

# The Emergence of a Meta-Genre: The Historical Novel and the Modernization of the Novel

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*The aim of the article is to situate the historical novel within the history of the novel. It is argued that the great pioneers of the historical novel in the 19th century are pivotal within a tendency that could be called "the modernization of the novel". The 19th-century historical novels confirm the modernization tendency both on a semantic level and on a compositional level. They pay attention to the contingencies of everyday life as well as to the "openended" dialogical nature of the fictional world.*

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## **Formulation of a Problem: Two Tendencies in the History of the Novel**

The modernization of epic genres, a gradual process that started with the Italian Renaissance, is a complex process within which several stages and certain clear contrasts can nevertheless be distinguished. The modern novel of the 18th and 19th centuries deviates from medieval and classicist styles of writing by introducing two remarkable textual strategies. On the one hand, the modern novel seeks an expansion of its semantic universe and tries to integrate random events from the non-literary world – in other words, there is a change at the semantic level, at the level of the worldview. On the other hand, the totality of random events in the fictional world is conceived in a new way too – a change at a macrosyntactic or compositional level, at the level of the construction of the fictional world. Both textual strategies can be seen as meta-generic interventions. The modern novel likes to play with speech genres taken from the everyday world (letters, anecdotes, common conversation, and even jokes) and, through this expansion of its semantic universe, takes on its now familiar, modern

character. At the compositional level, the meta-generic tendency can be described by envisaging the modern novel as a kind of parasite that feeds on older narrative patterns. As I show at the end of my paper, both meta-generic tendencies are vital for the 19th-century historical novel. The novels of Sir Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas (père) did not create a new genre in the margin of the great novelists. On the contrary – as Georg Lukács demonstrated in his famous essay on the historical novel – the writers of historical novels are key novelists in the process of the modernization of the novel. The textual strategies they developed influenced writers like Balzac and Zola and made the meta-generic text fashionable in the “belles lettres.”

The historiography of the modern novel (and this is the central thesis today) must take into account these two revolutionary tendencies: the semantic reorientation as well as new conceptions with regard to the composition of the novel. To put it more technically, the two textual strategies can be called developments in the “motivation” of the novel. Boris Tomashevsky conceived this term to show that a novel is only an esthetic object if the arbitrarily chosen parts of the text are incorporated into an artistic unity. Each introduction of a motif must be motivated; that is, justified via a causal explanation: “If the individual motifs, or a complex of motifs, are not sufficiently suited to the work, if the reader feels that the relationship between certain complexes of motifs and the work itself is obscure, then that complex is said to be superfluous. If all the parts of the work are badly suited to one another, the work is incoherent. That is why the introduction of each separate motif or complex of motifs must be motivated” (Tomashevsky 171). These two tendencies in the novel are connected to two of the three motivation types distinguished by Tomashevsky. On the one hand, coherence at a semantic level follows a new pattern and, on the other hand, the novel will gradually evolve into a different compositional coherence. By discussing both tendencies in detail, I show how they can contribute to defining the adjective “modern” in the concept “modern novel,” and how they can explain why the novel took a revolutionary turn in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries and achieved its modern aspect in the 19th century.

### **The first Tendency: The Rise of the Contingent-everyday in the Semantic Universe of the Novel**

The semantic reorientation that characterizes the modern novel can be typified most clearly by contrasting the *motivation* in realist poetics with

the classicist ideal of credibility. During the transition from classical style movements (Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, and Classicism) to modern novel styles, the novel's subject matter underwent a clear evolution: the fondness for exalted subjects gradually gave way to a preference for everyday topics. Following Lukács, it can be argued that the modern novel focuses on a problematic world. Indeed, for Lukács, the staging of a problematic individual in a God-forsaken world is the core of novel-writing. The role of the random is frequently emphasized for this tendency. Chance is an invention of the modern subject in the sense that the subject is fascinated with the immanent processes of everyday life to such an extent that he gradually distances himself from the theological and metaphysical explanations of the contingent that have been dominant since the Middle Ages. The opposite of the fascination with the everyday can be found in the ideal of loftiness that haunts many forms of classicist art and that also characterizes older epic literature. The exalted can easily be associated with the opposite of chance; namely, providence – God's messianic plan and the natural order that He set down in nature and in the social world.

The transition from providence thinking to chance thought plays a crucial role in Köhler's study on "Der literarische Zufall." In older genres, he states, the characters are under the constellation of the classical ideal of credibility. The random is stashed away in the causality compulsion of an eschatological worldview; for Sir Lancelot for instance, nothing is random as such but instead refers to great metaphysical forces. Köhler correctly stresses that a forceful aristocratic ideology is hidden behind the apparently random in a romance of chivalry: "Damit ihm auch wirklich zu-fällt, was ihm zu-kommt, begibt der Protagonist des Artusromans sich auf die Suche nach der aventure – aventura. /.../ Die queste des höfischen Ritters integriert im Abenteuer den Zufall in einen universalgeschichtlichen Kontext, der sich in den Gralromanen zur ritterlichen eschatologie steigert" (29). It is typical for the exalted message of a romance of chivalry that the random is situated in a metaphysical and dogmatic-social context. A suprapersonal social destiny and a suprapersonal destiny of being are the goals that make any arbitrariness impossible. For a knight that goes out on adventure, everything has a meaning and no opposing force arises by accident: evil is a necessary component of a world that, in order to materialize, requires the contingent or the random. At the same time, the random adventure is constantly transformed into a world order that is beyond all contingency, a world order that refers to the transcendental. Just as the *Geist* in Hegel can only materialize due to the apparently Other, so the necessary also materializes in the romance of chivalry thanks to

the apparently random. According to Köhler, this eschatological logic is also still noticeable in the character of Don Quixote, but Cervantes' hero is a modern hero precisely because, in the end, he can no longer deny the painful secularization of chance.

Bakhtin properly typified the transition between both semantic universes in his thesis on the "incompleteness of the novel," which he defends in *Epic and Novel*. He views premodern genres like the epic and the romances of chivalry as "complete," while the novel is in essence "incomplete." After all, completeness denotes a semantic homogeneity, a fictional strategy to present the semantic universe of the novel as a closed entity that is uniformly maintained in a strictly constructed manner. The romance of chivalry and the epic are indeed good examples; they are rooted in a culture in which moral codes are relatively stable and in which events can always receive a deeper, symbolic meaning. The makers of closed fictional worlds view narrative events from afar, and present and interpret them from an Archimedean standpoint: "Thanks to this epic distance which excludes any possibility of activity and change," according to Bakhtin, "the epic world achieves a radical degree of completedness not only in its content but in its meaning and its values as well. The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image" (*Epic* 17). In another essay, Bakhtin elaborates on this idea more carefully. In his comparative study of narrative chronotopes, he notes that the epic world of the Greek romance is "an alien world: everything in it is indefinite, unknown, foreign" (Bakhtin, *Forms of Time* 101). This study defines the opposite of the epic more precisely. Owing to his analysis of the picaresque novel, he argues that the semantic condition of the fictional world in the modern period changes profoundly in the modern period. He illustrates this with reference to the chronotope of the road, a semantic element that can be regarded as a grid for the entire worldview of the modern novel. With the chronotope of the road, the novel enters the everyday and fictional events will occur in the changing world of familiar surroundings: "the road is always one that passes through familiar territory, and not through some exotic alien world /.../; it is the socio-historical heterogeneity of one's own country that is revealed and depicted" (Bakhtin, *Forms of Time* 245). The significance of Bakhtin's observation is situated in the possibility of relating the literature of the everyday to a new semantic universe that views the credibility of random events differently. The modern semantic universe is an open system in which the heterogeneous and multiform events of a thoroughly random universe occupy center stage, rather than the homogenous events and events marked by uniform moral codes. "The road is especially (but not exclusively) appropriate for portraying events governed by chance.

This explains the important narrative role of the road in the history of the novel” (Bakhtin, *Forms of Time* 243–44). In modernity, the world of the novel becomes a domain in which everything occurs as if we were on the road in everyday life. It is the everyday causality in which the causes concern the coincidences of “being on the road.” The cause of an event is the banal fact that different roads cross one another. Modern man does not ask any metaphysical questions simply because he already assumes that the material world follows different laws than the spiritual world, and also that the social order does not ascribe privileged functions to certain groups. On the contrary, the divine social order and divine providence are no longer credible. Heroes are no longer defined *a priori* by an artificial closed world with fixed moral and social codes.

For Bakhtin, the introduction of the everyday boils down to the fact that space is created for a fictional world that is not complete and that has a fundamentally “open” character. The modern novel will frequently use older epic motifs but, when these genres are imported, this will go hand in hand with the new semantic universe: for example, the quest is introduced in many picaresque stories but without the metaphysical undercurrent that determined the motif in romance or in the epic. According to Bakhtin, we are dealing with a tendency that can be generalized and that is constitutive for the definition of the “modern novel:” “/T/he novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present)” (Bakhtin, *Epic* 7).

## **The second Tendency: from Eschatological to Dialogical Plot Patterns**

In order to arrive at a workable definition of the “modern novel,” causal logic may be a necessary condition at the semantic level, but it is not a sufficient condition. For a modern novel, there needs to be a second form of causality; namely, the dialogic composition form. Through a contrast between, on the one hand, strictly teleological composition patterns (which I shall call eschatological plot structures) and the open structure of the dialogical plot on the other hand, the novel’s causality principles can be shown to be subject to a process of modernization at the level of the novel’s composition as well.

Using Tomashevsky’s term, causality at the level of the macrostructure of a text can be called “compositional motivation.” The introduction of motifs must be made believable through its plausible and coherent order-

ing within the whole of the plot structure. In premodern story types, the compositional motivation passes off relatively rigorously. For instance, the classical tragedy is a tightly ordered series of acts that, as Aristotle notes, must demonstrate a certain necessity. Although this is by no means the case for all stories, the majority of products from our narrative culture nevertheless display this tendency. Gerald Prince states: “Many narratives can be viewed as teleologically determined. Narrative often displays itself in terms of an end that functions as its (partial) condition, its magnetizing force, its organizing principle” (157). In such teleological compositions, the global story arc that is imposed on the plot is significant. The story evolves from a state of disequilibrium toward a balanced final situation. French structuralist narratology – Todorov and Greimas especially – frequently used this type of composition as a point of departure for formalist descriptions of plot structures. More important, however, is the conclusion that this teleological logic functions according to the outline of an eschatological story. Tightly composed stories start from a value system that precedes the contingent acts that are mentioned in the story. This value system can be a system of mythical or religious beliefs, or of bourgeois truths such as virtue, individual happiness, and so on. Whatever the specific value pattern, it will be accepted in the story as an *a priori* fact and will play a crucial part in the composition of the fictional world. The value system explains the hero’s actions and the direction in which the story evolves. In the course of the story, these values appear to materialize with great difficulty; like the Messiah in the Christian eschatological story, the heroes battle with the negative forces in the contingent world, but eventually succeed in enforcing non-contingent, universal values on this decayed world. Such stories are, moreover, eschatological because they present the end of the story as the ultimate victory of the fundamental value system. An eschatological plot outline will indeed culminate in a revelation; in the *eschaton* (Greek for ‘ultimate moment’ or ‘fundamental instance’) the story will show the double meaning of the word *apokalypsein* ‘revealing’: the contingent world will perish but, at the same time, the truth of the value system will be revealed. After all, the story ending is the cornerstone of the composition for premodern stories. Such stories are highly dependent on goal-oriented actions, and these actions have to be constricted in a tight, “closed” structure.

The plot of such teleologically stories can be called “a plot of action,” using the term of the neo-Aristotelian narratologist Ronald Crane. According to Crane, a typical action plot is the plot of *Tom Jones*, a story in which the hero must overcome a great deal of carnal and moral weakness and numerous peripetias of fate in order to finally manifest himself

as a morally righteous and happy individual. “A plot in this sense – the sense in which modern novelists pride themselves on having got rid of plot – can be pronounced good in terms simply of the variety of incidents it contains, the amount of suspense and surprise it evokes, and the ingenuity with which all the happenings in the beginning and middle are made to contribute to the resolution of the end” (Crane 95). Crane’s statement in the quote that modern novelists abandon such plot concepts is remarkable. In *Tom Jones*, he implicitly argues, the novel has yet to reach its ultimate “modern” form. Even though this novel is one of the first highlights of the modern novel at the level of the semantic strategies and the tendency towards the everyday, its closed plot structure would indeed be labeled premodern by many novelists of the 19th and 20th century. As far as the composition is concerned, *Tom Jones* has more in common with the romance of chivalry and the epic than with the open structures of Balzac or James.

Thus, the question we need to ask is: how does the plot structure of the modern novel differ from its premodern predecessor? Moreover, is there a specific form of causality that makes the modern novel deviate from tradition? In other words, the question is whether a different form of causality features in the romanesque process of modernization. My hypothesis is that the logic of causality of the novel does indeed change character and that, with regard to the modern novel, there is a gradual replacement of the old eschatological plot structures by a new plot structure I would like to call dialogical. The main reason for introducing the concept “dialogical” is the fact that dramatic principles get the upper hand in relation to the strict action logic of the older story structures. Just as the novelist is no longer able, at a semantic level, to observe a form of transcendent inevitability in reality, he or she will also develop another view of causality at a compositional level, in the structure of the narrative development. Stories no longer have to represent actions in the function of the story’s dénouement – also called “the closure” by Rabinowitz – but they have to investigate these actions and attempt to describe them adequately. In brief, they cannot dwell too long on an eschatological composition principle, but must sketch the events in their dialectic complexity. The narratologists of the Chicago School (like Crane, Booth, and Rabinowitz) argue that a modern novel must equally pay attention to forms of causality other than the merely chronological causality of the actions. They hold the neo-Aristotelian view that stories, apart from style (speech or “diction”), must be seen as a conglomeration of action patterns (a plot), characters, and ideas. It is in fact primarily the causality of the character system that can be called one of the revolutionary contributions of the modern novel to

literary history. Every novel, according to Ronald Crane, must be regarded as a combined action of three forces or causes: “It is impossible /.../ to state adequately what any plot is unless we include in our formula all three of the elements or causes of which the plot is the synthesis; and it also follows that plots will differ in structure according as one or another of the three causal ingredients is employed as the synthesizing principle. There are, thus, plots of action, plots of character, and plots of thought” (Crane 97).

Based on this plot theory, it can be argued that *Tom Jones* pays a great deal of attention to the characters that carry the action – after all, the novel is often labeled a novel of manners – but that the text’s coherence is primarily situated in the action logic hidden behind the events. The compositional motivation – which is responsible for this coherence – is all about the eschatological action plot.

A novel that, compositionally speaking, deserves the epithet “modern” will achieve coherence based more on a plot of character – a plot that focuses on the dialogue between the moral positions of the characters. A coherence based on a plot of character is certainly one of the most innovative elements in the novel. José Ortega y Gasset’s statement in *Notes on the Novel* (1927) about the “disappearance of the plot” possibly contains the clearest reference to the conceptual contrast that I want to bring into focus here: “In its beginnings the plot may have seemed to form its most important part. Later it appeared that what really matters is not the story that is told but that the story, whatever it might be, should be told well” (Ortega 63). In accordance with Henry James’s remarks on “telling” and “showing,” Ortega regards the “told well” of the modern novel as a whole of techniques that the novel borrows from drama: “From being narrative and indirect the novel has become direct and descriptive” (62). He further explicitly argues that there is a contrast between the modern novel and premodern prose forms or its epigones – epics, romances of chivalry, adventure stories, dime novels, and serials (80–81). Whereas the latter are based on concrete action, “which moves as fast as possible toward a conclusion” (Ortega 80–81), the modern novel will depart from different principles: “the order must be inverted: the action or plot is not the substance of a novel but its scaffolding, its mechanical prop. The essence of the novel – that is to say, of the modern novel with which alone I am here concerned – does not lie in what happens but precisely in the opposite: in the personages, pure living, in their being and being thus, above all, in the ensuing milieu” (87).

Thus, the modern in the composition of the novel seems to be situated at the level of the “plot of character.” Characters and their dialogue



with their environment (social forces as well as the psychological forces that are inherent to the character) are indeed at the center. As a result, the “closure,” the teleological focus on a final resolution of the story, is devalued. Teleology is still possible, but this principle no longer dominates the composition. Rabinowitz states that “one of the primary targets for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists has been closure itself. /.../ I would argue that many realistic writers prefer endings in which the full consequences of the events portrayed /.../ are neither worked out nor clearly implied” (307). He observes this in *Crime and Punishment* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but – and here I refer to Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination* – the novels of Balzac and James equally excel in “unresolved endings.” These are all novels in which characters are foregrounded and which, via the characters, provide the plot with tension from the inside. The ending of the novel is more a reconciliation between viewpoints or a statement of a permanent “dramatic” tension between characters. Bakhtin equally observed this. He views premodern genres like the epic and the romances of chivalry as “complete,” whereas the novel is in essence “incomplete.” On the one hand, the novel no longer has the epic certainty that the described events have, with a predetermined sense and meaning. On the other hand, “incomplete” also means that the novel no longer has a fixed shape and that a novel instead has to constantly reinvent its own formal characteristics. In this sense, each novel composition is contingent. It distinguishes itself by creating ever-changing new combinations of older generic patterns: “The novel gets on poorly with other genres. The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accenting them” (Bakhtin, *Epic* 5). The novel as it were quotes the older forms of literature and comments on them. The modern novel frequently uses a plot of action to give body to the characters. For instance, the love stories and adventurous events in Balzac are used to characterize the psychology or the ethical choices of the characters. The overall plot structure can be viewed as a conflict between the characters; yet, at a deeper level, one can observe that the tension between the characters is connected to the different plots of actions that the characters carry with them. In this sense, the modern novel, with its psychological portrayals, its emotional conflicts and ethical problems, is a meta-genre that makes use of the generic instruments of Western narrative tradition. The novel has become a meta-genre into which all existing structures can be incorporated.

## The Case of the Historical Novel

The first aspect of the modernization of the novel can easily be found in the works of the pioneers of the 19th century. Scott and Dumas pay a great deal of attention to the details and contingencies of everyday life. It does not matter that the world they describe is not the contemporary everyday context; they depict characters in an immanent world that is ruled by chance and by the volatile desires of the human psyche.

However, the second tendency seems to be absent in the historical novel. Do the novels of Scott not end in a very harmonious manner with the achievement of one or another transcendent goal or ideal? In this sense, they could be called teleological texts with an eschatological plot. This probably explains why the genre failed to be taken seriously by the academic world. The historical novel did something that the modern novel wished to avoid: namely, it used dominant eschatological plot lines. Nevertheless, 19th-century historical novels also confirm the tendency toward modernization at the compositional level. In his late 19th-century study on Walter Scott, Louis Maigron argued that the historical novel primarily wants to “show” (cf. James’s “showing”) and no longer wishes to render a teleologically sound history: “dans un bon roman historique /.../ l'intrigue ne compte guère et ne saurait guère compter” (365). Georg Lukács continues along the same line by asserting that Scott’s historical novel does not fundamentally deviate from the realistic novel of his contemporaries: “both demonstrate how a fictional character’s thoughts and actions are determined by the social, political and economic structure of the society in which the character lives” (Heirbrant 10). I would like to subscribe to the viewpoints of both distinguished scholars because many elements in the historical novel demonstrate that this type of text emphasizes dialogicality as the foundation of the plot structure, even more so than the 18th-century realist novel. In this context I would like to refer to two arguments. First, Scott – together with Dumas – is a master of writing dialogues and creating tension by way of dialogues. These writers certainly do not rely solely on an exciting storyline. As a result, the plot becomes character-driven and deviates from the earlier eschatological plot line. Second, the historical novel is indeed related to the “open text” that Bakhtin characterizes as modern. The historical novel is a modern novel because the character is also transformed together with the contextual change; to such an extent even that Lukács regarded Scott as the predecessor of Balzac for that exact reason. It is entirely true that Scott’s novels (appearances notwithstanding) strongly deviate from the premodern novel. After all, the fictional world in eschatological stories remains abstract;

the adventurous world of the older epic is full of obstacles that serve only one purpose: to yield conflict material. In other words, the context of the characters differs from the way in which modern man views his world: change is absent, all values remain constant, and fate is ubiquitous and reigns with a strong religious or natural philosophical inevitability. Thus, the hero that contends with such a context has to be an equally unchanging, static hero. In a historical novel, as in other types of the modern novel, both context and hero are “modern:” they are inconstant and are able to adapt. This becomes most obvious in the dialogue between hero and context: the hero responds to his time, tries to intervene, and is affected by it. Bakhtin nicely summarizes the essence of the modern novel: “Changes in the hero himself acquire plot significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed” (*Bildungsroman* 21). This is most definitely the case in Walter Scott’s work. Maigron correctly argues that, for Scott, the intrigue (the eschatological plot) is of minor importance. Maigron probably meant that Scott conceives of the novel as a meta-genre and that his novel quotes older plot types in the function of the “plot of character” and of the historical fate of an *Ivanhoe*, a *Rob Roy*, or a *Waverley*.

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