitioning supplicants or as initiates among many in a sacred chorus supporting the patriarchal text" (Said, 46). To that end, we have a kind of equation that goes like this:

> Text—interpreters—disseminators—public
>
> But such a schema implies a kind of canon of order that often installs one kind of literature above another and which tends to install, as Said has said, a "canon of rejection of subject cultures" (Gorak, 187).

From the idea of a hegemonic system of canonization based on academic pursuits, we can also move to the notion of a hegemony of commodified texts that would include, but not be limited to, fiction and criticism. What I mean is that there are texts that tend to recapitulate, often stylistically, the form many of the canonized texts and therefore attempt to become canonical themselves. For example, a text that tries to emulate the form and substance of Dickens would, in a way, attempt to become canonical itself.

Often, texts have been appropriated by academe after certain writers have acknowledged their significance. That is to say, at the time the texts were written, perhaps only other writers admired their achievement while the role of academe was less predisposed to adulation. At that point the academy might deign to incorporate certain texts into the curriculum and hence to canonize them by virtue of their acceptance, critical review, and commodification. This procedure, of course, is not what interested the writers. It is often the case, especially today, that we find problems with institutionalizing certain writers into the canon because (1) the institutions are either ignorant of or indifferent to teaching potential canonites or (2) the business of publishing has reached the point where those who

could become canonized are precluded due to fiscal constraints and the theory of the bottom line.

At one time, before the word "merger" became a synonym for "profitability," writers counted and people who published books published them for the love of the word. Today that has changed. With China companies buying publishing houses and motion picture companies buying publishing houses to be bought by electronics companies, voices of new and old writers are being subsumed by the vexation of profitability. As Victor Navasky rather wryly wrote: "Publishers got out of the business of selling hardcover books ten or fifteen years ago. The idea now is to publish hardcover books so that they can be reviewed or promoted on television in order to sell paperback rights, movie rights, book club rights, comic book rights, serialization rights, international satellite rights, Barbie doll rights, etc." (Navasky, 2). Forty-five years on, it is still the same.

The implication here is there were only a few people who were actually in control of what was being published, agents and editors, who, for the most part, were part of a socially stratified group of people that were not unlike those who were reading their books. "This fact points to an important role in canon-formation for literary agents and for editors at the major houses, who belong to the same social stratum as the buyers of hardbound books, and who—as profitability in publishing came to hinge more and more on the achievements of bestsellerdom for a few books—increasingly earned their keep by spotting (and pushing) novels that looked like bestsellers. Here we have a nearly closed circle of marketing and consumption, the simultaneous exploitation and creation of taste, familiar to anyone who has examined the culture under monopoly capitalism" (Ohmann, 202).

Included in this notion is the act of translation since what holds for original works holds as well for translation. In other words, some texts have not been translated simply because they have not appeared to be "cost effective." Others have been translated, published, but due to poor reader response gone out of print. Therefore, you see, that it is not just a simple matter of whether a writer is good or not, but whether the writer is saleable or not that may place him or her in a position to become canonical.

What one finally ends up with is that "no one overarching 'canon' answers to the various cultures which have grown up under the shadow of 'Empire'" (Gorak, 251). For some, like the classic critic Northrop Frye, the canon is a "repository of myths and metaphors which subsumes the corpus of literary texts into the greater field of human aspiration" (Gorak, 255). For others, like the art critic E.H. Gombrich "traditional

canon-making relies on imaginative inclusion rather than on draconian selection and excommunication" (Gorak, 255). With the straining of both English and American imperialism in light of their increasing need to sustain hegemonic influence, there is the need for a reevaluation of what the canon constitutes if there is a need for one at all. Divergent cultures, the rise of the Latin American ethos, the increasing recognition of women from all cultures, and the acknowledgement of LGBTTQ literature put increasing pressure on the canon and the canon-makers to explore diversity in all colors.

So, what things can we say about the canon and notions of marginality? The canon is a shared understanding of what literature is worth preserving, but that choice takes place through a somewhat problematic socio-economic-historical process; canonization emerges through specific institutions and practices; and these institutions are likely to have a rather well-defined class base and/or economic agenda (Ohmann, 219). Like Shklovsky' s notion of the "constantly peripheral" or of Said who looks forward to a canon of the future based on "new narrative forms" and "other ways of telling," the canon is or should be in a state of flux, incorporating diversity of form and substance and not delimited by notions of skin color, gender, or sexual preference.

It also relates to the notion of taste, but without going into a long and painfully circuitous Kantian discourse on taste, let me say that I have chosen these texts, these non and/or semi-canonical writers, because I personally find them to my taste. The approach in the course will be to expose you to these writers and theories about fiction, and discuss where they may fit in within the tradition in which they are writing and why or why not they should be included in something as prestigious as a literary canon.

The writers that I have chosen to write about are those who may someday become canonized, may not be soon, or may never be. Some of them have been canonized in their own country, but have not been canonized in the United States often for reasons of publishable profitability. They come from various disciplines and literatures, but all of them have one thing in common: they or their texts are not that well known. Even those from Europe are not necessarily incorporated into what is often called Eurocentric.

All this just to say, the works I have chosen should really be considered in a text titled, UN-THEORIES OF THE NOVEL or, possibly, THEORIES OF THE ALT-NOVEL or THEORIES OF NOVELS DIFFICULT TO CATEGORIZE or, maybe, THEORIES OF ARTIFICE