

## Après la Lettre: The Death of the Novel Revisited

Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, in 1965, Frank Kermode quipped that the ‘special fate of the novel, considered as a genre, is to be always dying’. The debate over the novel’s alleged demise is resurrected every decade or so with the tiresome predictability of a zombie movie. Right now, it is unfashionable to the point of being almost taboo, routinely dismissed as a typically – perhaps even toxically – masculine form of intellectual masturbation (is there any other kind?). This argument’s obvious weakness is its reliance on dubious gender stereotypes (practical women getting things done while pompous mansplainers dick around). Its strength lies in the circumstantial evidence of its veracity: few women in recent years have felt the need to hold forth on the subject despite being responsible, in my opinion, for much of the most adventurous writing in the English tongue. And yet a great deal of this writing explores the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, thus pointing to a similar dissatisfaction with traditional literary forms.

The death-of-literature trope (of which the death of the novel is just one variation) is probably as old as literature itself: it can be traced as far back as Juvenal or Tacitus, all the way down to Will Self, through Samuel Richardson (who wondered, in 1758, if the novel were not just a fad, whose time had already passed) and scores of *fin-de-siècle* scribes bemoaning the decline of just about everything under the sun. This theme often finds its roots in a feeling of belatedness. ‘We come too late to say anything which has not been said already,’ La Bruyère lamented at the end of the seventeenth century, as Terence had already done in 2 BC, himself pipped to the post by Khakheperraseneb circa 2000 BC. The fact that the French philosopher had come too late to even say this merely proved his point.

For Richard B. Schwartz, the rot set in as early as the late Renaissance: ‘Literature with a capital L really died with the aristocracy that consumed it’

(*After the Death of Literature*, 1997). We can infer from this that the decline of literature ‘with a capital L’ preceded the emergence of the novel (always already a mongrel, *déclassé* genre) and that the latter was a symptom, if not a cause, of the former. After all, the novel is usually seen as a by-product of the triumph of the bourgeoisie – Hegel even describes it as ‘the epic of the middle-class world’ while Joseph Bottum connects its decline to that of Protestantism (*The Decline of the Novel*, 2019). In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961) René Girard reminds us that aristocratic authors such as Madame de La Fayette or La Rochefoucauld in seventeenth century France sensed that a literary career (like any other career) was somehow beneath them. Being reliant on the appreciation and recognition of readers (who may well have been of lower rank) was deemed ignoble, so in order to keep their hands clean they would contrive to have their books mysteriously published behind their backs. Taking their cue from Nietzsche, writers often reacted to the rise of a mass readership at the end of the nineteenth century by recasting themselves as members of a cultural aristocracy (*The Intellectuals and the Masses*, John Carey, 1992). That this should have happened mainly in the wake of the novel’s High Victorian heyday is probably not purely coincidental. Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s contention is that the death-of-the-novel discourse itself implies privilege and conceals a repressed fear of losing it. Its purpose is to generate ‘a protected space within which the novel’s survival is assured’ along with that of the (white, male) novelist’s social status (*The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 2006).

According to George Steiner, the rise of the novel was contemporaneous with a growing linguistic crisis. After the seventeenth century – after Milton – the ‘sphere of language’ ceased to encompass most of ‘experience and reality’ (‘The Retreat from the Word’, 1961). Mathematics became increasingly untranslatable into words, post-Impressionist painting tended towards abstraction, likewise escaping verbalisation; linguistics and philosophy highlighted the essentially arbitrary nature of signifiers... The final proposition in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1921) bears witness to this encroachment of the unsayable.

Against a backdrop of declining confidence in the powers of language – just as Schiller’s ‘disenchantment of the world’ was becoming ever more apparent, and the writer’s legitimacy, in a ‘destitute time’ (Hölderlin) of

absent gods and silent sirens, seemed increasingly tenuous – literature came to be considered, in some quarters, as an ‘absolute’ (*The Literary Absolute*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 1978). Walter Benjamin described the ‘birthplace of the novel’ as ‘the solitary individual’ – a free agent, cut off from tradition, who could no longer claim to be the mouthpiece of religion or society. As soon as this ‘solitary individual’ was elevated to the status of an *alter deus*, the essential belatedness – as well as arbitrariness – of human creativity became glaringly obvious. William Marx has analysed how the overstated claims made for literature in France at the end of the eighteenth century, led (in his view) to its long-term decline (*L’Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d’une dévalorisation, XVIIIe-XXe siècles*, 2005).

If the death-of-literature motif goes all the way back to Antiquity, it becomes ubiquitous in the twentieth century, intersecting with – or even subsuming – other anxieties over the decline of reading or (Western) civilisation. D. H. Lawrence’s 1920s essays on the subject are typically ambiguous. At times the novelist seems unsure whether the novel is ‘on his death-bed’ or ‘just toddling round his cradle’. At others, he is convinced it has a glorious future as the only vehicle capable of conveying the relativity of human life: ‘Its future is to take the place of gospels, philosophies, and the present-day novel as we know it’. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick remarks, the novel’s obituaries are often ‘simultaneously birth announcements, clearing away the old to make way for the new’, but the future of fiction which is thus outlined usually turns out to be itself a fiction – a Platonic ideal to aspire to rather than a practical blueprint to follow. The Jena Romantics, who were the first to pitch the novel as *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the late 1790s, ended up producing mainly fragmentary work rather than the total book they had envisaged in theoretical terms. The modern writer – i.e. the novelist – may be free from most external constraints, but this very freedom opens up a chasm between conception (the imagined work) and realisation (its compromised execution). I suspect that the discourse surrounding the death of the novel serves, in part, to maintain a dialogue between actual novels and the virtual Novel they aspire to but invariably fall short of.

José Ortega y Gasset was more pessimistic than Lawrence. In 1925

he argued that all the great themes were being depleted, leading to both a lack of originality – the novel was no longer novel – and an attendant overreliance on imagination and style. The genre, according to the Spanish philosopher, was cannibalising itself; disappearing up its *ars rhetorica*. The aforementioned Walter Benjamin also diagnosed a ‘Crisis of the Novel’ (1930) in his landmark review of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Far from lamenting it, however, he lauded Alfred Döblin’s montage technique for exploding both the structure and style of bourgeois fiction, thereby paving the way (with a nod to Hegel) for a new kind of epic. In similarly pioneering fashion, Robert Coover would welcome the ‘polyvocal’ possibilities of hypertext, particularly its ability to disrupt linear narrative (‘The End of Books’, *The New York Times*, 21 June 1992). Concerns that literature will be superseded by new-fangled technology are, predictably, far more common. Sam Byers writes that ‘if there is one common thread through the multiple deaths of the novel, it is that most of the time technology is somehow implicated’ (*The End of the End of Everything: Fiction’s Fretful Futures*, 2013). For Jules Verne, in 1902, the culprit was newspapers. For his descendants, the threat comes from the television box set (Robert Harris), the Internet (Jonathan Franzen, Will Self) or, more generally, the proliferation of screens (Philip Roth).

On the eve of the unspeakable horrors of the Second World War, Theodor Adorno announced that ‘the carcass of words’ was all we had left. Language had been irredeemably debased by advertising and propaganda; corrupted by abuse and overuse (Mallarmé’s ‘usage of the tribe’). In 1949 he went on to declare that writing poetry after Auschwitz was downright ‘barbaric’ (a judgement he would later reassess in light of Paul Celan’s work). Other authors have been overwhelmed by a similar sense of the futility – and even obscenity – of writing following tragic events like 9/11 (in the case of Jay McInerney) or Covid-19 (in that of Sarah Perry). Friedrich Hölderlin had already raised this issue when he wondered what poets were for ‘in a destitute time’ (‘Bread and Wine’, 1801).

In 1954 Harold Nicolson announced that the genre was moribund, not because it was too fanciful (as José Ortega y Gasset had claimed) but, on the contrary, because fact was now stranger than fiction. This notion

that the novel is ill-equipped to express the complexity and vitality of the modern world would lie at the heart of *Reality Hunger* (2010), David Shields' controversial paean to the 'lyric essay'.

Brion Gysin – the artist and writer to whom we owe the cut-up technique (or at least its reinvention) – complained, in 1959, that fiction was lagging fifty years behind painting. Alain Robbe-Grillet would doubtless have concurred. The French author was unsure whether the New Novel he was devising would turn out to be a rebirth or a last hurrah, but the works he and his fellow *nouveaux romanciers* produced were innovative in a way that is simply no longer conceivable today. *For a New Novel*, his collection of essays published in 1963, remains one of the most devastating critiques of what we would now call literary fiction, which is usually nothing but the novel's mummification in its nineteenth-century incarnation: realism *après la lettre*, with a few digital knobs on. Adducing the famous Waterloo scene in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), he underlines that the novel was already straining against the strictures of realism in Balzac's heyday. And yet innovators such as Kafka, Faulkner or Beckett continue to be insidiously sidelined, their works held up as brilliant exceptions that prove the rule. He goes on to demonstrate how all the trappings of the Balzacian project were designed to reproduce a stable 'entirely decipherable world'. The novelist's task was to do this deciphering – to unearth the hidden meaning of the world by sounding the hearts and minds of their rounded, all-conquering characters (themselves a reflection of the triumph of bourgeois individualism). Detecting traces of this outmoded humanist outlook in the unlikeliest of places – Sartre's *Nausea*, Camus' *The Stranger* and even the poetry of Francis Ponge – Robbe-Grillet cautions against the use of anthropomorphic analogies: all those seemingly harmless similes or metaphors that convey the sense of a secret communion between human beings and their environment. Unlike his neo-realist foes, Robbe-Grillet does not seek to domesticate or dominate the world 'by assigning it a meaning'. The world, in his work, does not mean anything – which does not mean that it is meaningless either. Characters observe it but it does not look back, and this lack of reciprocity is experienced as neither tragic nor absurd: 'Since it is chiefly in its presence that the world's reality resides, our task is now to create a literature which takes that presence into account'. It

is indeed the visible – concealed by layer upon layer of hackneyed phrases and stultifying doctrines (including the realist literary convention) – that is rendered invisible to us. Thus newly envisaged, the novel becomes an instrument of discovery of the world rather than a means of duplication or interpretation. This discovery takes place in and through language; it goes hand in hand with the emergence of the novel's form, which constitutes its own reality. Art, the author reminds us, is not the embellishment of a message: it is the message itself.

John Barth mentions Robbe-Grillet in 'The Literature of Exhaustion' – a very nuanced, witty, and surprisingly conservative essay, which is often misconstrued as 'one more Death of the Novel or Swan Song of Literature piece'. The issue, for him, is not whether the novel is dead or alive (he clearly believes the latter), but that a large number of his contemporaries should 'feel apocalyptic about it'. This feeling, he argues, has reached critical mass, therefore becoming a 'considerable cultural fact' whether it is true or not. The way out is to exploit these felt ultimacies, à la Nabokov or Borges, by producing works 'about the environment in which writing novels is no longer possible'. Barth suspects, however, that the novel may well have lost its cultural centrality. In this he anticipates Will Self's 2014 *Guardian* piece, 'The Novel is Dead (This Time it's Real)', but unlike Self, he does not believe that a return to modernism is any more feasible than a return to naturalism, both literary forms belonging to their own times and both having been largely exhausted. The same year – 1967 – Gore Vidal asserted that the literary world was now in denial: 'we shall go on for quite a long time talking of books and writing books, pretending all the while not to notice that the church is empty and the parishioners have gone elsewhere to attend other gods'. Lars Iyer also considers that the show is well and truly over (*The White Review*, November 2011). Literature, he says, only endures as a 'pantomime of itself' – a 'parody of past forms'. It is no longer possible to follow Ezra Pound's injunction to make it new, because 'originality itself no longer has the ability to surprise us'. Now that there are 'more novelists than readers', the very concept of authorship has vanished, 'replaced by a legion of keystroke labourers, shoulder to shoulder with the admen and app developers'. Serious writers today do not only feel belated vis-à-vis

their illustrious predecessors – vide the anxiety of influence – but also with regard to literature itself.

In the late 1960s, the novel was often declared dead or dying by critics (like Susan Sontag) who deplored writers' attachment to the well-made format. By the early 1990s the argument was usually that English departments had been hijacked by cultural studies, Theory or political correctness gone mad (see, for instance, Harold Bloom's broadsides against the 'School of Resentment' or Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*, 1992). By then, the novel – which was once meant to fuse poetry and philosophy, encompassing all other genres – had been reduced to Booker-style literary fiction. This probably reinforced the autofictional turn that originated from Truman Capote's 'faction', Joan Didion's essays and Roland Barthes's 'biographemes' and has been best illustrated by Elizabeth Hardwick, Geoff Dyer, Sheila Heti, Chris Kraus, Karl Ove Knausgård or Rachel Cusk. According to Rob Doyle, this 'distinct drift away from fiction' is due to the novel having largely fulfilled its historical role: 'There is no longer as much drive as there once was to construct fictitious realities and illusions of character. The tendency rather is to channel imagination into framing and aestheticising the real' (*Autobibliography*, 2021).

So, is the game over now? Probably not. For Maurice Blanchot, it is the impossibility of ever producing a complete work – a materialisation of the Absolute in codex form (Mallarmé's 'Le Livre', Borges's 'total book' – that 'catalog of catalogs' rumoured to be lurking on some dusty shelf in the Library of Babel – or Wittgenstein's evocation of a tome that would 'destroy all the other books in the world') – that preserves literature as possibility. The novel, echoes Tom McCarthy, has been 'living out its own death' ever since *Don Quixote*, the 'experience of failure' being integral to its DNA. If it were not dying, the novel would not be alive.