

# A Question of Beginnings

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The durability of *The Rise of the Novel* among works of literary scholarship is altogether remarkable. Before long, half a century will have elapsed since its initial publication and more time than that has already passed since Ian Watt completed his first draft in 1947. Disagreements with the perspective of the book on the novel began as early as its first reviews, the central one being that Watt's concentration on what he called "the realism of presentation" gave short shrift to other kinds of realism, or to trends in the novel not easily identifiable with realism. Nobody has summarized these objections more succinctly and more wittily than Watt himself. In an essay wryly entitled "Serious Reflections on *The Rise of the Novel*," published a decade after the appearance of the book, Watt explains that by cutting three concluding chapters on Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne, he ended up tipping the balance in his account of the genre more than he would have liked: "As a result I have had to grow accustomed to figuring in some minds as a permanent picketer for the Union Novel (International President H. James), carrying a sign which reads 'Cervantes Go Home' on one side and 'Fielding is a Fink' on the other."<sup>1</sup> Watt of course cannot avoid taking responsibility for the final form of his own book, in which the reader's "belief in the reality of report" is seen as the novelistic trait *par excellence*, and any "patent selectiveness of vision" by

<sup>1</sup> Ian Watt, "Serious Reflections on *The Rise of the Novel*," *Towards a Poetics of Fiction: Essays from "Novel," a Forum on Fiction 1967-1976*, ed. Mark Spilka (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 92.

undermining that belief or deflecting “attention from the content of the report to the skill of the reporter,”<sup>2</sup> ultimately goes against the grain of the genre. The issues involved in this judgment are still worth debating, but it should be said that Watt is so finely intelligent, such a shrewdly informed reader of novels in their dense contexts of social and intellectual history, that his somewhat tilted perspective proves to be far less a detriment than one would have imagined. Despite its one-sidedness, *The Rise of the Novel* remains the most illuminating account we have of the emergence of the new genre in eighteenth-century England. After all these years, it still conveys a sense of the excitement of intellectual discovery.

It is scarcely necessary to say that a whole series of new waves have swept through literary studies since the publication of *The Rise of the Novel*. In their wake, many would be inclined to conclude that Watt’s study is now superannuated, hopelessly parochial in its exclusive focus on eighteenth-century England and on three canonical white male writers. Watt tried to defend himself in “Serious Reflections” against the early harbingers of such objections by pointing out that his book was, after all, subtitled “Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding.” Nevertheless, the use of the definite article before “Novel” in the title proper was a little misleading: although Watt was undertaking an ostensibly delimited investigation of a new trend in English prose narrative between 1719 and 1749, both his title and many of the terms of his analysis made larger claims about the nature of the novel. Critics who saw the novel rising elsewhere and earlier were also likely to have somewhat different views about the defining characteristics of the genre. If, for example, Cervantes, instead of being invited to go home, was assumed to be the central innovator of the new genre, as Harry Levin, Marthe Robert, and a host of other critics have plausibly argued, then the confrontation between reading and living, the problematic of fiction-making, would be the pre-eminent novelistic concern, and not the realism of presentation. If *La Princesse de Clèves* was taken as the point of departure for the genre, then the minute analysis of feeling, the nuanced narrative embodiment of moral dilemma, would be the distinctive novelistic concerns, necessitating certain characteristic narrative procedures, and a case might even be made for the decisive importance of a woman’s perspective in the shaping of the new genre. Recently, Margaret Anne Doody has argued with great vigour and erudition that the novel, far from rising in eighteenth-century England, can be traced back to the Hellenistic romances, with demonstrable consciousness of these

2 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 30. References are to this edition.

origins in late antiquity informing the literary projects of prose writers in the Renaissance and the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This revisionist account uncouples the novel from the middle class and from eighteenth-century England and associates it instead with the Mediterranean and the Near East, with a kind of ancient multiculturalism, with the viewpoint of women and slaves, and with a whole complex of values undreamt of in the four-square Puritan world of Richardson and Defoe.

Genres, it should be said, have proved to be among the more elusive objects of literary study. They are not altogether distinct historical phenomena; their borders have a disconcerting propensity to waver and dissolve; they lend themselves to hybridization; they exert no clear-cut normative force on the writers who are claimed to implement them. The choice, then, of a particular beginning for the novel will always be in some degree arbitrary, inevitably dictated by the critic's perception of what the eventual characteristic traits of the genre turn out to be. If you see a certain pattern of induction to wisdom through the trials of adventure as central to the novel, the Greek romances make perfect sense as points of origins—and Fielding was manifestly aware of these texts from late antiquity, using them as elements in his plots, though Defoe and Richardson did not. If you are convinced that the dissemination of fiction after the invention of printing heralds a new mode of representation and narration, and a new cultural quandary, Cervantes has to be credited as the inventor of the novel. If, following Bakhtin, you imagine the generic impulse of the novel to be an ever more encyclopedic embodiment of diverse social languages and social realities and of the experience of the body, Rabelais would be a plausible founder of the genre. And if the novel seems to you, as it does to Ian Watt, above all the reflection of a new post-Renaissance world picture, "one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and particular places" (p. 31), then Defoe and Richardson are arguably the pioneers of the genre, pointing the way for Balzac, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Joyce, and countless others.

The bias of Watt's view of the novel, as his critics (I among them) have long noted, is especially palpable in his concessive attitude towards Fielding. Watt's generous intelligence duly registers Fielding's imaginative vitality and his humaneness, but while the author of *Tom Jones* is praised for exhibiting "a responsible wisdom about human affairs" (p. 288), Watt clearly implies that wisdom, however admirable as a moral virtue, is not

3 Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

a particularly novelistic trait. Thus he concludes that *Tom Jones* “is a very personal and unrepeatably kind of success: Fielding’s technique was too eclectic to become a permanent element in the tradition of the novel—*Tom Jones* is only part novel, and there is much else—picaresque tale, comic drama, occasional essay” (pp. 287–88). Although Watt proceeds to mitigate this judgment by proposing in his final chapter that later writers such as Laurence Sterne and Jane Austen create a synthesis of the narrative procedures of Richardson and Fielding, his conclusion about the relation of *Tom Jones* to the genre presupposes the “realism of presentation” as the essential criterion for the novel, making other kinds of presentation or other realisms look like straying into other generic pastures. I would argue to the contrary that one of the defining features of the novel is precisely its eclectic character, its ability to embrace other genres and make them serve its own purposes. (That is in part what Gide must have had in mind in calling the novel the “lawless” genre.) In fact, novels often manage to incorporate picaresque tales, comic dramas, fables, fantasies, dramatic monologues, and much else; and the essay, occasional or otherwise, has been intrinsic to the novelistic imagination of society and individual experience in major novelists as different from one another as Proust, Musil, and Thomas Mann.

The chief drawback, then, of *The Rise of the Novel* is in its overstating the case for the realism of presentation. Watt argues this case, however, with such perceptiveness, with such a rich sense of the cultural forces that lent momentum to this new kind of writing, that his account of the novel’s rise has continuing relevance for the understanding of its later flourishing, even if it falls short of covering all the teeming variety and unpredictability of the genre. I would like to test the elasticity of Watt’s underlying conception of the novel by considering how it might come into play in two works of fiction that would seem to run counter to the terms of the genre he maps out in describing its rise in eighteenth-century England. The two novels I shall propose for reflection are Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), which, if we are to invoke the inevitably fluid categories of literary history, we might think of as a late modernist work, and Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (1979), which has the manifest earmarks of a postmodernist fiction.



*Lolita*, like Nabokov’s other novels, revels in the very exhibition of verbal artifice, the “skill of the reporter,” that struck Watt as one of the leading features of Fielding’s writing which set it apart from the generic trend of the novel. *Lolita* abounds in elements of parody; its pages swim with

literary allusions, both playful and serious; it invites the discerning reader to contemplate the ingenuity and intricacy of its formal structure; and if the narrator Humbert Humbert tries to justify his elaborately wrought prose on realistic or psychological grounds—"You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style"<sup>4</sup>—it is nevertheless clear that behind Humbert stands Nabokov the stylistic prestidigitator, delighting in what Fielding self-ironically calls "fine writing" and showing no discernible affiliation with a tradition putatively initiated by Defoe. The story of erotic obsession and the sexual abuse of a child has terrible moral urgency, and both the twisted Humbert's suffering and the vulnerable Lolita's fate are painted in sombre hues, but none of this diminishes the narrative exuberance of the novel or precludes moments of downright clowning by the novelist. "We had breakfast in the township of Soda, pop. 1001" (p. 220), Nabokov has Humbert observe, as he moves him across a map of America equally determined by real geography and literary gamesmanship. Peter Sellers's farcical interpretation of Clare Quilty in the Kubrick film of the novel is entirely in the spirit of the actual murder scene in the book, which is at once hilarious and horrific, and shot through with parody.

Let us consider one characteristic instance of Humbert's extravagantly self-conscious artifice as the reporter of his own experience and see if there is nevertheless some connection with what Ian Watt describes as the distinctive features of the genre. Humbert, after driving away with Lolita from her lakeside summer camp and taking her to The Enchanted Hunters Inn, has at last succeeded in having his way with her (or, as we are led to perceive in a wry reversal, from a certain point of view she also coolly has her way with him). Humbert, ever inclined to indulge in fantasies and ever reflective about possibilities of artistic representation, imagines what he would do if the hotel management "lost its mind one summer day" and commissioned him to paint a mural for its dining-hall. Here, says the post-coital Humbert, pondering his newly acquired child consort, are "some fragments" he would include:

There would have been a lake. There would have been an arbor in flame-flower. There would have been nature-studies—a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by his molding caress), helping a callypygean slave child to climb a column of onyx. There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes. There would have been all kinds of camp activities on the part of

4 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel Jr (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 9. References are to this edition

the intermediate group, Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun. There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child. (pp. 134–35)

The burnished stylistic surface of the language is spectacularly evident, and would seem to stand in flat contradiction to Watt's claim that "the function of language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms," typically rejecting elegance in favour of the homespun look of verbal verisimilitude (p. 30). Humbert's rendering in words of the fantasized mural, like everything else in his narrative, is palpably *composed*—in its sound-patterns, its images, its play of allusions to other works of literature and to previous moments in this novel. Nabokov, famously fond of alliteration, subtly orchestrates the repetition of consonants here to give the passage a kind of musical cohesiveness: the initial hard "c"s in the sequence "caress," "callypygean," "climb," "column," are followed by the "l"s and "g"s of "luminous globules of gonadal glow," and at the end of the passage there is a delicate little series of "p"s followed by "l"s in "a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool." Humbert's eminently literary diction includes one word so unusual, "callypygean" (possessing beautiful buttocks), that it may well be a tiny allusion to Joyce's *Ulysses*, where it is used to describe a statue of Venus in the National Museum and is associated by Bloom with Molly. Humbert's self-representation as a sultan caressing a lovely slave child is a more generic kind of allusion, to the erotic Oriental fantasies of late eighteenth-century French and English literature and to a general topos of pornography. At the same time, the novel here as elsewhere pointedly alludes to itself: the passionately flowering arbour by the water, Lolita at her lakeside camp, folds back into the child Humbert's amorous experience with Annabel Leigh on the beach at the Riviera; and the *alphabetic list of camp activities*—Canoeing, Coranting (dancing), Combing Curls—reverts to an earlier moment in Ramsdale, as *Lolita's* wonderfully alert annotator, Alfred Appel Jr, has observed, when Humbert peruses volume C of the *Girls' Encyclopedia*, getting exactly as far as the entry for Canoeing. The surfacing of this little slice of the alphabet, perhaps subliminally presaged by the alliteration of "c"s that precedes it, is a small indication of how the medium of representation in Nabokov, composed of linguistic, literary, orthographic, and typographical elements, is *foregrounded, in defiance of any supposed realism of presentation*. (Sterne rather than Richardson or Defoe would be the appropriate precursor in this regard.)

The most salient, and perhaps the most evocative, element in the composed character of the language is its witty orchestration of images. The

paragraph begins with a lake (exterior), ends with a pool (interior, in a rather complicated way, as we shall see in a moment). The jungle-like efflorescence on the lakeshore, with its luxuriant blossoms and its beasts of prey, segues into the Oriental landscape of the sultan and his slave child. The second half of the passage, perhaps picking up an associative clue from the presumed splendour of the sultan's court, is dominated by images of precious stones in a state of pulsating deliquescence. At the head of this image-cluster stands the amusing, brilliantly vivid evocation of that neon-lit Wurlitzer of yesteryear with "luminous globules of gonadal glow" running up its "opalescent sides."

All this display of verbal pyrotechnics, which is virtually unremitting in *Lolita*, would seem to preclude the bias of language towards a chiefly referential function that Watt identifies with the novel. Perhaps we are more likely to be aware now, after both structuralism and poststructuralism, than he would have been in the 1950s that referentiality in language is a somewhat problematic concept. Language, we have been abundantly reminded, is an arbitrary instrument based on convention, and though a certain plain style in fiction may approximate—always, I would argue, with an element of stylization—the ordinary language of everyday discourse, every verbal representation is an artifice, and thus obtruded verbal artifice may serve the function of referentiality as well as the literary simulation of unadorned speech or letter-writing. Humbert Humbert's ostentatiously literary style is also a pervasive expression of his distinctive sensibility and of his peculiar erotomania. Every shard and facet of the world as he contemplates it mirrors his sexual obsession, while his wild oscillations in tone from irony (the wry announcement of "nature studies," for example) to erotic frenzy to remorse reflect the essential instability of this cultivated, crazed, intermittently conscience-stricken man.

Humbert is of course the tiger in the jungle and nymphet Lolita is the bird of paradise he pursues. More ambiguously, he is the phallic snake, she the shoat it consumes, though that image also lends itself to an anti-Freudian reversal, in which the snake is the pubescent female cavity choking on the outsize pig it swallows (an unpleasant identification encouraged by the use of the verb "sheathing" and reinforced by the reference at the end to the child's pain). What is most remarkable about the passage is that the exquisite images marshalled by Humbert to paint his erotomania turn out to be quite creepy, actually painful to the moral imagination. In all the opulence of the slave child helped (forced?) to climb a priapic column of onyx, one glimpses a scene of sadistic exploitation. The fire opal dissolving in the implicitly vaginal "ripple-ringed pool" is of course Humbert mentally revisiting his recent moment of sexual climax (*Lolita's* camp is located on

the shore of Lake Climax), but in a concluding reversal, which is at once a flash of remorse on Humbert's part and a stroboscopic revelation of his turpitude to the reader, his last orgasmic throbs turn kinesthetically into a palette of reds and pinks now linked to a different tactile sensation, the wincing of a young girl obliged to submit physically to a full-grown male.

The general effect of this deployment of style is paradoxical. According to Watt's conception of the novel, a lack of selectiveness, an accumulation of a mass of circumstantial detail, are hallmarks of the genre. Nabokov's kind of novel, however, as we have abundantly seen in this representative passage, is finely, even fanatically, selective. Yet the overall result is in one sense the kind of reading experience that, in Watt's account, is typical of the novel: "it makes us feel that we are in contact not with literature but with the raw materials of life itself as they are momentarily reflected in the minds of the protagonists" (p. 193). Granted, Humbert constantly reminds us how literary his narrative is, and "the raw materials of life" might seem the unlikeliest notion to associate with anything written by Nabokov, who himself would surely have haughtily dismissed the very phrase. The point is, however, that the protagonist-narrator of this novel is not a London shopkeeper or a female servant but an expatriate European of great cultivation, a man rich in artistic pretensions. Calling himself a *poète à mes heures*, he thinks and breathes literature, giving a dense literary colouration to the desperate story of his own perversion. If "the raw materials of life" in his case are juke boxes and movie magazines and seedy motels, they are equally his reading of Poe and Joyce and Baudelaire, and the unrelenting obsession that drives him. This highly wrought prose narrative is, then, for all its aspects of parody and self-reflexivity, the representation of a very particular individual "having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places." The nexus proposed in *The Rise of the Novel* between the genre and a new sense of the individual and of the value of individual experience in the early modern period continues to have explanatory power, even if one sets aside the emphasis on a Puritan attitude towards style and artifice. The question of beginnings, as I have suggested, inevitably invites answers dictated by the features of the phenomenon under scrutiny on which the questioner chooses to focus. If you look at the governing conception of polished verbal artifice in Nabokov and his own consciousness of literary antecedents, you might be compelled to the conclusion that for this particular novelist the genre to all intents and purposes begins with *Madame Bovary*, anything earlier being too crude formally to be regarded as more than an unevolved precursor to the real thing. On the other hand, if you look at Nabokov's fascination with the endless peculiarities of individual character—what Walter Benjamin, reflecting on

the distinctiveness of the novel, aptly called its effort “to carry the incommensurable to the extremes in the representation of human life”<sup>5</sup>—and at his technical resourcefulness in representing these peculiarities, the beginnings of the genre in which he writes could plausibly be traced back to the new concrete narrative rendering of the particulars of individual experience in the eighteenth century that Watt describes so well.



Let us now turn to Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* as a limit-case in regard to the relevance of any notion of realism, presentational or otherwise, to the genre. Calvino's postmodern fiction is not only a self-conscious exercise of artifice, like *Lolita*, but a sustained deployment of what the Russian formalists called “laying bare the device.” Calvino's constant short-circuiting of the illusion of reality he begins to create, his provocative breaking-off of every narrative he launches, runs counter to the “formal realism” that Watt associates with the genre, though it does have a certain kinship with the repeated interruptions of narrative and the repeated exposure of the conventionality of narration in Sterne. *If on a winter's night* embodies a hyperconsciousness of the tradition of the novel that has the virtue of reminding us that “the novel” with its characteristic narrative practices is not a static or unitary entity but a mode of representation and narration that evolves through a changing sense of history and through a changing sense on the part of novelists of their own conventions. “We can rediscover the continuity of time,” Calvino observes in his introductory chapter, “only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded, a period that lasted no more than a hundred years.”<sup>6</sup> His own novel, clearly assuming an era in which time has exploded, is a long teasing denial of the continuity of narrative time.

*If on a winter's night* comprises a frame-story, in which a male character referred to as “you,” or the Reader, in some sense a stand-in for each of us reading the book, becomes romantically involved with a female Other Reader named Ludmilla as both attempt futilely to read a novel that keeps breaking off and changing into a different novel (pages from another book are bound in after the first signature, copies are lost, purloined, and so

5 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 87.

6 Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 8. References are to this edition.

on). The bulk of the book, then, is made up of a series of broken-off beginnings of novels (all of them first-person) reflecting different settings, sensibilities, and conventions—a European spy novel, a political novel set in a fictitious Eastern Bloc country, an apocalyptic future fiction, a lyric erotic Japanese novel, a South American tale of violence and romance. There are ten such novel-beginnings in all, some of them engrossing, all of them parodic to one degree or another, all permanently interrupted just when they have begun to build some momentum of narrative interest. The only approximation of narrative continuity occurs in the frame-story: the plot, it conveys is intermittent and somewhat sketchy, but it does in the end bring the male Reader and the female Other Reader together to the marital bed, fulfilling an old convention of the novel. Laying bare of the device, moreover, is not limited to the interruptions and to the considerations of readerly experience in the frame-story but also invades the various realisms of the novel-fragments. Let us consider the initial paragraphs of the first of the ten novel beginnings as an instance of one possible fate of the realism of presentation two and a half centuries after Defoe:

The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. In the odor of the station there is a passing whiff of station café odor. There is someone looking through the befogged glass, he opens the glass door of the bar, everything is misty inside, too, as if seen by nearsighted eyes, or eyes irritated by coal dust. The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences. It is a rainy evening; the man enters the bar; he unbuttons his damp overcoat; a cloud of steam enfolds him; a whistle dies along tracks that are glistening with rain, as far as the eye can see.

A whistling sound, like a locomotive's, and a cloud of steam rises from the coffee machine that the old counterman puts under pressure, as if he were sending up a signal, or at least so it seems from the series of sentences in the second paragraph, in which the players at the table close the fans of their cards against their chests and turn toward the newcomer with a triple twist of their necks, shoulders, and chairs, while the customers at the counter raise their little cups and blow on the surface of the coffee, lips and eyes half shut, or suck the head of their mugs of beer, taking exaggerated care not to spill. The cat arches its back, the cashier closes her cash register and it goes pling. All these signs converge to inform us that this is a little provincial station, where anyone is immediately noticed. (pp. 10–11)

The first three words, "The novel begins," mark the transition from the prefatory disquisition on novel-reading, from the frame-story in which "you," the Reader (together with us, the real readers), takes up the text, into the world of the novel he enters. But the actuality of the situation of reading persists through these opening paragraphs and is only slowly

allowed to fade out as the fictional world takes over. Thus, in an amusing superimposition of two orders of reality, the steam from the locomotive “covers the opening chapter” and the clouded interior of the train station generates a film of smoke that rests on the sentences we are reading. This invasion of the situation of reading by the content of what is read is then reversed when a brief but vivid evocation of the whistling sound of the espresso machine is immediately exposed as a mental construct produced by printed signs on the page (“or at least so it seems from the series of sentences in the second paragraph”). The passage functions, then, as a guided illustration of how we as readers assemble the illusion of a particular reality by following the conventional signals of the fictional text: thus the narrator, having described the card-players and drinkers, the counterman and cashier, concludes, “All these signs converge to inform us that this is a little provincial station, where anyone is immediately noticed.”

From a certain viewpoint, *If on a winter's night* is a prime instance of what John Barth once rather pessimistically called “the literature of exhaustion” (his examples were Nabokov, Beckett, and Borges)<sup>7</sup>—a literature that, arriving at a sense that everything interesting has already been written, falls back on reflecting ingeniously upon its own terminal condition at the end of a long literary tradition. There are, however, two major objections to be raised to Barth’s notion of a literature of exhaustion. First, it is irrelevant to a whole vibrant sector of contemporary writing: novelists such as A.S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood, John Updike, and Philip Roth at their best offer vigorous and inventive representations of individual experience and social reality that show no signs of fatigue with literary tradition. But even a self-conscious fiction like Calvino’s can engage readers with a kind of exuberance of mimetic inventiveness. His obtruded awareness of the conventionality of the novel and of the implicit contract between novelist and reader does not preclude an effective energy of realistic representation in the writing.

The locomotive, the station, and the café are props we are all at least vaguely familiar with as readers of novels—the familiarity is of course precisely Calvino’s point—and probably also as viewers of films inspired by novels, but these elements are marshalled in a way that draws us into an imagined world. The fondness for specification of circumstantial detail cultivated by the pioneers of the genre in eighteenth-century England and untypical of other narrative genres is vigorously evident here: the odour of the provincial station, the damp overcoat, the espresso machine echoing the locomotive with its whistle and puff of steam, the people at the counter

7 John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1967, 29–34.

blowing on the surface of their coffee, the cat arching its back in an exemplary illustration of what Roland Barthes calls "the effect of the real."<sup>8</sup> But what above all encourages us to slip into the world of the story is the focusing of the narrative in the point of view of its protagonist, which by stages takes over from the obtruded frame of the situation of reading. In the two initial paragraphs, that point of view is represented in the third person; in the next paragraph the central personage will step forward and continue his narrative in the first person—"I have landed in this station tonight for the first time in my life." The visual representation of subjectivity plays an important role in defining the scene: the traveller peers through the fogged glass door of the bar, at first unable to make out what is within; in the other direction, between patches of steam, he can see the train tracks glistening in the rain; once he is inside, his roving gaze, despite the haze, picks up the coffee machine, the counterman, the card-players craning around towards him, the drinkers, the cat, the cashier who closes her register to the accompaniment of a ringing sound. The scene plays out a central topos of the realist novel: the penetration of the protagonist into unfamiliar space—a house, an urban neighbourhood, a new social milieu—which becomes an enactment of the process of the progressive discovery of the social, cultural, and material reality that is at the heart of the realist enterprise.<sup>9</sup> One could of course argue that Calvino's deployment of this venerable topos is chiefly an *exercice de style*, as Raymond Queneau called his own purely formal experiments in narrative representation, but I think it also works as imaginative evocation—Calvino's intention, after all, is that we should actually get caught up in the sundry stories which he then interrupts. The continuing effectiveness, in turn, of this tried and true narrative strategy may suggest why, even in the postmodern moment, there continue to be so many serious and lively practitioners of the realist novel who do not seem anachronistic.



All this amounts to a distinctively novelistic way of telling a story through the minute pulsations of experience of the principal character, creating the illusion, to repeat Ian Watt's formulation, "that we are in contact ... with the raw materials of life as they are momentarily reflected in the

8 Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 11–17.

9 I have discussed this topos in "Modernism and Nostalgia," *Partisan Review* 60:13 (Summer 1993), 388–402.

minds of the protagonists.” For this particular mode of narration (there are obviously others that novelists use), the novel does not begin with the Greek romances or with Rabelais or with Cervantes or with Fielding, and only minimally with Mme de La Fayette, but rather with Defoe and Richardson. Ian Watt gives us only a partial account of the nature and origins of the genre, as his critics have contended all along; but *The Rise of the Novel* remains unsurpassed, and by no means superannuated, in its identification of the importance for the novel of individual experience realized through circumstantial detail, and in its lucid explanation of the cultural and social forces in the early modern period that led to this general shift of paradigms in prose narrative. Our own cultural and social circumstances have palpably changed, as has our sense of literary tradition, dictating the emergence of new narrative modes—Calvino in our age is part of a trend, whereas Sterne in his time was a quirky exception. But significant continuities have persisted over the span of two and a half centuries. Let us recall Watt’s generalization on individualism and the novel as he launches on his discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*:

The novel’s concern with the daily lives of ordinary people seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature; and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of novels. (p. 60)

These two basic conditions may be inflected differently in our own society from the way they were in eighteenth-century England, but they still obtain. And even with the competition of another major narrative genre, film, the technical resources of the novel for taking us into the inner spaces of individual lives lived out through daily circumstances remain unrivalled. Heading into a new millennium, many of us ordinary people are still, perhaps surprisingly, readers of novels, at least in part for the reasons put forth in *The Rise of the Novel*.

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