

Introduction

Truth and Literature

Why the Novel Matters

Nothing is important but life. . . . For this reason I am a novelist. And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog.

The novel is the one bright book of life. . . . In this sense, the Bible is a great confused novel. You may say, it is about God. But it is really about man alive. Adam, Eve, Sara, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, David, Bath-Sheba, Ruth, Esther, Solomon, Job, Isaiah, Jesus, Mark, Judas, Paul, Peter: what is it but man alive, from start to finish? Man alive, not mere bits. Even the Lord is another man alive, in a burning bush, throwing the tablets of stone at Moses's head.

This is the most important passage in “Why the Novel Matters,” an essay written by D. H. Lawrence in 1925 and published posthumously in 1936.¹ Here we find a theory of the novel expressed in bold, elementary formulas—one that circulated widely among the writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More sophisticated versions of the same ideas can be found in the works of Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and E. M. Forster.² A few years before “Why the Novel

1. David Herbert Lawrence, “Why the Novel Matters,” in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers* (New York: Viking Press, 1936); reprinted in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 191–198. Regarding the dating of the essay, see Steel’s introduction,” p. L.

2. Honoré de Balzac, “Avant-propos” (1842) to *La Comédie humaine*, English translation “Author’s Introduction” to *The Human Comedy*, trans. Ellen Marriage in *The Works of*

Matters,” in speaking about literature in general but thinking about the novel he was working on at the time, the greatest of Lawrence’s contemporaries had written that “real life, life finally uncovered and clarified, the only life in consequence lived to the full, is literature.”³ Most likely, over the coming decades, novelists of the twenty-first century will continue to repeat the same ideas.

What makes Lawrence’s essay interesting is precisely its crudeness: by simplifying the thought process and removing any nuances, it unabashedly presents an opinion that many writers and readers have shared over the past two centuries, thereby making it easily recognizable. The superficial intentions of “Why the Novel Matters” are easy to decipher: Lawrence wants to make himself important, to endow his works with an absolute value and challenge anyone with the same ambitions who might threaten his supremacy. And yet, if we reflect on the assumptions that make a piece like this possible, we understand that what lies hidden behind the mediocrity of his claims is an entire epochal landscape. Today we take his words for granted: we might agree or disagree with him, but what we read strikes us as plausible. When we compare Lawrence’s ideas to other ways of viewing how the various human sciences relate to each other, though some of his judgments no longer seem obvious. Asserting that the novel is the only book of life, placing it ahead of religion, philosophy, and science, is hardly a gesture to be taken for granted. In order for a statement like this to be even conceivable, the European cultural horizon had to have already gone through two of the most profound metamorphoses in its history. The first, more limited one transformed literature; the second, which was more extensive, transformed the relations between literature and other forms of knowledge, and, ultimately, between literature and truth.

Honoré de Balzac, ed. by George Saintsbury (Boston: Dana Estes, 1901) vol. 1, pp. liii-lxix; Émile Zola, “Le Naturalisme au théâtre” (1879–1880), English translation “Naturalism on the Stage” in *The Experimental Novel, and Other Essays*, (New York: Cassell, 1893), 123–125; Virginia Woolf, “Life and the Novelist” (1926), in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, 1925–1928, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 400–412; Edward Morgan Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

3. Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*; English translation *Finding Time Again*, trans. Ian Patterson, in *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols, general editor Christopher Prendergast, vol. 6 (London: Penguin Press, 2002), 204.

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Between the mid-sixteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, a genre long considered an unpretentious form of entertainment—the novel—became the primary art practiced in the West, the art that portrays the extensive totality of life,⁴ or, as a contemporary novelist put it, the flagship that literature ranges against systematic thought, against science and philosophy.⁵ No other aesthetic language has inspired so many critical texts and so much thought over the past two hundred years. Writers who were once accused of ruining the canons of taste and morality have been introduced into school curricula; works intended for quick consumption have received the kind of attention philology reserves for safeguarding cultural monuments for posterity. Three centuries ago, an interest of this sort would have been unimaginable: in 1740, at the beginning of a decisive decade for the history of the novel in Lawrence’s homeland, no one in England or elsewhere would have ranked the novelist ahead of the saint, the philosopher, or the scientist.⁶ The metaphor of the novel as the book of life appeared in the mid-1700s but began to be used the way Lawrence did only toward the end of that century; and only over the course of the nineteenth century did the prestige of the novel become consolidated. The most striking premise of “Why the Novel Matters” thus represents a geological change in the system of literary genres starting from the second half of the eighteenth century. The first question this book explores lies within the confines of literature: Chapters 2 to 8 describe the birth of the novel, its rocky rise, and its modern evolution.

Books of Life

But this discontinuity in the sphere of literature was part of a broader transformation. To illustrate it, I offer a genealogy of the metaphor with which we began. The book of life is an image charged with history: over the course of time many works, many genres, and many disciplines have claimed to be the book of life.⁷ The most distant example, that of the Bible,

4. György Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920); English translation *The Theory of the Novel* trans. Anna Bostick (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

5. Walter Siti, “L’orgoglio del romanzo,” in *L’asino d’oro* 10 (1994): 67.

6. See Jerry C. Beasley, *Novels of the 1740s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 1.

7. See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981).

is also the one Lawrence refers to. But it is not hard to come up with other precedents: for Galileo the book of nature was written in the language of mathematics;⁸ more than a century later, Voltaire used the same image to talk about philosophy,⁹ giving metaphorical shape to an idea that has existed ever since Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle made abstract thought the highest form of human discourse.¹⁰

Lawrence is replicating a venerable intellectual move. He is reusing an age-old critical genre: the *paragone*. In its Renaissance form, the *paragone* compared the merits of two arts (poetry and painting, for example), but its archetype has a wider scope and a more extensive genealogy.¹¹ The first comparison between families of discourses developed in Greece between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, when a set of practices and texts that slowly acquired the name of philosophy broke off from the practices and texts of the epic poets. The first major example of a *paragone* is found in the *Republic*, where Plato endorses the superiority of concepts over mimesis, and the primacy of philosophy over the imitative arts. This line of thought gave rise to an opposition between the irrational languages of the poets and the rational languages of the philosophers and scientists, namely, the cornerstone of European metaphysics—the assumption that in the self-representation of our culture is said to distinguish “the path of Western thought . . . from all Oriental wisdom.”¹²

But while the genre of the *paragone* was formed in a Platonic mold, Lawrence spoke from a completely different historical perspective. Between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, a

8. Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore* (1623); English translation *The Assayer*, in *The Controversy on the Comets of 1618*, trans. Stillman Drake and C. D. O'Malley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).

9. Voltaire, *Zadig ou la Destinée* (1747); English translation *Candide, Zadig and Selected Stories*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), chap. 3, p. 109.

10. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948); English translation *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), chap. 11.

11. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, chap. 11; Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics,” part 1, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 496–527, and part 2, 13, no. 1 (1952): 17–46.

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Philosophie und Poesie,” in Gadamer, *Kleine Schriften IV* (1977); English translation “Philosophy and Poetry,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 131.

cultural transformation redefined the relations between the books of life. During the eighteenth century there arose the discursive formation of modern aesthetics, which investigated and prior to that recognized the content of truth crystallized in the discourses of the arts. Between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, many writers and philosophers celebrated the force of art with new insistence. This current of thought toppled ancient hierarchies. If it is true that the texts grouped today under the category of mimesis have always been important, it is equally true that only in the past two centuries have they been so for the reason cited in “Why the Novel Matters.” The idea that a narrative form could be superior to science, religion, and philosophy—because only fiction grasps “life”—is recent. It is an idea that can exist only once the aesthetic sphere is no longer conceived of as entertainment, decoration, or the allegorical rewriting of already known moral, historical, cosmological, and theological truths, but rather as an alternative model of knowledge to the world-picture propagated by philosophy, science, and religion. It can exist only once we begin to think that life, or its innermost core, eludes conceptual language.

In the past two centuries, mimesis and fiction have acquired a new status. Whether or not we agree with Lawrence, there is no denying that the art of storytelling holds truths that are vital to us: the claims stated in “Why the Novel Matters” could be made only after the order of discourses had undergone a metamorphosis. The significance of the novel and the reason a species of entertainment gained so much importance over a period of two and a half centuries is incomprehensible unless one understands that its rise is the sign of a ground-shifting transformation in the relations between literature and truth, between literature and philosophy, and between mimesis and truth that took place on the thresholds of the modern age.

Games of Truth

There does exist a third way of expressing the relationship between books of life, however, that differs from and comes later than the ones we find in Plato’s *Republic* and “Why the Novel Matters.” I will explain it starting from the end—from when the theoretical folds that this threshold contains had been entirely unfurled.

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