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Edited by Irina Dumitrescu and Bruce Holsinger

Novella

Florian Fuchs

GIVEN ITS BREVITY, THE NOVELLA HAS BEEN newly rediscovered as “the original #Longread,”¹ an appellation that fits neatly into its centuries-long genealogy. Before there were hashtags, the novella has been described as many things: an anecdote retold, the sister of drama, a short novel, a story readable in a single sitting, an unprecedented incident, or simply as a piece of news. Curiously, these alternative titles point to no common feature, except one: novellas seem to be defined with respect to other genres. This is perhaps most true of the rapprochement of the novella and the short novel, which has proven so intuitive that its comparative nature is often forgotten and “novella” used interchangeably with “short novel.” On the contrary, a novella and a novel, however long or short, are very different things.

What helps these and other false equations cohere is that novellas have gained their specific features, including the ability to dwell alongside other genres, through a significant cover operation. Without losing its formal integrity, a novella seeks attachment to other forms, coalescence with other novellas into novella cycles, or even incorporation into a larger genre, while at the same time remaining intact and discrete. This affiliative impulse has been true since the novella’s paradigmatic emergence in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, a novella cycle written and circulated a century before print. Despite the classical sovereignty of verse fiction on the one hand and oral storytelling traditions on the other, the novellas of the *Decameron* established a new kind of modern literature written in prose and telling of everyday events. Set within societies shaped by citizens, these early instances already carried the pointed, argumentative form that would be perfected during the nineteenth century, effectively allowing novellas to become narrative amplifications of unresolved issues of civic life.

At second sight, the faux equation between novella and short novel is therefore categorically wrong, because it implies that novella and novel occupy the same spectrum. Yet novellas are not merely scaled-down novels. Their most obvious distinction might be word count, but this does not get at the fundamental difference between novella and novel. Form is the crucial feature that marks the novella, while the novel may

be called formless: novellas lack subplots and contain only one major storyline that centers around one decisive turning event, such as the sudden occurrence of an accident, a revelation of one person as another, or similar arrivals of the inexplicable into the characters' everyday. This plot and its unforeseen incident drive the whole of the novella and give it the form of a chance occurrence that brings about decisive consequences.² Within these limits, protagonists cannot be developed at length, nor can their world ever be seen outside their spotlight. Instead of offering detailed and extensive panoramic setups of atmospheres or locations, novellas provide a schematic structure that calls on the reader's here-and-now for most of its contextualization. An office, a scene on a ship, a conversation before a date: in a novella, events like these are truncated and unstable, calling on the reader to flesh out the gaps.

Novellas draw on us. They begin from our world, but they also conclude in our world because their focus on one episode prevents them from developing a world of their own. A novella, like Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, is only an extension of an existing reality, whereas the openness of a novel strives to create a whole reality anew, potentially infinite and flexible enough to add more and ever more subplots, details, protagonists, or even dozens of sequels, as in the case of Émile Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*. If the novel is the epitome of infinite scalability and world-making, the novella is its counterpoint: guided by a strict, even measured focus, the novella's primary interest is to interfere with our world.

The novella's tendency to latch onto other genres is active in the origin of the novel itself. The novel is a result of novellas latching onto one another, that is, a series of novellas with the same set of main protagonists. Already Friedrich Schlegel, who, in his 1801 essay on the then little-known Boccaccio published the first theory of the novella, observed this contiguity in his notes, claiming that "the oldest form of the prose novel is a system of novellas," and, more specifically, "the *combining* of a number of stories belongs very much to the art of the novella."³ Schlegel understands that the contextual hegemony of the novella into the lives of its reader demands a theory of the novella—that is, a theory of how literary forms behave in the world, so humans can at least theoretically describe their contextual impact, which he calls "the problem of the environment in a system of novellas."⁴ Schlegel's early studies show that literary theory is not an invention of the theorist, but on the contrary an analysis of the provocation caused by the appearance of a new literary form in the world.

While the discipline of poetics since Aristotle provided the rules for writing and analyzing literature in place up to the eighteenth century,

modernity at the same time forged its own type of literature that did not fall under these poetic rules, but like the novella demanded new modes of speaking about literature's place in the world. Schlegel's early fragments are no full novella theory, yet they identify demands for such theory and must be counted among the first symptoms of a coming to terms with the relational abilities of the novella form. In fact, the full emergence of what today is called literary theory, commonly understood to begin with Russian formalism or in Weimar Germany, centered equally around a set of paradigmatic novella studies. Implicitly answering Schlegel's demands that studying the novella's relationality is the key to a theory of literature, Georg Lukács wrote *The Bourgeois Way of Life and Art for Art's Sake: Theodor Storm* (1909), Boris Eikhenbaum developed *How Gogol's Overcoat Is Made* (1918), Erich Auerbach analyzed *The Technique of the Early Renaissance Novella* (1921), and Walter Benjamin proposed his theory of the novella in *Goethe's Elective Affinities* (1924), all of which became original sparks for literary theory.

The novella's unique technique of appearing in the world that Schlegel specifically called "the art of the novella" is marked by its ability to turn the mere story of a strange occurrence or character into a symbolic story that becomes applicable anywhere and at any time. Think of Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853). We could very well imagine it either as a marginal anecdote about a clerk who at first was curiously peculiar about his work, then began to refuse working at all, until he left his job only to be found dead shortly after; or as a novel about the strange life story of a clerk working in mid-nineteenth-century offices, similar to but less grotesque than Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. But Melville's novella is neither: it is not about the protagonist. We only learn what happens to Bartleby; we do not learn much about him.

After the long nineteenth century of novellas that began with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Conversations of German Refugees* (1795) and ended with Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), André Jolles defined this focus of the novella on action:

As novella we understand the presentation of an incident or an event of haunting and powerful meaning that appears truthful to us. The novella demonstrates this event for us in such a form that it appears more important than the people experiencing it. It all comes down to what happens; the psychology and the characters of those acting and suffering do not interest us in themselves, but only inasmuch as what happens is caused by them.⁵

Novellas do not introduce us to people who turn from strangers into acquaintances with each additional page. To have something happen before us is their goal or, better yet, to have something happen *to us*.

The relationality of novellas does not allow us to distance ourselves from what happens in them, unlike how we would from an anecdote, nor do they allow us to distance ourselves from ourselves, like the novel's drive for identification. Everything in *Bartleby* is a forcefield drawing us to the strangeness of his existential disobedience. Everything in Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Water* (1992) is a forcefield that draws us to how a young woman's trust in an older man is fatally violated.

What decides whether a short story is a novella is its ability to transgress its own limits, and hence the limits of fiction, to impact the world of its reader. *Black Water* wants to be left behind and followed up by opinions, questions, even decisions, actions back in this world. In this regard, novellas are paradigms of how strong narrative form can result in a kind of agency in the world that is usually ascribed only to visual or performative art forms such as images, sculptures, performances, or videos. In a different media ontology than visual means, their measured form is interested in positioning novellas like actors, problems, arguments in the sphere of quotidian life. That is not to say that, like fables, novellas could just as easily receive a simple moral attached to their end; quite the opposite is the case. Through a form designed to interfere, a novella proposes a dilemma of civic life that does not fit into the accepted social norms of its time.

Beginning in the Florentine republic of Boccaccio in the West, but also through parallel cultural trajectories like the parabolic tales in the Chinese *Han Feizi* (third century BCE), novellas have emerged in historical situations in which citizens' storytelling brings forth unresolved matters of quotidian life in a form that is both accessible and prosaic, as well as pointed and symbolic. Such historical situations allowed one of the foremost novella writers in the German tradition, Heinrich von Kleist, to write eight novellas in the brief period between 1808–1811, which question many of the most fundamental problems of his era: divine justice, racism, state power, rape, marriage, property law, and aesthetic beauty.⁶

This sharp form of proposition has often drawn interpreters to relate the novella form to legal case stories, though understanding them this way blurs the important distinction to casuistic systems such as those that support law or medicine. Casuistry seeks to reduce single cases to problems that can be resolved through formalized methods already in place in those systems, whereas novellas tell their story to provoke these very systematic norms themselves. While novellas undoubtedly originate from aspecific troubling of norms, their goal is precisely to obfuscate any attempts to be made fully legible according to these same norms.

In the case of the novella, only reading is left. The relational impact of a novella is clearest when one attempts to interpret and extract its central problem, which will always differ from the next, suggesting that no matter what her interpretation, each reader will be left with an unresolvable residue at the end. Such erratic remainders are thus no longer located in the realm of rhetoric or literature, but genuinely in the realm of the quotidian social sphere. From the view of literature, this volatile residue can only provoke what literary theory tries to do, as Schlegel first tried it, namely, to describe how literature appears in the social sphere. From the view of the social sphere, however, this residue of the novella is one in which the form ultimately takes the shape of an autonomous actor in the public sphere. Pointing to this crossing-over of storytelling into civic engagement, Hannah Arendt crucially coined the notion of the “enacted story,”⁷ according to which a short narrative can pose as an autonomous actor in the public exactly when it elicits the question posed to an erratic remainder: “Who are you?” In *Bartleby* or in *Black Water*, we do not meet a character but encounter a problem so vibrant and so illogical that we must acknowledge its autonomy and grant it independent agency. The novella’s relationality results from a story that no form of interpretation could prevent from becoming actual.

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NOTES

1 Joe Fassler, “The Return of the Novella, the Original #Longread,” *The Atlantic*, April 24, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/the-return-of-the-novella-the-original-longread/256290/>.

2 See Andreas Gailus, “Form and Chance: The German Novella,” in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, vol. 2, *Forms and Themes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 739–76.

3 Friedrich Schlegel, *Fragmente zur Poesie und Literatur I*, ed. Ernst Behler, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1981), 16:166; 297. All translations are my own. For a detailed discussion of Schlegel’s novella theory see Florian Fuchs, “Agierende Form: Über Friedrich Schlegels Theorie der Novelle,” *Athenäum: Jahrbuch der Friedrich Schlegel-Gesellschaft* 26 (2016): 23–50.

4 Schlegel, *Fragmente*, 16:188.

5 André Jolles, “Einleitung,” in Giovanni di Boccaccio, *Das Dekameron* (Leipzig: Insel, 1921), 77.

6 See Bianca Theisen, “Strange News: Kleist’s Novellas,” in *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich von Kleist*, ed. Bernd Fischer (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2003), 81–102.

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 181–88.