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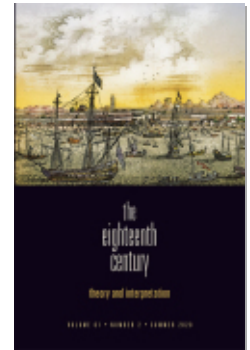
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Introduction: The Novel as Theory

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The current plenitude of theories *of* the novel—of its historical “rise,” its cultural significance, its stranglehold on the popular understanding of what literature is—often edges out considerations of the novel as theory. This special issue is about the things novels know, but it is also about how they know them. We want to claim not simply that novels develop epistemologies but also that novel form is epistemological. The novel, discursive and polyvocal, is peculiarly available as the ground from which to recuperate the material resonances—the historical contents—of formal structures by virtue of its candor about the ways in which it produces these structures. The consensus that emerged from our contributors' essays is that the eighteenth-century novel made available to us some very particular kinds of formal intervention, that its particular brand of self-conscious formal experimentation allows us to see, in sharp relief, form as history.

One way to assert the particular theoretical heft of eighteenth-century novels themselves is through our discipline's varied definitions of novel form, all of which agree on its social character. For Caroline Levine, form is “transhistorical, portable, and abstract, on the one hand, and material, situated, and political, on the other.”¹ But for all its ubiquity and for all the disciplinary histories—from geology and biology to politics and history—that have tackled form's complex arrangements of matter, we still, she says, need a new method with which to approach it. Form is everywhere around us, but it seems also always to be tantalizingly just out of reach. Part of this volume's effort is to make the eighteenth-century novel more proximate by perceiving its epistemologies and abstractions. As Sandra Macpherson writes in this issue, “to say novels invent their own forms *is* to stake out a theoretical position—if not for a theory of the novel, then certainly for a theory of *form*” (264). If for Macpherson the novel produces a theory of form, for Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, form coheres as “explanation,” an issue of disciplinary specificity open to different measures, concepts, and

theoretical insights. They argue that critiques of new formalism, frustrated with its lack of method or its confusion about its own definition of form or its refusal to ask the right questions, have missed the point²: “The fact that form appears sometimes as shape, sometimes as pattern, sometimes as habit, line structure, model, design, trope, and so on suggests not that formalism is incoherent but that ‘form’ . . . is not a word without content but a notion bound pragmatically to its instances.”³ These flexible insights connecting novel, theory, and form frame the work of this issue, which sees eighteenth-century novels as explicit and unyielding in their theoretical commitments, enacting form in the very specifics of their worldly and literary engagement. Form generates knowledge in excess of its local expression, and not in uniform or transhistorical ways. John Richetti, in the introduction to a 2011 *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* special issue on formalism, encourages us to “speak not of one principle of formal narrative but of many” in discussions of the novel, noting in common across his contributors “a new, historically oriented formalism” in which form “is relate[d] to the various socio-historical circumstances that surround the emergence of the novel as a genre and that in many cases are its overt subject matter.”⁴ Richetti points up the way in which the novel is powerfully implicated in the loose rehabilitation of historical materialism our discipline has been calling new formalism.

This issue was conceived as a conversation about how novels generate orders and methods of apprehension, bringing eighteenth-century novels in particular to discussions about form and formalism that have preoccupied literary studies for a long stretch now. Why is a return to form so pressing in our field at the moment, and how do we balance its seeming nostalgia with its radical potential? While Macpherson wants a “little” formalism “that would turn one away from history without shame or apology,” we are open to the big formalism she turns away from: the formalism that brings us back to history.⁵ We’re guided by Theodor W. Adorno’s dialectic of history and form: “Aesthetic form [is] sedimented content” in his key formulation.⁶ According to this view, formal concerns are historical concerns, and beginning with history is an inevitability that is dangerous only when it goes unacknowledged. Susan Wolfson and Marjorie Levinson call this group of new formalists—those of us practising critique in full consciousness of being Marxist throwbacks indebted to a deep history of materialist aesthetics—“activist” formalists.⁷ We insist here that formalist and historical claims are indissolubly linked and that the novel’s formal development is peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, historically engaged. When we claim that the novel is theory, we’re also relying on the notion that form is art’s theory of itself. Adorno puts it this way: “The knowledge of artworks is guided by their own cognitive constitution: They are the form of knowledge that is not knowledge of an object.”⁸ The “cognitive constitution” of an artwork is not entirely coextensive with its form, but very often, as Simon Jarvis observes, form is “how art thinks.”⁹ As eighteenth-century novels assert again and again, novel form *is* novel theory.

We opt for “novel” over “fiction” not to venerate or reify any such construct as the singular eighteenth-century novel, but as a concept that recognizes the particularly reflexive moves in prose fiction of our period. Chief among these are what we consider novels’ theoretical activities, abstract and self-conscious reflections that exceed fictional plot to conjecture about texts—their composition, circulation, social function, worldly impact—and about their readers—their pleasures, cognitions, attentions, dispositions, and biases. We see these formulations articulating what M. M. Bakhtin describes as the novel’s “zone of maximal contact with the present,” and it’s in this fundamental energy between text and world that we locate novels’ generation of theoretical insight.¹⁰ We use “theory” to recognize the spectrum of fields in which novels imagine themselves to participate; in this issue, these include economic subjectivity, Christian morality, government, genre theory, sexuality, feminism, race, and queer community. The project began in 2014 as a panel proposal to the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS). We both had just published books that, in part, study the ways eighteenth-century novels envisioned minds—of characters and of readers—to work. How was fiction imagined to mobilize the passions? How did character model heightened states of affect? How did authors design fiction to fuse private, embodied pleasures with polite literary tastes? Or didn’t they?¹¹ Our mutual interest in the states of mind the novel purported to describe had turned into a fascination with the broader cultural claims eighteenth-century novels made, the authority they persistently exercised over a wide range of discursive fields. Increasingly, we wondered why and how novel form allowed for these authoritative claims. Such were the questions we asked in common, and the papers that appeared on our pair of “Novel as Theory” panels demonstrated how expansive and how varied were approaches to the novel’s own theories. Our aim, borne out by the contributions to this issue (many of which originated as papers on those panels), has been not to test existing theories of form, genre, or novel on eighteenth-century specimens, but to locate within novels their own epistemological extensions into the world.

By focusing on novels’ social commentaries and empirical generalizations, we, together with our contributors, join many critics who part ways with post-Watt accounts of the eighteenth-century novel as above all a project of privacy, of the individual, of realism. Julie Park’s special issue of *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* in 2011 disputed the very notion that “novel” can be said to designate any particular set of literary works, seeing in the period instead “self-conscious permutations of fiction that drift rather than march into fixed forms of realism.”¹² Deidre Lynch (in yet another special issue, this one in honor of Nancy Armstrong) argues as much, finding in Eliza Haywood a “lack of interest in individuating” women and their histories of sexual violence; women characters’ entries into social contracts, rather than prefiguring the heteronormative marriage plot so conventional by the nineteenth century, confirm the pervasiveness

and nonspecificity of gendered injustice.¹³ Frances Ferguson also saw sexual violence at the heart of the novel's effort not to invent psychological depth, but to reveal the fallacy of interiority for women under sexualized pressures. For Ferguson, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) produces "a pattern of psychological complexity that does not at all directly express mental states"; rather, it shows that our problematic stipulation of mental states (in cases of rape) disables the articulation or realization of any idea or aspiration that might have been.¹⁴

Through such a detachment of the novel form from psychological transparency, the novel reappears as a study in the collision between persons, or person and history, a view sustained by critics concerned with commerce, action, and responsibility as central features of the novel, over and above character or interiority. For Lynch, novels are "sites where people . . . have managed their relations to their things" rather than to themselves or their human intimates.¹⁵ Kramnick shows that the Lockean individual, imagined as private and self-contained in so many accounts of the rise of the novel, entailed "an idea of consciousness seemingly dependent on, yet with no clear relation to, the physical world," a locus of experiment, where exterior, mind, action, and consequence come together, and not always easily.¹⁶ Novels do not tell stories of deeply built individuals; they rather examine worldly conditions, in Macpherson's formulation, through "depersonalization," mobilizing the concepts of strict liability as experiments in persons' effects on their surroundings and so effacing specifics like intention or will.¹⁷ For Christina Lupton, the question of what and how novels know lands on the material form of the codex book. Imagining their future in a fixed print form, novels are free to experiment with "the realm of accident and uncertainty that they vociferously exclude."¹⁸ Apprehending their own form as a discernible and closed technology, novels in turn have space to generate their own theories of readers' bookish manipulations, of the impact of the external world on their internal stories, of plot's elasticity to both guarantee and risk stable outcomes.

These approaches draw on contemporary theoretical apparatuses, to be sure, but they primarily attend to how novels originate conjectural knowledge through their formal experiments with character, plot, narration, and materiality. It is such novel-generated theory that we seek to foreground in the work collected here. We don't wish to argue for the primacy of the eighteenth century's own account of itself over and above contemporary theoretical work; to the contrary, it is the theoretical work of recent decades that brings into focus the distinct intelligence of novels, particularly those of our period, which were candid and loquacious about their narrative, formal, and social idiosyncrasies. Nor do we propose that the novel subsumes the many other forms of prose fiction that proliferate their intelligences in the period. In their sum total, we find the contributions to this issue to be at once invested in and agnostic about the ascendance of the novel to the center of eighteenth-century studies. Approaching the novel as episteme rather than as autonomous aesthetic form has allowed the essays in this volume to

explore novels without apprehending them as preconditioned to engage certain questions (about reality, about the individual, about belief) in particular ways.

The eighteenth-century cultural world, in which literary genres and disciplinary structures made and unmade themselves with fierce energy, is also a world in which formal strictures were deliberately mapped onto ethical considerations. Unapologetically materialist and mechanistic, this world married wild formal experimentation and deep self-reflexive attention to the alignments between the formal structures of the artwork and the complex forms of a rapidly shifting social world. The essays collected here reveal over and over again that novels are theories, not simply of their own formal techniques, but also of the cultural landscapes in which they find themselves. This by now venerable Bakhtinian formulation, we think, has not lost its relevance to how we understand the particular valences of novel form: as more intimately, but also, paradoxically, more dispassionately engaged than other genres in the social life it purports to describe. More intimately because, alongside the firm inscription of art as autonomous at the end of the eighteenth century, there was a simultaneous “emerging consensus that the transactions that would count as literary would involve heart-to-heart relations.”¹⁹ (David Hume thus upends his own argument for the establishment of a standard of taste by conceding that we are all-too-readily overpowered by “a peculiar sympathy with the writer who resembles us.”²⁰) More disinterestedly because, as Bakhtin argued, the novel’s formal capaciousness allows it to absorb competing, even contradictory, voices into a loose formal structure, sidelining the author who is so central to our affective relation to it. The period presents varied and alternating accounts of authors’ and readers’ affective and creative proximities to the novels they write and read. In short, the novel insists on an ethics of form.

But imaginative prose forms are porous, and we concede there are those that might consider the eighteenth-century novel itself as a modern critical fiction, or as a hegemonic instrument. Scott Black, for instance, finds in works we typically consider novels a rebuttal of realism. Laurence Sterne’s fiction distances readers from reality, he argues, rather than preparing them for enlightened reentry into it. *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) is a comic romance, “not designed to fit the world or fix the self,” and so offers readers relief from a disenchanting world.²¹ For Black, we miss particular understandings of prose fiction’s aims by overzealously applying the novel category. In Srinivas Aravamudan’s view, the novel is a defined category, but one that works to imperial ends. The novel fixes—or, more precisely, its “promoters” deploy it as a strategy to fix—nationalist and domestic constructs against the “experimental, prospective, and antifoundationalist” attitudes of eighteenth-century prose fiction more broadly surveyed. Considering oriental tales, spy fictions, and other transcultural fictions, Aravamudan sees the novel as a conservative response to an “open-ended thought-experiment” that horizontally considered Englishness within a context of global exchange.²² In this view, the novels’ internal theories are hegemonic, normalizing fiction as an experience of the proximate and familiar.

Let us not bypass the challenges posed by Black and Aravamudan. The questions raised on those panels in 2014 would likely have been different had they been raised today. They might be more sceptical about the capaciousness of the novel genre in our period; they might be more stridently decolonizing (an approach only explicit here in Susan Lanser's contribution). To underrepresent such methods in this volume is not to indicate their secondary status but to acknowledge what this volume misses, its incompleteness, and our need (as collaborators on this volume) to continue redefining the questions that are at the center of what and how eighteenth-century literature knows, and how it makes abstract and compelling claims to that knowledge.

Readers of eighteenth-century literature will recognize these sensations of incompleteness: the eighteenth century is also a moment in which the imperative to novelty vied with nostalgia for an ancient and imperfectly recoverable past. This is a moment in which literature talks about itself obsessively, but markedly almost entirely *without* a determined method or even clear formal and contextual guidelines.²³ The novel's insecurity about form leaves more visible traces of its theoretical self-consciousness than does the confidence of other genres. As D. A. Miller observes about the relationship of Jane Austen's narrator to her uncontrollably garrulous characters, "It is difficult not to see the narrator's language as a 'reaction formation' to Miss Bates's. The rigor of the one inverts the shapelessness of the other."²⁴ Form emerges out of the novel's constitutive formlessness, and the "lapses" of novelistic form are in fact its "necessities."²⁵ The critical constitution of the novel is, as Miller so cogently explains, its longing for form. In this way, we might see the novel's dialectic of form and formlessness as a kind of allegory for our current critical disposition. Perhaps what the eighteenth-century novel shows us, above all else, is that form is best theorized in its absence, and that the constitutive incompleteness the novel shares with literary criticism might point us towards increasingly ethical ways of knowing.

In the essays contained here, novels generate accounts of social relations, literary form, government, economic subjectivity, and desire that extend beyond their own particular plots, characters, and pages. Stephanie Insley Hershinow generalizes the queer potentialities of the novel to the narrative structure itself, exploring the incest plot as a critique of the novel's heterosexual endogamy. The *Evelina* (1778) seen by Eugenia Zuroski brings a queer materialism to the surface through the laughter that accompanies Lovel, the fop who "tickles" the heteronormative plot of Frances Burney's novel and offers up the possibility of a less constrained, queerer pleasure. In the work of these contributors, we can see the way in which novel form critiques and even upends its own defining drive. Wendy Anne Lee and Sara Landreth see in novels a reworking of traditional forms of spiritual and political authority. For Oliver Goldsmith, argues Lee, the novel is a theory of utilitarian sovereignty. Goldsmith belatedly models his monarchism on Thomas Hobbes's contractarian instrumentalism, imagining the monarch as an empty figurehead that makes other social bonds possible. Lan-

dreth sees in Hannah More's fiction a theory of Christian subjectivity premised on procedures of pious reading, patterns of automation rooted in the moral behaviors of women characters and in plot itself. Susan Lanser, broadly locating the novel's theorization of gender, traces "plots of rescue" across the eighteenth century, illuminating genteel women's efforts to aid other women exploited under regimes of marriage, rape, and colonialism. European concentrations of wealth guarantee that heroines of color are regularly denied the social, economic, and reproductive futures envisioned for their white counterparts. Also focused on novels' considerations of material inequity, Peter DeGabriele reads Daniel Defoe's *Colonel Jack* (1722) as a test of metaphor's capacity to bridge the fissure in Enlightenment subjectivity between self and accumulated profits. Defoe distinguishes money from what is properly the body, interrupting a Lockean fantasy of the self's social extension through monetary exchange. Also centrally concerned with the novel's figures, Sandra Macpherson troubles the distinctions made by generations of formalists between surface and interior, abstraction and mimesis, novel and allegory, resisting the received truth that somewhere between John Milton and Austen, social description supersedes allegorical representation. The novel is not as mimetic or descriptive as we've taken it to be, and form's immanence in the novel is its own discussion of figures' resistant exteriors. Together, these contributors invite us to think about the things novels say about the worlds in which they circulate, about their own formal properties and modes of signification, and about the degree to which literary critics know what's known by novels themselves.

NOTES

1. Carole Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, 2015), 11.
2. For these critiques, see Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–69; Sandra Macpherson, "A Little Formalism," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 385–405; and Robert S. Lehman, "Formalism, Mere Form, and Judgment," *New Literary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 245–63.
3. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 650–69, 661.
4. John Richetti, "Formalism and Eighteenth-Century English Fiction," in "Form and Formalism in the British Eighteenth-Century Novel," ed. Richetti, special issue, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24, no. 2 (2011): 157–60, 160, 159.
5. Macpherson, "A Little Formalism," 385. Macpherson is citing Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) to underline the point that "committed formalism is historicist."
6. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1997), 5.
7. Susan J. Wolfson, "Reading for Form," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 1–16, 2; Levinson, 559.
8. Adorno, 347.
9. Simon Jarvis, "What Does Art Know?," in *Aesthetics and the Work of Art: Adorno, Kafka, Richter*, ed. Peter De Bolla and Stefan H. Uhlig (Basingstoke, 2009), 57–70, 66.
10. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist (Austin, 1981), 11.

11. See Kathleen Lubey, *Excitable Imaginations: Eroticism and Reading in Britain, 1660–1760* (Lewisburg, 2012); and Rebecca Tierney-Hynes, *Novel Minds: Philosophers and Romance Readers, 1680–1740* (Basingstoke, 2012).

12. Julie Park, "Introduction: The Drift of Fiction," in "The Drift of Fiction: Reconsidering the Eighteenth-Century Novel," ed. Park, special issue, *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 52, nos. 3–4 (2011): 243–48, 247.

13. Deidre Lynch, "Social, Sexual, and Other Contracts in Eighteenth-Century Novels," in "Gender, History, and the Novel: *Desire and Domestic Fiction* after Thirty Years," ed. Jonathan Arac, special issue, *Modern Language Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2019): 21–27, 26. On same-sex bonds between women in the novel, see Susan Lanser, *The Sexuality of History* (Chicago, 2014). On eighteenth-century novels' construction of impersonality, see Stephanie Inslay Hershinow, *Born Yesterday: Inexperience and the Early Realist Novel* (Baltimore, 2019); and Wendy Anne Lee, *Failures of Feeling: Insensibility and the Novel* (Stanford, 2019).

14. Frances Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* 20 (1987): 88–112, 101.

15. Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago, 1998), 118.

16. Kramnick, *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* (Stanford, 2010), 98.

17. Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore, 2010), 16.

18. Christina Lupton, "Contingency, Codex, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel," *ELH* 81, no. 4 (2014): 1173–92, 1189. See also Lupton, "Other Times," chap. 3 in *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth-Century* (Baltimore, 2018), 92–121.

19. Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2015), 23.

20. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* [1757], ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), 226–49, 244.

21. Scott Black, "Tristram Shandy's Strange Loops of Reading," *ELH* 82, no. 3 (2015): 869–96, 890. See also Black, *Without the Novel: Romance and the History of Prose Fiction* (Charlottesville, 2019).

22. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago, 2012), 25, 4, 7. See also Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England, 1662–1785* (Oxford, 2005).

23. See Michael Gavin, *The Invention of English Criticism* (Cambridge, 2015); and Lee Morrissey, *The Constitution of Literature: Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism* (Stanford, 2007).

24. D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, 1981), 40.

25. Miller, 54.