
The History of the Realist Novel is paradoxical: it is the history of a literary system that spans the globe and yet consists of distinctly local performances. While intent on describing "everyday occurrences...accurately and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history" (these are Erich Auerbach's words [485]), the novel, more than any other literary genre, has demonstrated a remarkable formal portability, traveling virtually intact across cultures and languages and beyond historical circumstance (see Doody). Students of the novel will readily grant these "historical" facts, but there is less consensus regarding the question of how exactly the novel is able to perform these seemingly incompatible protocols. How can the novel be at once local, insular, even provincial, and yet worldly, universal, global? To what extent can the novel's representational specificity account for its verifiably global character?

Traditionally—and arguably this is still the dominant model today—the age-old distinction between form and content has been deployed to account for the double duty performed by the novel. According to this model, the novel's loose, though fairly stable, formal traits—character-centered story-telling, "thick" description, narrative focalization, standard plots, recurrent stylistic devices, the past as primary verbal tense, and so on—make it particularly well suited to the task of representing, in however mediated and complex a form, widely varying local environments without significant loss of structural integrity. In a familiar projection of this account, national literatures are defined by the particular content they bring to bear on a ready-made form generically marked by the experience of the nation; the novel then becomes, by implication, a world literary form that can be transposed from one nation to another even as the transposition itself registers the existence (or marks the emergence) of a recognizably modern form of political and social organization. The seeming discontinuity obtaining...
between the specificity found in national literatures and the universality of a single Weltliteratur is thus neatly resolved by positing the singularity of local content against the generality of a plurivalent global form.1

Before proposing a different set of terms for reading the novel in the age of globalization, I want to consider this tendency with reference to two texts that are informed by, and have in turn informed, developments and debates in recent critical genealogies of the novel. Both Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983; revised 1991), a text whose influence in the cultural study of the novel has been widely felt for better than a decade, and Franco Moretti's Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900 (1998), a more recent but no less important contribution to the sociological study of the novel, give compelling reasons for considering the nineteenth-century novel as a powerful vehicle of cultural self-representation by means of which the modern nation state could be symbolically grasped by its citizens. In their accounts a specific national reality circumscribed by spatial and temporal modalities newly within reach of individual human experience finds a successful representational vehicle in the spatial and temporal coordinates charted by the traditional novel. Differences of emphasis and of disciplinary approach (Anderson is a social scientist, Moretti a literary historian) mark their otherwise complementary arguments: while Anderson may be said to novelize the nation, Moretti attempts to nationalize the novel.

The role of the novel in Anderson's account of the formation of the nation as an "imagined community" revolves around the treatment of time in traditional narrative. For Anderson, the novel is ideally suited to the presentation of temporal simultaneity in what he calls, borrowing the term from Walter Benjamin, "homogeneous empty time" or, alternatively, a "complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" (25). By staging a performance situation in which disparate characters act simultaneously without actually occupying the same narrative space, the novel creates the conditions of possibility for imagining a community in which members, though unknown to one another, share a common sense of belonging. In this model, novel readers—Anderson calls them "omniscient readers," assimilating without apparent contradiction the traditional description of the "omniscient narrator" to the act of reading—are able to perceive "at once" character (A) telephoning character (C) while character (B) is out shopping and character (D) is either playing pool or getting drunk at a bar. As he puts it: "That all these acts are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time, but by actors who may be largely unaware of one another, shows the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his readers' mind" (26). This in turn allows Anderson to make the following claim about the nation: "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community

---

1 This is reflected in, and is in part a reflection of, the perhaps now outdated disciplinary division that separates departments of national literatures from those devoted to the study of comparative literature, a division which bears the traces of this compromise: the local, historically structured study of a nation's literature (regardless of genre) and the presumably global, ostensibly theoretically informed comparative study of different forms (such as genres).
moving steadily down (or up) history” (26). For Anderson, the conception of simultaneity enacted by the form of the novel provides the technical means for “re-presenting” the nation as an imagined community, now graspable by human subjects newly released from an older sense of temporality marked by mythical prefiguration and divine fulfillment.

It is important to note that for Anderson the role of the novel in the formation of the nation is not privative: the novel is only one among several discursive technologies that permit the apprehension of the nation as an imagined community. In Anderson’s model the novel, together with newspapers and what he calls “print-capitalism” generally, made it “historically possible” for growing numbers of peoples to think of themselves in the context of a nation state. Indeed, locating the origin of the modern nation in the Americas, Anderson claims priority in the construction of national narratives for the bureaucratic pilgrimages of “creole functionaries” within the administrative units of the Spanish empire. The “shared fatality of trans-Atlantic birth” created the conditions for a form of “fellowship” to emerge among creole “travelling-companions” that, together with their use of print technology after the wars of independence in the early 1800s, gave rise to the imagined form of the modern nation. I return to the figure of the “creole functionary” below.

Extrapolating some of Anderson’s key insights, Moretti makes an even stronger claim in his Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900: it is not just that the novel was capable of representing the nation to its citizens during the nineteenth century; the nation itself needed the novel to come into being as a symbolic “home” capable of turning “local loyalties”—village, city, region—into a sense of “national loyalty.” With Jane Austen, the nation is invented as an intermediate space: large enough to sustain itself, but small enough to be thought of as a relatively autonomous entity. This invented space, according to Moretti, “wasn’t obvious” before Austen: “Readers needed a symbolic form capable of making sense of the nation-state . . . but . . . no one had really come up with it” (20). The “Relative Distance” discovered by Austen’s heroines as they plot the narrative of their marriage allows them to project emotional meaning into the national space and, in the form of their stories, reconcile, through the logic of the marriage market, society’s internal divisions: country vs. city; land vs. money. Deftly threading his argument with instances of what he elsewhere calls “distant reading” (see “Conjectures”), Moretti makes a compelling case for using maps to decode the logic of the European novel’s disparate sub-genres, such that the novel of ideas, the historical novel, and the Bildungsroman each in its own way contributes to the formation of the idea of the nation in the (European) context of other nations. Moretti maps the space of the nation itself as a geographical matrix wrested from other possible matrices capable of generating narrative, with the novel becoming the privileged narrative form within or by means of which the spatial logic of the nation comes to take imaginative shape.

To be sure, the temporal and spatial models deployed by Anderson and Moretti go some way in explaining the novel’s cultural dominance during the age of nation-building and provide expertly reasoned arguments for supposing the interconnectedness of nation and novel. Yet these models are based on a mostly
unproblematized conception of the novel’s representational efficacy that not only assumes its referential infallibility, but, in doing so, also assigns to it an active or, properly, performative function that is never recognized, as though it were, like ideology itself, so transparent as to need no formal acknowledgement. By claiming that nations can be literally “imagined” (Anderson) or literally “mapped” (Moretti)—indeed, novelized—into existence in accordance with the temporal and spatial schemes of fictional narrative, these models actually collapse performative models of discursive action into figural ones that posit the interchangeability of literary form and geopolitical formation. The novel’s involvement in complex processes of cultural self-representation such as those that give rise to the imagined and indeed imaginary contours of the modern nation may well be as crucial for the demarcation of its geophysical contours as are acts of war, peace treaties, the purchase of territories, and declarations of independence; yet, to describe the novel as a “temporal analogue” to the nation (Anderson) or as a “symbolic space” (Moretti) that inevitably leads to it fails to account fully for how the novel actually does the things they claim it does.²

The confusion of performative with figurative functions of language that marks these models helps to mask a deeper ideological presupposition subverting the arguments about the worldwide reach of the novel. In order to explain the portability of the form and, implicitly, its eventual global orbit, Anderson and Moretti must resort to economic paradigms—“print-capitalism” for the former, “world markets” for the latter—that take as their blueprint the history of European colonialism and neo-colonialism but fail to register how the novel might bear the traces of this violent history. From its “origins” in Britain and France, the novel travels around the globe in step with capitalism: wherever there bourgeois a local bourgeoisie, there the novel (and the modern nation state) will thrive.³ In this scenario, the novel enters into an all too familiar narrative of economic development in which “advanced” and thus presumably global Western culture provides a ready-made form that “underdeveloped” or “developing” non-Western cultures can then adapt to local content as though the novel, like the nation state at the height of the Cold War, could be ranked and then neatly boxed into one of three unevenly developed worlds.⁴ Moreover, their avowals about the novel as a “world-system” to the contrary, Anderson and Moretti create a map of the novel’s travels in which the novel’s form qua form remains squarely entrenched within a national framework, presumably entering the global stage in a world already

² I mention the “form of the novel” here because, while time and temporality are certainly treated as content before Proust (the Historical novel since Scott would be a case in point), in Anderson’s argument “homogenous empty time” is a formal category as is space in Moretti’s model. Even here, however, the form/content binary collapses under its own weight since their claims rest on the methodological assumption that with respect to the nation form should be read as content, perhaps even the content of the novel. See below.

³ For an explicit elaboration of this argument, already implicitly contained in Moretti’s Atlas, see his essay “The Slaughterhouse of Literature.”

⁴ If third-world literature, in Fredric Jameson’s cheerless phrase, is a “national allegory,” to what extent does the compromise between Western global form and non-Western local content allegorize the “embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (“Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” 89)?
divided into nations. It is hard to imagine how the novel’s productive powers can participate in the creation of imaginary communities if the novel-form is “national” only to the extent that it is able to capture local content by means of otherwise global formal devices. The form/content dichotomy on which hinges the sort of relation between novel and nation that Anderson and Moretti attempt to map begins to lose its explanatory power when we consider that the “origin” of each assumes the priority of the other. For Anderson, the modern nation-form has its “origin” in the New World and is somehow made possible by the sort of imaginative experience provided by the already existing form of the novel; for Moretti, the novel has its “origin” in Western European nations (“England/Britain and France”) and is somehow made possible by the necessity of imagining the nation as a novelized or novelizable space whose prior existence as a nation is assumed.  

Anderson and Moretti are certainly not alone in reading the novel as a literary form that affects broad social patterns and that at times seems to effect them wholesale. Indeed, the last two decades have witnessed a shift of emphasis in novel studies from the definition of the novel as a literary type to an understanding of how novels intervene in society—a shift of emphasis, that is, from a description of what the novel is to an account of what it does. This trend can be traced both to the work of Edward Said, for whom literature cannot be detached from its “worldliness,” and to that of Fredric Jameson, for whom literature is a “socially symbolic act” with its own “aesthetic ideology.” The contributions of New Historicism to the study of the realist novel have since expanded and enriched our understanding of its production, dissemination, and reception. More recently, the notion of “cultural institution” has been used in an attempt to analyze the productive powers that novels exercise in culture and to foreground the social role of genre in the institutionalization of the novel. The result is a broad consensus that brings together diverse approaches and various points of application regarding the novel’s ability to do things; yet, with very few exceptions, none of these historicist studies offers in any significant detail plausible discursive mechanisms for explaining how novels might actually do what these critics claim they do. The no doubt formidable power of representation—upon which most of these studies base their (often only implicit) assumptions about the role of the

---

5 That the modern nation as a form was in fact “imagined,” “invented,” and in this sense “novelized” is not under dispute here; rather, I dispute the causal relation Anderson and Moretti assume exists between novel and nation. A more plausible account of the invention of Britishness, to give one example, is the one provided by Linda Colley, who in Britons persuasively argues that Great Britain as a nation was “an invention forged above all by war” with France (5). (I owe this reference to one of the anonymous readers of the essay.)

6 The term “worldliness” comes from Said’s The World, the Text, and the Critic; the term “socially symbolic act” comes from Jameson’s The Political Unconscious. For an elaboration of the term “aesthetic ideology” see the latter: form provides an “imaginary of formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (79).

7 For a wide-ranging appraisal of the place of the novel in cultural studies, see the introduction to Cultural Institutions of the Novel, edited by Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner. For a critical reading of the history of the “rise-of-the-novel” histories of the novel see Brown. For a New Historicist reappraisal of New Historicism’s role in institutionalizing novel studies see Gallagher and Greenblatt. For a reading of the novel as a disciplinary institution in its own right see D.A. Miller.
novel in society—is a necessary but not sufficient condition for explaining the historicity of literary form. Absent from these accounts is a consideration of the acts language performs when it operates in a non-referential, non-representational, non-figurative context—when it functions, that is, as a performative speech act. And even when the novel’s ability to shape the reality it describes is assumed and mention is made of the active force of novelistic discourse, the case for the performativity of the novel still needs to be made, as opposed simply to stating and accepting it as a self-evident fact. More is at stake in making this case than the possibility of literary history: a more robust theoretical account of the action, operation, and effects of performative language in the novel compels us to revise the terms we use in describing the social role of the novel and, accordingly, to qualify the claims its criticism routinely makes about the constitutive role of literature in the formation of cultural, political, and ethical fields.

The logical starting point for an account of the novel’s performativity, however, is also, as it turns out, a point of logical tension, since performative language and fictional discourse, acts and the representation of acts, seem to belong to incompatible linguistic orders and to carry out diametrically opposed linguistic functions. We are immediately confronted with terminological difficulties that have to do with the conceptually necessary but practically impossible task of isolating the non-referential pole of language within the novel, a discursive medium that lays claim to a binding referential relation to reality. The problem can be succinctly expressed as follows. The distinction between the constative and performative dimensions of language—a distinction originally posited by J.L. Austin in How to Do Things with Words—provides grounds on which to dismiss or disregard the operation of performative language in the novel, whose discourse is considered non-serious or “parasitic” and thus not liable to function like ordinary language (a fictional character’s “I do” is categorically non-binding in the world of legislated marriage). As Jacques Derrida and others after him have shown, however, this distinction is much less stable than the exclusion of the performative from the novel might imply: the performance of an act and its representation are never far apart and, in practice, impossible to separate (a fictional character’s “I do” is indistinguishable from mine). So while the performative may well remain inaccessible as act within the representational parameters the novel draws for itself, the performative force of language is still operative at the level of linguistic materiality. What Derrida calls the “iterability” of words

---

* In brief, performative speech acts are utterances that do something in or by the saying of something, and constative speech acts are utterances that describe or constate something to which true/false criteria can then be applied. Jacques Derrida asserts that this crucial distinction “will have been a great event in this century,” even as he complicates its presuppositions and, as we shall see below, critiques its uses and effects within the mondialisation du monde, his preferred formulation for what we term globalization. See “The University Without Condition” 209.

While celebrated readings in drama, autobiography, and poetry have made use of the categories first formulated by Austin, the novel has not been consistently submitted to the speculative pressure of speech act theory. This is curious, to say the least, since, more than any other genre, the realist novel has thoroughly assimilated the institutional force of the performative in its complex marriage and inheritance plots. For examples involving drama, see Felman, and Fish 197-245. For an example regarding autobiography, see Paul de Man’s “Excuses (Confessions).” For examples dealing with poetry, see Derrida, Singéponge/Signponge, and Johnson.
(the fact that they can be used anew in varying contexts) is made possible by a performative force of rupture that both breaches and broaches (entamer in French) disparate instances of utterance: a fictional character's "I do," or for that matter every word available to her and to me and to you, is liable to be repeated in a different context and thereby altered.3

But even if we move from this minimal consideration of the performative as a function inherent to all language use and look for the effects of this force at a considerable remove, in the novel's thematic, narrative, and rhetorical treatment of events, as well as its own event-ness, we find that the performative does in fact "infect" all novelistic utterance and that it does so unexpectedly in the hypostatized form of the speech act proper, thus becoming integral to the novel's textual functioning even as representational logic constantly works to repress and negate its violent, cutting, wounding, disfiguring textual force. Reading the performativity of the novel, we soon come to understand, necessarily implies reading the novel against the grain of its representational program of referential infallibility. It is only by paying close attention to all those moments of figural instability, structural anomaly, or logical incongruity that unsettle the very structures of reference we too readily assimilate to patterns of social agency that we can begin to detect the impact, and the systematic necessity, of the performative on the novel's representational program. To read the effects to which the performative submits the novel's discursive logic is thus also to disarticulate many of the assumptions commonly accepted about the novel's cultural efficacy, not the least remarkable of which is the causal link Moretti and Anderson establish between the novel and the nation.

So staged, the performativity of the novel calls for an empirical approach to the novel, one that will eventually and inevitably entail moments of close reading, but that begins with a more distant perspective on the novel's structures of reference. Leaving for the moment intact Austin's distinction regarding performative and constative utterances, we can identify several areas in which the novel can be said to refer to performative speech even if its force remains inactive or quiescent (like the spring on a trapdoor) within the novel's representational protocols. First of all, there is the paradoxical role of performative speech acts in the construction of narrative. If we examine the major plots that organize the traditional novel, we are immediately struck by how these plots narrate events that are very often brought off by performative speech acts. From the perspective of their narrative elaboration, events as common to the realist novel as marriage and inheritance, but also lawsuits, financial schemes, social mobility, crime and its detection, punishment, parliamentary acts, imperial misadventures, and even the political contours of the nation—in short, all those institutional rites accrediting and virtually constituting the growing middle classes—are in fact reducible to the performance of the speech acts that enable them to occur. Marriage, to take only the most traditional topos of the realist novel, can be described as an event whose narrative assemblage is anchored by reference to a performative whose force is left in suspense—or remains infelicitous, to use Austin's term—

3 See Derrida's Limited Inc 61, 100, 107. For more on Derrida's use of entamer see Weber.
until all the conditions necessary to its happy execution are met, which typically occurs at the moment of narrative closure. Jane Eyre’s famous “Reader, I married him” brings to a close the complex marriage plot that ultimately binds her to Rochester, a story of performative infelicity during which she has repeatedly tried, but until the very end failed, to make her “I do” do what she wants it to do, which is to secure Rochester. As Jane’s story illustrates, performatives often bring about closure in a manner that is less a measure of the narrative potential of a particular speech act than a corroboration of the instantaneous, even violent, nature of illocutionary forces: they can shut down narrative at a single blow. It is only when the conditions comprising the “total speech situation” become contingent and positional—there are a number of suitors, say, or one of the participants is already married—that the narrative can be animated towards its eventual resolution in the performance of the speech act. This produces the novel’s narrative paradox: only to the degree that the closural act cannot be performed will the narrative progress towards its performance, which is also the point of the narrative’s abrupt undoing. We seem to be left with an oblique narratival allegory in which the avoidance or voidance of performative action in the narrative also captures the novel’s own suppression or displacement of performative force at the level of its discourse.\textsuperscript{10}

If we proceed from this narrative paradox to an account of the thematic elaboration of performative speech, we find that the novel often dramatizes itself as a rhetorical instrument that is capable of accomplishing deeds and of accomplishing them in or by using words. Whether that accomplishment is as ambitious as political reform or as immediate as “sensation,” the novel draws attention to itself as a discourse that, no matter what its referential aspirations to “realist” transparency, considers its own ability to act as a fundamental aspect of its functioning. This power is all too often thematized in moralistic terms as fiction’s ability to corrupt or influence its readers, who are almost always figured as romantic, solitary, sensitive, susceptible, bored, perverse, crazed, weak, or in any case isolated individuals constitutionally predisposed to read literature too literally. But this does not in any way minimize the powers that the novel ascribes to itself. Reading novels, the novel tells us, reliably leads us into madness (Don Quixote), adultery (Emma Bovary), decadence (Dorian Gray), stupidity (Bouvard et Pécuchet), self-novelization (Proust), when it does not, more commonly, just nudge us in the direction of a better than average marriage (Austen’s heroines). Though the novel’s power to act is here formalized as a mimetic relay of readings that confuse literary with extra-literary reality, the possibility that these acts are in fact performative (that is, non-mimetic) remains a structural necessity, with the properly allegorical, didactic treatment of the risks entailed in reading only formalizing this possibility as an essential operational hazard. The distinction I am

\textsuperscript{10} The awkward locution “narratorial allegory” is here used to signal that the narrative structure can itself be read allegorically (as certain formalist criticism does as a matter of course) and, in doing so, to distinguish it from the tautological phrase “narrative allegory” or the inaccurate “narratological allegory,” since the field of narratology as a whole seems to have been untouched by, and appears to remain immune to, speech act theory. (This is in itself a curious phenomenon, not least because narratology is presumably invested in the ways in which narrative treats events and the actors or agents involved in them.)
drawing here between mimetic and non-mimetic functions of language roughly corresponds to the difference between constative and performative uses of language. Performatives are by definition non-referential (they refer to nothing other than the act they perform) and can therefore be considered to bring about events without recourse to figure, to narrative, or to any other representational system. In this sense, performatives are truly historical since they do not represent events; they are events. The point is as follows: the novel’s thematic investment in its own performativity can be read as an index of what may be thought of as its event-ness—that is, its historicity—even as the explicit treatment of this performativity often judges its acts negatively as the shortcomings of character-readers. We can take this as a reasonable index of the realist novel’s content: a record of our mundane and middling life in the form of events whose otherwise mechanical and uneventful iteration is at times interrupted by the promise of the unexpected as event-ness, producing the effect of being inevitable within an already receding horizon of always possible infelicity. The question is whether the novel’s inability to keep its stated promise of action (reform, deliverance, sensation, utopia, what have you) clears the way for the performance of those discreet linguistic acts that make history happen.

Consider Dickens’s *Bleak House*, whose narrative, as is well known, is organized around the seemingly endless lawsuit of “Jarndyce and Jarndyce.” Its dehumanizing effects are the direct result of a mind-numbingly repetitive, self-propagating, iterative chain of discrete performative acts whose cumulative force (the lawsuit comprises blue bags upon blue bags of documents) amounts to little more than institutional inertia, leading those who are party to it to a peculiar form of mechanical lifelessness that only suicide (as ultimate event) or closure (as narrative suicide) can interrupt. The use of “and” rather than the more familiar “versus” in the name of the lawsuit only repeats at the level of syntax the lawsuit’s iterative act of nomination in which the two original claimants, in sharing the same name, can be said to cite each other, and, since it is after all a lawsuit, to oppose each other at the same time. In this literalization of Derrida’s notion of iterability (a citation that both breaches and broaches—elle l’entame—the contexts of its utterance) the narrative can be said to perform in machine-like fashion a form of repetition that prevents an event, in the full sense of a unique and inaugural occurrence, from actually taking place, as though “yarns” (no matter how “dicey”)

---

I choose *Bleak House* not only because it illustrates with particular poignancy the infelicity of the performative in the realist novel; the choice is also a deliberate attempt to engage with a debate of considerable, if unacknowledged, standing between the deconstructive and new historical readings of the novel: I am referring, respectively, to the seminal essays of J. Hillis Miller and D.A. Miller. In the “Introduction” to the Penguin edition of the novel (1971), J. Hillis Miller traces the proliferating series of texts and documents that extends across the novel putting the possibility of reaching an authoritative reading into question. In “Moments” (2001), he then sharpens his analysis of documents by making a distinction between constative and performative speech acts, both as they occur in the institutional setting of the Chancery and in the various private acts performed by the novel’s characters. D.A. Miller’s “Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*” (*The Novel and the Police* 59–89) uses a Foucauldian theoretical framework to show how the novel itself acts to discipline its readers. My own reading suggests how both readings are in fact complementary: social discipline comes about not only through the register of visibility and representation; the subject is materialized through the iteration of performative acts, whether private or public, within a given discursive regime, such as that installed in and by the novel.
gave way only to more “yarns” regardless of the outcome (as in un coup de dés) and the aleatory, contingent nature of narrative were only made possible by the performative force of its own interruption. Richard’s progressive dehumanization can be read as a formalization of this linguistic dilemma, since his “madness” becomes the violent manifestation of a performative yearning for action, for any action, whose “event-ness” may deliver him from the bleak prospects of persisting with the unending and uneventful Chancery suit. Indeed, the lawsuit and its inability to finally secure uptake as a successful performative speech act (it petered out anticlimactically when the inheritance in dispute is absorbed by court costs) conditions the possibility of the narrative as a whole, prompting life-altering revelations (Esther Summerson finds her true identity) as well as life-threatening schemes (Tulkington blackmails Lady Dedlock).

As the lawsuit collapses under the weight of its own infelicities, the narrative to which “Jarndyce and Jarndyce” gives rise also comes to an end with the last iteration of the name Jarndyce in the figure Richard Carstone. For even though he is not named “Jarndyce,” Richard is the lawsuit’s last male heir, since inheritance is here dramatized as no longer being a right or prerogative resulting from biological reproduction within a family system—Richard and Ada are at any rate orphans—but rather as issuing from what may be thought of as performative iteration (the appositive “Jarndyce and Jarndyce” using perhaps the most accurate syntactical formula for naming state-sponsored marriage). That Esther turns out to be Lady Dedlock’s daughter is a brief biological fiction that the law—and the narrative—cannot for long sustain: they meet, bond, and separate in the space of a few pages. The structure of iteration we find expressed in the paradox of marriage-as-lawsuit itself ends with the merger of the two predominant narratives in the novel as Esther’s story (narrated in the first person) finds its own resolution in the conclusion to the Dedlock mystery (a legal mystery narrated by an omniscient narrator). Richard’s unhappy end is thus also the beginning of the “happy” resolution of the Esther/Woodcourt marriage plot, which owes its development as much to Richard’s death (it brings the lovers closer together) as to the almost clinical dissection and subsequent suturing of Esther’s past and present identity at the hands of Woodcourt-the-surgeon.

In a similar, though reversed, configuration, Tulkington’s power over Lady Dedlock is based on the fact that he has in his possession a document belonging to Nemo in Captain Hawdon’s hand (penmanship-as-signature) that threatens to undo her marriage to Sir Leicester, the last of the Dedlocks, but which retains in a state of performative inaction (narrative-as-blackmail) until he is killed. The lawsuit, content-less (no one ever knows what was actually in dispute) and form-less (no one would know how to re-assemble it as a narrative sequence even if one were to try—Dickens does not), resembles at novel’s end nothing less than the novel’s own triumph over the performative force that threatens to undo it: Krook’s death by spontaneous combustion can be read as a figure for the potentially explosive, violent force of the performative, which, were it not for the fact that Krook is himself only a figure for the Lord Chancellor, might re-emerge with the full force of the law. The Court of Chancery can from this perspective be read as a figure for the State, whose reach, following the metonymic logic that
initially links the Court to Krook’s shop, is seen to extend well into the so-called
domestic space of the narrative proper, since, like Chinese boxes or Russian
dolls and their unmistakably national symbolism, Chancery Court is understood to be
a larger, and indeed bleaker, form of the many “bleak houses” that contain the
novel’s multiple stories. Between cousin John’s Bleak House and the happier
version of it he conditions for Esther and Woodcourt at novel’s end there lies an
assortment of homes all of which could well be described as “bleak”: Chesney
Wold, Tulkinghorn’s chambers, Nemo’s room, the brickmaker’s home, the Jelly-
byss’ house, the shooting gallery, the Turveydrops’ dancing school, Tom-All-
Alone’s, and so on. There is no need to map this tropological displacement,
however, since it only makes sense if we read it in the context of performative
iterability allegorized by the lawsuit, whose form is itself contained or book-ended
by the closural act that brings to its putative end the novel itself, which is also
named *Bleak House*.

It is not difficult to see how the novel and the nation are connected in this
allegorical series, but the link is established through a false logic of substitution
in which the form of the novel (a paradoxical structure of infelicity) seems al-
dways to be replenished by its own semantic function (a story of bleakness or
unhappiness). Rather than a logic of synecdoche in which form expresses con-
tent, a performative reading pursues a logic of iteration in which form and content
become indistinguishable. Indeed, the content/form doublet collapses under the
pressure of novelistic representation as it tries to suppress or displace the perfor-
mative force of its own discourse. The violent force of the performative is mar-
shaled or disciplined into a constative story of unhappiness (ideology as a
c cautionary tale of exception or exceptionality) and, in what amounts to the same
thing, a cultural narrative of event-ness that ceases, from the point of view of the
performative, to be eventful. What I have described as the “content” of the real-
ist novel—a record of ordinary events occurring in mechanical succession whose
narrative logic is premised on an unexpected malfunction of the textual ma-
chine that becomes visible as the infelicitous performance of otherwise unevent-
ful speech acts—becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from the “form”
the narrative of its (un)doing takes in the telling of a story of unhappiness.

Madame Bovary *c’est moi* indeed: in all its “infelicity,” adultery, the reverse or
obverse of the “happy” marriage plot, becomes significant as event, a “scandal,”
with an unmistakable aura of “narratability.” Content? Form? Adultery seems to
be neither and both at once; it is in this context only the most scandalous among
the many torsions to which performative failures submit narrative, but it also
happens to be a very widely disseminated plot structure, an “event” that seems to
transcend the local intrigues of its particular performance. Like the cab that
carries Emma and Léon about Rouen during their first encounter, the adultery
plot in the space of a few decades travels in a seemingly random pattern around
the globe: Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, Fontaine’s *Effi Briest*, Eça de Queiroz’s *O primo
Basílio*, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Clarín’s *La Regenta*, Thackeray’s *Vanity
Fair*, Machado de Assis’s *Dom Casmurro* are all “travelling-companions” (Anders-
son’s description of creole functionaries) installing, in a performance no less
dramatic than Léon’s (that other sort of provincial functionary), the contours of
a world-historical literary artifact in or by which marriage, as the felicitous outcome *par excellence*, is continually, iteratively legitimized in or by its inevitable infelicity.

But something more crucial than the structural integrity of the novel is at stake when the form/content binary collapses under the pressure of reading the performativity of the novel at these two registers. The very notion of fictional narrative as an order of cognition that formalizes our experience of time and space (the very categories upon which Anderson and Moretti base their claims) begins to lose its semantic coherence as anything other than a transposed analogical model of grammatical categories. Whatever the novel’s own claims to mimetic transparency, the referential status of its discourse is put into question since, from the perspective of its performativity, narrative is not necessarily determined in relation to time and space. If, as I argued above, novelistic narrative is premised on the infelicity of the very speech acts towards whose fulfillment it nevertheless progresses (like, say, a moth to candle), the allegorical relays that formalize it as a narrative of unhappiness cannot but also enact it as a series of “unhappy” discursive events as the order of cognition and the order of performance fail to coincide. The prevalence of the “happy ending” in realism only reinforces the fact that the novel is a narrative of unhappiness in need of closure. It is in the novelistic treatment of the hypostatized form of the performative force of language (the marriage plot, say, or any other novelistic dispositif governed by performative speech) that the gap between the figural and literal levels of novelistic discourse widens, exposing or revealing as it does so the sheer materiality of words. The ability of language to act, its force as speech, is revealed to be a material force when language is stripped of all its figural, narrative, even graphic determinations. It is at this site of inscription that the novel can be said to act, to participate in and as history; it is thus the site back to which its very event-ness must be traced and where the link between novel and nation, if it exists at all, must therefore be sought.

From this perspective, we can make a suggestive parallel between the historicity of the novel and the history of the modern nation. Eric Hobsbawm begins his study of nationalism, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, by drawing attention to the historical “novelty” of the modern concept of the nation as it emerges at the turn of the nineteenth century. By making the obvious and thus seldom analyzed point that the notion of “novelty” is also the novel’s own enabling fiction—newness as the self-constitutive definition of the novel as a historically “novel” form—we can equate the historically necessary acts that bring about the nation as a social formation (declaratory, institutional, juridical, executive) with the sort of acts that constitute the novel at the different levels I have so far traced (normative, thematic, rhetorical, generic): insofar as both types of acts are performative, the resulting entities, nation and novel, can be said to have been invented in a

---

17 I derive the notion of linguistic materiality from Paul de Man and his readers. See de Man’s “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” and the essays in the collection *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Cohen, Cohen, Miller, and Warminski, in particular Warminski’s illuminating “As the Poets Do It” 3-51.

18 Hobsbawm’s study highlights the constructedness of the nation as a social formation, a fact from which we can derive its performative character.
similar fashion by the application of performative force in accordance with a conventional apparatus arrived at by consensus (whether this be achieved forcibly through coercion or by dint of non-coercive forms of persuasion). The acts performed in and by a "Declaration of Independence," for instance, are similar in kind to the acts the novel performs in declaring its (aesthetic) autonomy. For, if we take the novel’s own discursive disposition as event at face value—the fact, that is, that it is "novel," both in the sense that it presents itself as something "new" and in the sense that it bills itself as a "novelty" (which one is tempted to equate with Zola’s "Au Bonheur des Dames," the title both of the novel and the name of the department store around which its action revolves)—then its very newness, its inventiveness, would seem to imply that, for it to be strictly so, it must performatively inaugurate an unprecedented discursive world. Experimentally, at least, the reaction Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pécuchet have upon reading Scott for the first time ("Ce fut comme la surprise d’un monde nouveau"); 139 ["They were surprised as if they had found a new world"; my translation] seems to be precisely the effect the novel, premised in and as news or novelty, produces in its readers: we enter into a familiar yet radically new world whose every detail has been virtually (re)created in words. This may be a whole new novelistic universe that positions itself in reference to a familiar landscape (Scott, to be sure, but also Dickens, Eliot, Balzac, Zola, Trollope, Pérez Galdós, Tolstoy, to mention only the most prolific of Europe’s canonical realists) or, more to our purposes here, is figured in the founding of a new (imaginary) nation or national community without a fixed referential relation to “reality” (Eliot’s Middlemarch, Hardy’s Wessex, Butler’s Erewhon, as well as Morris’s Nowhere, and, into the twentieth century, Conrad’s Costaguana, Proust’s Combray, García Márquez’s Macondo, and Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, to name only a handful). The novel is thus a discourse that often presents itself as an invention even if in doing so it exploits a common stock of rule-governed generic conventions (call this particular code “Utopia”) in order to present itself as an invention. The novel-as-

14 In “Declarations of Independence,” Derrida speaks of the “fabulous retroactivity” entailed in declaring independence insofar as the signatories can sign in the name of “the people” only by virtue of having become their representatives in the very act of signing.

15 I am well aware of the fact that the English term “novel” does not share a common etymological root with the term used for novel in many other languages (though some languages obviously do share it), but I would argue that even terms like roman, roman, romanzo, derived from an older or at least different vocabulary, still retain in their modern usage the sense of inventiveness, novelty, and newness I am trying to trace here. This might even be found in the defamiliarizing effect of iteration, as the French word roman retains its “foreign-ness” or “newness” (as in “news from somewhere”) when it is “borrowed” by other languages.

16 As these examples illustrate, the invention of a novelistic world problematizes the question of referentiality not only because of the conspicuous use of tropes ranging from metaphor to irony, but also because these tropes prove to be highly unstable themselves. Is the Combray that unfolds like a Japanese paper flower in the narrator’s tea cup a metaphor or a metonymy? Is Nowhere an ironic version of Erewhon or a de-ironized metaphor of London? An index of this inventiveness as sheer inventiveness can be found in those strange intermediate cases in which “real” communities, cities, and/or nations are described “accurately and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history” (Auerbach) but under a different name: Charlotte Brontë’s Villette, Clarín’s Vetusia, Hardy’s Christminster.

17 Zola’s “Au Bonheur des dames” has been oddly but not uninterestingly translated into English as “The Ladies’ Paradise,” a title which captures in a more vivid fashion than, say, “Ladies’ Happi-
event thus seems to produce itself as something new and novel by the very act of speaking about itself as something that is already new and novel.18

For is it not the novel’s ability to perform acts the very condition of its own possibility as literature? Literature must mean, at minimum, that anything goes. The novel, for it to be so, must dramatize itself as having the ability to do virtually anything that can be done with words, which is absolutely everything. The novel does not draw limits around itself that determine what it can and cannot do (capable of corrupting morals, for instance, but not of performing miracles, resurrecting the dead, righting wrongs, or inventing new nations); rather, its ability to persuade, coerce, seduce, excuse, and promise—in short, to perform any speech act—is also, at least in theory, its power to do anything with words. Assuming for a moment that, at least in practice, novelists are not the “legislators of the world” (as Shelley might regard them), the question then arises as to what or who renders them inactive or, if indeed still capable of performing acts, who or what endeavors to make them remain “unacknowledged” in their capacity as world-historical agents. What or who limits the novel’s agency? What or who determines the exact purview of its performativity?

We have already examined some of the structural limitations to the novel’s own performativity: the mimetic program to which the realist novel pins its representational ambitions creates all sorts of narrative torsions and dislocations when it attempts to describe the effects of a force of language that categorically resists causality and referentiality. The infelicity of the performative speech acts that undergird narrative within conventional plot lines becomes thematized through the ostensibly redemptive, reparative logic of the “happy ending,” even as unhappiness pervades the novel’s disposition towards the event. We can now offer a different perspective on the matter of performative limitation—one that falls outside the novel’s discursive purview (though strictly speaking there is no “outside” to the performative). This perspective has to do with the imposition of a certain logic, or a certain ideology, in a process we can only call “novelization,” a process in which the possibility of autonomy, closure, and totalization so fundamental to the novel’s ambition to create self-enclosed worlds is conditioned by the very performativity that threatens at every moment to shatter the illusion of the novel as a world-onto-itself. This can be phrased differently: the novel’s incapacity to close fully its own system and so offer a seamless representation of a new world that would appear as though it had always been present to itself accounts for the desire for closure, totality, systematicity, autonomy—in short, for novelization—which in turn draws its élan from the very disjunction that calls for closure in the first place. From this perspective, the limitations imposed on the performativity of the novel bear the marks of the novel’s institutionalization

---

18 For an extended analysis of the question of invention, see Derrida’s “Psyche: Inventions of the Other.”
and involve the hypostatized form of the performative in its original, Austinian formulation, as part of the juridico-political discourse within which it operates.

The institution or institutionalization of the novel can in large measure be traced back to the performative acts that bring off all those rites, contracts, transactions, laws, rights, and privileges that bind us to our social identity and, in doing so, novelize our world. The performative is also responsible, as Derrida reminds us, for creating geopolitical formations such as the nation:

When performatives succeed, they produce a truth whose power sometimes imposes itself forever: the location of a boundary, the installation of a state are always acts of performative violence that, if the conditions of the international community permit it, create the law, whether durably or not, where there was none or no longer any law, where law did not yet impose itself or else was not yet strong enough. In creating the law, this performative violence—which is neither legal nor illegal—creates what is then held to be legal truth, the dominant and juridically incontestable public truth.

("History" 51)

What holds true for the nation, boundary, or state is true also for the realist novel: novelization by means of performative violence can be said to entail a law of genre that is installed as truth, and as the truth of public truth at that, since its generic ambition is to represent, in Auerbach’s words, “real everyday occurrences . . . accurately and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history” (485). Literary realism legitimates one of the paradoxical effects of the performative violence that creates the genre of the novel (and of the nation) in the first place: the blunting or deactivation of its violence as performance. There is no more efficient medium for the systematic undoing of the active, non-referential, non-representational pole of discourse than realistic fiction—not only because it is always already “parasitic” (Austin’s term for ordinary language used in a non-serious manner) but also because it seems to exhaust its violent force as a condition of installing itself as the truth of public truth. Performative forces of course never cease to operate as long as language functions and, as we shall see below, they manifest themselves at moments of narrative indecision and figural aberration in which the materiality of the letter can be glimpsed. To read these moments is to come face to face with the historicity of literary language and, thus confronted with the sheer otherness of language, to be in a position to speculate on the ethical value of such historical action. But before proposing a possible protocol for reading these moments, I want first to consider the global institutionalization of the novel as the installation of public truth, for the realist novel, no less than the nation-state, very much depends on the “international community” to legitimate the law of its genre-as-truth.

Whatever else performative language accomplishes at the level of the novel’s discourse, the conditions of production, dissemination, and reception within the institutional framework of the field of Literature certainly pertain to the performativity of the novel. The different means of creating, publishing, marketing, distributing, and circulating novels in the context of a competitive marketplace, together with all the acts of legitimation that occur within it and which produce the figure of the author, her work, her “brand-name,” and even her legacy (the novelist as a generalized “author function” that, after Foucault, can also be said to be a collective “founder of discursivity”), are all processes that involve performative speech acts sanctioned by the various organisms within which they are
uttered. Given the sort of allegorical relays the novel so ably performs, it is not at all surprising that these processes should be novelized in advance and that, as a condition of their novelization, the acts involved should be categorically infelicitous. To name only a few examples, Balzac’s Illusions perdues, Dickens’s David Copperfield, Thackeray’s Pendennis, and Gissing’s New Grub Street all dramatize the social constitution of the figure of the author, and of literature more generally, as an elaborate rite of institution. That most of these are also Bildungsromane might alert us to the fact that the institutionalization of literature involves rites of legitimation that are akin to those which young protagonists must experience as they make their way in the world: social progress is marked (like a road is by milestones) by performative events (contracts, marriage proposals, inheritance, and all those acts that anchor novelistic narrative) within a structure of belief that guarantees and consecrates those acts regardless of the disillusion or disuse that typically attends them.

In her recently translated study of the international literary field, The World Republic of Letters, Pascale Casanova offers compelling arguments for uncoupling the study of literature as a transnational phenomenon from the national framework traditionally employed in literary history. The non-national history of literature she proposes traces the often violent struggles among and between authors and "consecrating authorities" (translators, critics, academics) to find legitimacy in the literary marketplace. Even if literary value is initially formed as symbolic capital within a national framework, the prestige and domination of a particular language group soon bestows legitimacy on a certain form of literariness that travels within a world literary space whose contours only superficially coincide with those of the nation-state. (Paris, in her telling, is the symbolic capital of the World Republic of Letters, which is, if at all, divided into language groups, not nations.) Casanova does not use the vocabulary of speech act theory to make her case, but the terms and concepts she borrows from Pierre Bourdieu bear the traces of his encounter with Austin’s formulation of performative speech acts.

In Language and Symbolic Power, Pierre Bourdieu considers the social mechanisms whereby certain forms of language use or competence become legitimized and, in so doing, serve to advance the interests of the dominant classes. Bourdieu argues that the performative should not be read as a purely linguistic act; rather, it should be considered as an important element in the socio-cultural struggle for legitimacy. The dominant groups in the habitus, those who have accrued the largest fund of cultural and symbolic capital, impose a particular linguistic order whose prestige in turn serves to legitimate their power. "Symbolic imposition—that kind of magical efficacy which not only the command and the password, but also ritual discourse or a simple injunction, or even threats or insults, purport to exercise—can function only if there is a convergence of social conditions which are altogether distinct from the strictly linguistic logic of discourse" (72). He calls performative speech acts "acts of institution" and argues that their power

19 Indeed, Foucault, Marx, and Freud are instances of discursive fields, not mere authors whose function is more or less limited to texts. See Foucault "What Is an Author?"

20 In Madame Bovary, Léon persuades Emma to board the cab in which their first adulterous sexual encounter occurs with these words: "Cela se fait à Paris!" (268; "Everybody does it in Paris!").
(the power of words in general) is "delegated power" bestowed upon a speaker authorized to speak on behalf of an institution: "The magical efficacy of these acts of institution is inseparable from the existence of an institution defining the conditions (regarding the agent, the time or place, etc.) which have to be fulfilled for the magic words to appear to operate" (73; emphasis in the original).

Casanova's description of the violence with which the various stakeholders (writers certainly, but also the corps of translators, critics, publishers, and academics who participate in the literary marketplace) enter the World Republic of Letters can, I think, quite legitimately be equated with the performative violence with which public truth is installed in a geopolitical sense. Even if it is an "imagined community" whose geographical matrix does not correspond to the political logic of nation states, the World Republic of Letters installs and is installed by the same sort of boundaries, laws, and "international" organisms that regulate and legislate public truth, though in this case we should call it the "public truth of the truth of public truth" when we take into account the realist novel as a worldwide system of legitimation and novelization as its legitimizing mode. To judge by the persistent return of realist protocols in recent novelistic production around the globe, this surely applies to contemporary fiction; "realism" might in fact be considered in this context as a condition of possibility for the novelization of what we could provisionally call the "global novel." The language in which the "global novel" is to be written remains a "national" language—translated almost simultaneously into however many languages the global market can sustain—or whether the novel's lingua franca de facto becomes American English is a question of far-ranging implications for the study of the novel in the age of globalization. Novelization operates as a globalizing discursivity that, having itself been installed through performative violence, installs performative violence as a mode of public truth.

We are now in a better position both to locate what I earlier referred to as sites of inscription where the materiality of the letter becomes perceptible and, given the historicity of the acts here performed, to offer a protocol for reading these moments from the perspective of an ethic of responsibility. But how exactly are we to read these sites of inscription other than as aberrant moments, which, like chinks in the novel's discursive armor, might only symbolize the impenetrability of constative representational schemas insofar as the novel seems at many levels to resist, or to be made to resist, its own performativity? How are we to read the performativity of the (global) realist novel without falling back on its formalizations, without succumbing to its violence? Is the novelization of the world by means of performative violence a denegation of the possibility of a truly eventful, strictly material, novel event? How, in other words, are we to read the novel ethically?

I approach these questions pragmatically through a textual example. In the middle of Book 1 of George Eliot's Middlemarch, as the narrator describes Mrs. Cadwallader's failed attempt to arrange a suitable match for Dorothea, a stunning image interrupts the progress of the narrative. Since the image represents a

---

21 The case of "socialist realism" supports the "internalization" of realism.
double interruption—both the novel's marriage plot as well as Mrs. Cadwallader's own scheme to marry Dorothea are left in suspense—it can also be read as a commentary on the place or function of figurative language within the deflated referential discursivity of the novel's realism, a mode that by definition must avoid figure. The image, moreover, is explicitly and conspicuously about metaphor. (The passage repeats the phrase "metaphorically speaking" that appears a few pages before in reference to Dorothea's "throwing herself" at Casaubon's "feet" as if he were a "Protestant Pope.") The question that triggers this meditation on figurative language asks why Mrs. Cadwallader would "straightway" contrive to arrange a match between Celia and Chettam after the one she has tried to arrange between Dorothea and Chettam fails. The answer repeats the movement of the question (which concerns the abrupt shift of Mrs. Cadwallader's attention from Dorothea to Celia) by switching between two metaphors: the first is found to be wanting; the second, like Celia's eventual marriage to Sir James, is more felicitous. The first metaphor concerns a telescope: "Was there any ingenuous plot, any hide-and-seek course of action, which might be detected by a careful telescopic watch? Not at all: a telescope might have swept the parishes of Tipton and Freshitt, the whole area visited by Mrs. Cadwallader in her phaeton, without witnessing any interview that could excite suspicion, or any scene from which she did not return with the same unperturbed keenness of eye and same high natural colour" (38). The second concerns a microscope:

Even with a microscope directed on a water drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs. Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed. (38)

The passage attempts to convey the ability of figurative language to shape the reality it is meant to describe. Its logic is grounded on a simple empirical principle: metaphors, like optical instruments, lend themselves to the task of "making interpretations," a "stronger" metaphor allowing us to capture reality more accurately, less coarsely, than a "weak" one. Thus, when we view Mrs. Cadwallader's "match-making" through the "strong" metaphor of a microscopic organism we realize that making a match is not simply the doing of a creature exhibiting "active voracity"; it involves an elaborate play of "minute causes" that in turn create "thought and speech vortices" that then bring about the sort of match that would satisfy a "swallower" such as Mrs. Cadwallader. Whatever agency we initially ascribe to Mrs. Cadwallader as a "match-maker," metaphor reveals that, under closer scrutiny, marriage does not occur within a structure of intention. It comes to pass within a vortex of "thought and speech" that makes matches happen while the supposed match-maker "waits passively." Marriage, as it turns out, is the doing of things with "thought and speech"; marriage, in a word, is performative. What we are left with at a micro-metaphorical level is the sheer materiality of language: "thought and speech vortices." We arrive at this insight, however, only by applying "strong" metaphors to what are essentially other metaphors, as the phrase what may be called may be called. The phrase metaphorically speaking can
Indeed be taken to mean that one is using metaphors in this specific instance (lest one mistake metaphor for non-metaphor, perhaps) or that, in speaking, one is always already using metaphors, or both at once.

In enacting the theory of its own practice, the passage as a whole reveals the inescapable materiality of language and adds to our understanding of it by adding that we can only gain access to it through a process of dis-figuration that can only be accomplished by and in figure. Mrs. Cadwallader will herself use the metaphorical scheme that describes her in this passage when she describes Casaubon to Chettam in these terms: "Somebody put a drop [of Casaubon's blood] under a magnifying glass, and it was all semi-colons and parentheses" (45). The materiality of language, the very blood coursing through the novel's veins, as it were, is in this instance curiously word-less: semi-colons and parentheses are, perhaps like Casaubon's work, insufficient to secure performative uptake on their own; yet they are far from immaterial, since, among much else, they guide the syntax of his will, which acts even after he has ceased trying to speak (in effect preventing Dorothea from making a match of her own). Semi-colons and parentheses may thus be thought of as "tiniest hairlets" that represent, under a "strong" lens, the materiality of language tout court precisely because they are not words: a materiality, to use Derrida's suggestive phrasing, without matter. 21 The complex rhetorical staging of materiality in the passage can therefore be said to enact the inability of figurative language actually to shape the reality it describes, since metaphor-as-microscope discovers the existence of a force of language that operates beyond or behind or in any case apart from the ability of figure to seem to animate ("seem to see") words as though they were tax-pennies, word and figure becoming indistinguishable through the parenthetical phrase "metaphorically speaking" that anchors the image's closing sentence. It is a force of language, moreover, that, like the passage as a whole, entails the act of interruption since it is radically heterogeneous to the constative register of figure. No matter how complex the referential relay figure attempts to trace, it will always follow the logic of substitution, whereas the performative, understood as a force inherent to all language use, resists referentiality absolutely, even to the extent of positing a materiality that has no matter.

Described in these terms, the discursive materiality of the novel becomes accessible in or through the act of interruption. Given that the novel resists its own performativity at virtually every discursive register (i.e., the narrative, figurative, thematic, generic, and institutional registers I have examined), it is not terribly surprising that the violent force of language should become visible as a referential error. After all, the binding relation to the real to which the novel lays claim proves to be, under the lens of speech acts, a rather misleading metaphor insofar as a logic of performance constantly disrupts the referential moment and, with it, any pretense to cognitive reliability. What turns out to be something of a surprise, however, is that this act of interruption can only be read through or against the very structures of reference put in place, or made possible, by the material

---

21 For an extended meditation on the idea of a materiality without matter, language without words, see Derrida's "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink 2."
force of language. We would be justified in classifying this form of interruption under the rubric of irony—the trope with which the novel has been traditionally associated (in Lukács, for example)—provided we understand irony, in a technical as well as an epistemological sense, as a figure of speech that captures the mutually interruptive oscillation between constative and performative registers of language. This is in keeping with Paul de Man’s definition of irony as the permanent parabasis (or interruption) of the allegory of figure insofar as the interruption of tropological models of substitution by a performative logic of acts creates a perpetual state of referential unease. If we consider this effect of interruption as a manifestation of the general infelicity of performance in the novel, we can begin to understand these moments of referential aberration as moments at which the novel can be said to act, leaving a material trace on the world. The instant of ironic interruption in the novel, that is, becomes a site of inscription where the production of the event, or, better yet, the event-ness of the novel, can be located.

That this material event is made manifest by the effect of interruption on the novel’s structures of reference does not mean that the ironic “form” of the novel bears a “content” that would restore to this violent force a defining or definitive narrative (of unhappiness, of alienation, of the “disappearance of god,” of what have you). As interruption, iterated throughout and across the novel’s structures of reference, becomes a “permanent” feature of its discourse, it ceases to count as either “form” or “content,” not least because it becomes impracticable, not to say impossible, to tell them apart. Interruption, therefore, also becomes a condition of possibility for reading ethically, since the constant oscillation between the order of cognition and the order of performance assures that whatever certainties representation, on the one hand, and performative violence, on the other, seem to guarantee are at best ephemeral and unstable. Ethical reading in this regard entails the absolutely unscripted, open-ended, and ever incalculable conditions irony creates in the novel. The distance separating a national from a globalized experience of the novel passes through its performativity, a state that remains always in suspense and punctuated by unintended interruptions. The realist novel can thus be said to assemble the conditions of possibility of a global subject: the “ideal reader” of the novel becoming a subject who is “at home” in the “world republic” of the (global) novel precisely by being “at home” nowhere, and particularly in the temporal and spatial certainties that, according to Anderson and Moretti, the novel seems to guarantee. An ethical reading practice would imply learning to live with (in) irony, oscillating permanently in a relay whose outcome is at any instant undecidable and decided in advance between form and content, performative and constative, novel and nation, the local and the global, speech and acts.

This might seem like a fairly modest set of claims with which to conclude, but we might do worse than take some comfort in the knowledge that the novel, and literature in general, might indeed do a bit less than we claim it does. It is this, I

25 Indeed, irony, according to de Man, “allows us to perform all sorts of performative linguistic functions which seem to fall out of the tropological field, but also to be very closely connected with it” (“The Concept of Irony” 169).
would finally argue, that makes the task of understanding the active and often violent force of language all the more urgent, for it can allow us to gain access to the textuality of experience. The cultural study of the novel in the age of globalization cannot do without the intricate work of textual decoding if it is to pursue a progressive agenda of political engagement that is based on the assumption that literature intervenes in society.24

*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

**Works Cited**


24 I would like to thank Rick Begam, Susan Bernstein, Guillermmina De Ferrari, Sara Guyer, Theresa Kelley, Caroline Levine, Henry Turner, Rebecca Walkowitz, and the journal’s anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions.


