

Foreword, volume 7: The Orientation of the Novel

[**Editorial note: this manuscript file will be replaced by a definitive pdf in early 2013**]

[3] The novel is not interminable.

A literary genre, it began one day. Having been born condemned it to die, and all along the path of its development it confronts the law that commands its extinction: after having passed through a finite number of states, it finds its position of rest. This arrest [*arrêt*¹] gives it a destiny. By destiny one must understand a system – though not one so perfect that it does not also admit that residual contingency² from which the manifest imbroglio of literary history results.

We would like here to exemplify the novel's initial inquiry or investigation [*information*], namely what it transforms in order to begin its process: myth – and its conclusive investigation – when, having run its course, it treats its own law, which the process it commands then comes to transform.

The self-application of the novel henceforth forbids it to stop. Terminated, but indefinite, it enters the interminable.

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That the novel transforms myth is something we can see in the substitutions of *tukhè* for *anankè*, of freely taken heroic chances for the injunctive word of the oracles, of intimate and demonic certainties for the constraints of theogonic knowledge³ – so many mutations in the driving force [*ressort*] that leave the scenario unchanged. What distinguishes [4] a mythical narrative, therefore, is the fact that in it there functions a cause without reason (something Georges Dumézil indicates in *furor*, the principle of an 'irrational determinism'). The novel defines itself then by motivating this cause so as to rationalize it: consecution (the sequence of episodes) tolerates, undisturbed, the displacement of the consequence,⁴ while the inherited figuration finds a way to deploy itself in the new genre. Thus the figure of the wanton woman – here an Irish queen who shocks the hero and blunts his desires, there a most Roman lover [*amante plus que romaine*] who excites him.

The novel's rationalization is thus the introduction, into the scenario of myth, of psychological and juridical calculations of interest, thus of motivation and judgment, a double discrimination that consecrates Horatius as responsible and that makes of him a person properly speaking. And on the contrary, what *furor* shows is the depersonalization of the hero.⁵

Motivation implies interpretation, which justifies Livy in always accommodating by a *sive...*, *sive...* [whether... or...] both the mythical version and a prosaic solution that is itself often plural. Interpretation implies equivocity: it implies, in a character, the tension of different possibilities and a convergence of opposed traits that the person renders compatible. Myth separates this mixture: we will see examples of this in India (Indra delegates to Trita the guilt of his participation in a necessary crime)

¹ TN: The French term *arrêt* means both a stop or arrest of movement, but also a decree or a ruling, and an arrest in the police sense of the word.

² '*Die in jenen Systemen zurückbleibende Zufälligkeit*' (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §188).

³ Cf. Pierre Grimal, Introduction to *Romans grecs et latins*, éd. de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

⁴ On consecution and consequence see Roland Barthes, *Communications No. 8. Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits* (1966), 10, 12.

⁵ TN: See Georges Dumézil, 'Horace et le furor', in his 'Lecture de Tite-Live' §3, CpA 7.1.

and in Persia (double heroes, double exploits, double story). Myth lacks the sleight of hand of Roman law, which drives a guilty Horatius to his death – in order to save in extremis a glorious Horatius.

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At the other end of this trajectory, Aragon and Gombrowicz will be appreciated for having begun to reintroduce similar scissions in some of their heroes, whereby the novel captures its double. Aragon will make Ant(h)oine lose his reflection in the mirror, along with the insignia of his unity. Gombrowicz will render Skuziak's participation in the plot superfluous, and his act gratuitous.

To put psychology and its sufficient reasons at such a distance is surely to revert to myth.

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