

# Two Theories

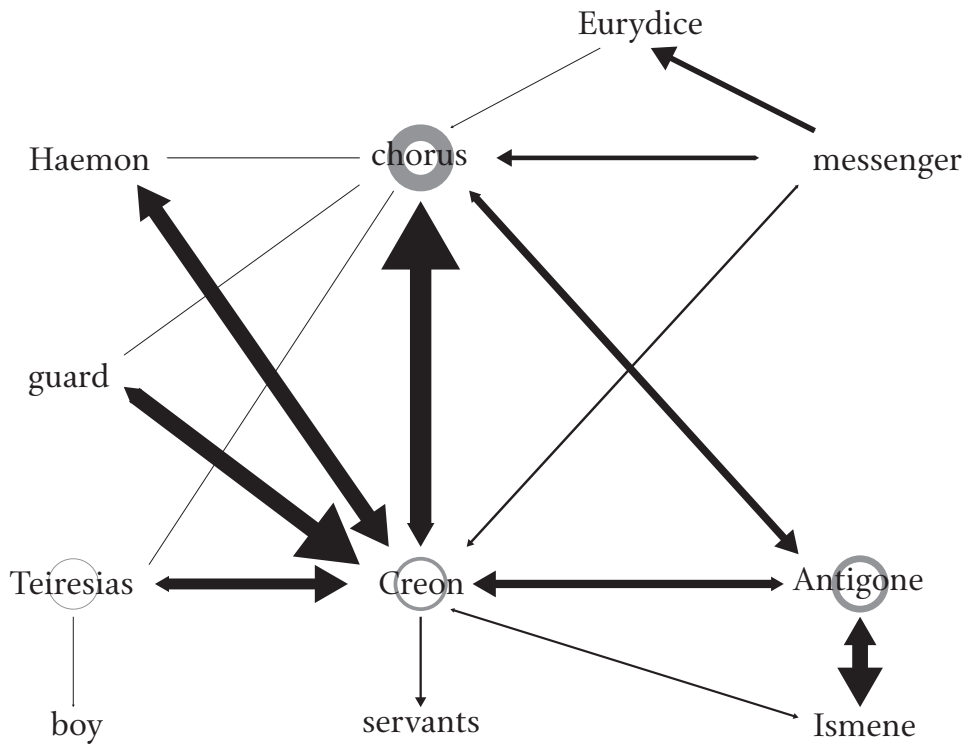
Franco Moretti

Let me begin with two images: the character-networks of *Antigone* and *Les Misérables*. Both plots have been turned into networks on the basis of the interactions among characters, and yet the outcome couldn't be more unlike.<sup>1</sup> While Sophocles's system is small, tight, and visibly centered around the fatal figure of Creon, *strategos* of Thebes, Hugo's crowded network shows dozens of figures with a single link to the body of the text, evoking the "minor-minor" characters of Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many*.<sup>2</sup> One can still study minor characters in tragedy, of course – "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" – or the centripetal pull of certain scenes in Fielding, or Dostoevsky, or even *Ulysses*. But, at bottom, tragedies and novels pose different questions to critical reflection, encouraging it to move in opposite directions. And that is indeed what the theory of tragedy and the theory of the novel have done.

Beginning with Plato and Aristotle – and then Hume, Voltaire, Schelling, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche... Scheler, Unamuno, Heidegger, Camus... Foucault, Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Žižek, Butler, Menke – philosophers have dominated the theory of tragedy. At times, they have done so by addressing strictly aesthetic issues, like the structure of tragic plot in the *Poetics*, the one-sidedness of dramatic characters in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, or the function of the chorus in *The Birth of Tragedy*; more often, they have taken tragedy to be the ideal terrain for general issues like the threat of emotions to political stability (*The Republic*), the clash between liberty and the course of the world (Schelling's *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*), the struggle between the imperatives of the State and the bonds of the family (Hegel's *Phenomenology*), the internal contradictions of the will (Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*), the distinction between ancient pain and modern sorrow (Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*), all the way to Nietzsche's critique of the *homo theoreticus*, Lukács's aptly titled "Metaphysics of Tragedy," and Heidegger's "attempt... to assess who the human being is" via his reading of *Antigone*'s second choral ode in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

Under the weight of these questions, the analysis of a specific literary form that was the object of the *Poetics* was replaced by a philosophy of "the tragic" as a self-standing entity: an "essentialization" or, better, a "derealization of tragedy," as William Marx has called it,<sup>3</sup> which was further exacerbated by the frequent

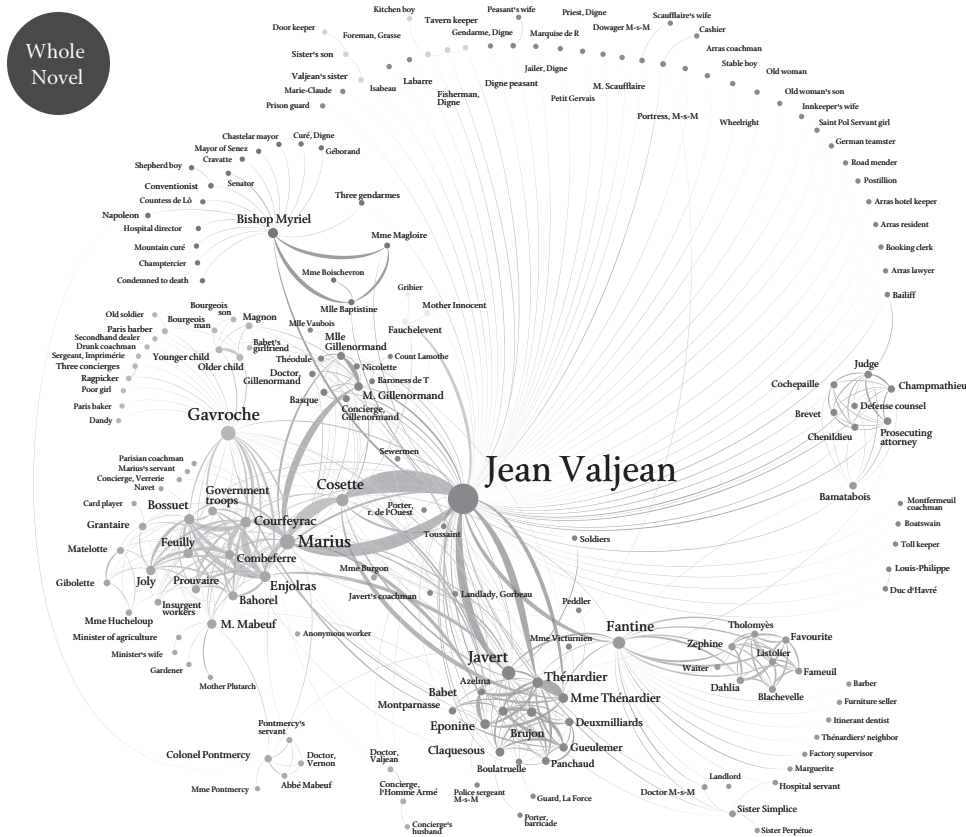
Figure 1  
Antigone



“Four hours of action, that become this. . . . What do we gain, by turning time into space? First of all, this: when we watch a play, we are always in the present: what is on stage, is; and then it disappears. Here, nothing ever disappears. What is done, cannot be undone. Once the Ghost shows up at Elsinore things change forever, whether he is on scene or not, because he is never not there in the network. The past becomes past, yes, but it never disappears from our perception of the plot.” Source: Franco Moretti, “Network Theory, Plot Analysis,” *New Left Review* 68 (2011).

focus on just a handful of notions – “catharsis,” “collision,” “reconciliation,” the chorus – as the key to the whole enterprise.<sup>4</sup> The “generic understandings of tragedy” in Schiller, Schelling, Schlegel, Hegel, and Hölderlin, Joshua Billings has written, are “substantially based on a single play” (typically, *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Antigone*);<sup>5</sup> in the past two hundred years, we have managed to add a couple more. Within literary studies, the theory of tragedy is clearly the model for the study of a single form with an exclusive canon, and very sharp boundaries.

Figure 2  
Les Misérables



“The novel has many, many more characters than readers (myself included) remember or even notice while reading. Most of these forgotten, unrecognized characters are nameless, play a marginal role in the novel’s plot, appear only briefly before disappearing without leaving a trace. . . . I would argue, however, that their presence is of the utmost importance since they stand precisely for ‘les misérables’ of the novel’s title. Thus our habitual reading practices demonstrate the problem Hugo sought to bring to our attention: the invisibility of the miserable ones to the social world we, the readers, represent.” Source: Michal P. Ginsburg, “Characters and Characters’ Networks in *Les Misérables*,” *Visualizing Les Misérables*, <https://lesmiserables.mla.hcommons.org/>.

Socrates was said to be a friend of Euripides; Plato, to have composed tragedies himself. True or not (almost certainly not), these views express the fact that the study of tragedy arose simultaneously with tragedy itself. For

its part, the theory of the novel took shape approximately two millennia after the composition of the earliest novels. Almost certainly due to the feeling that the novel was an illegitimate form, with no place within the spectrum of classical genres, this colossal hiatus between texts and theory was filled by all sorts of short-term commentaries, generally dismissive or downright censorious. Philosophical interest shrank to a few great intuitions of German romanticism, the most memorable of which – Schlegel’s fragment 116, from the *Atheneum* of 1798 – pursued the exact opposite of an essentialization of novelistic form:

Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim is not merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor.<sup>6</sup>

Philosophy, rhetoric, poetry, prose, criticism, nature, life, society, wit, instruction, humor . . . Too much! In practice, this universal-progressive utopia was disarticulated among a plurality of critic-historians – Shklovsky, Lukács, Bakhtin, Auerbach, Watt, Barthes, Jameson – with the occasional incursions of anthropologists (Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard), social scientists (Benedict Anderson), historians (Mona Ozouf), or psychoanalysts (Marthe Robert).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, those two millennia during which novels were being written, but not written about, created a literary landscape where – in lieu of the handful of works written in a single language over a couple of generations addressed in the *Poetics* – theorists had to confront thousands of texts of all sizes and structures, in prose and in verse, from disparate epochs, languages, and places. Having to account for Chrétien and Cervantes, Sterne and Melville and Kafka – and eventually also for *Genji* and *The Story of the Stone*, *Noli me tangere*, *Macunaíma*, and *The Interpreters* – forced literary analysis into uncharted territory: if the study of tragedy had always been openly and un-self-consciously Athenocentric, the theory of the novel had to come to terms – however slowly and reluctantly – with the *mare magnum* of *Weltliteratur*.<sup>8</sup> For all practical purposes, the two theories inhabited different worlds.

As is often the case, geography had morphological consequences as well, and the theory of the novel quickly discovered that it needed to find room – *conceptual* room – for the kaleidoscope of novelistic subgenres. Their proliferation is not only a feature of modern literary systems (as in the forty-four British subgenres that I once reconstructed):<sup>9</sup> the decades around 1200 had already been singled out by Cesare Segre for their “extraordinary eidogenetic activity” – “a thorough inventory of representable reality, from the *roman d’aventure* to the *roman courtesan*, from the *roman intimiste* to the *roman burlesque* or *comique*, from the *roman ex-*

otique to the roman picaresque”<sup>10</sup> – while Andrew Plaks had traced the same pattern in premodern China,<sup>11</sup> and Tomas Hägg, even earlier in time, had recognized it as the original matrix of the ancient Greek novel.<sup>12</sup> Theoretical reflection inclined toward historical phenomenology: still sternly logical in Lukács’s tripartite *Theory*, more open in Bakhtin’s interplay of local forms and main novelistic “lineages,” and completely explicit in the gusto for morphological ramifications of recent attempts like Pavel’s and Mazzoni’s.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the most distinctive form taken by the theory of the novel may well be the unplanned collective cartography of specific subgenres: from Lukács’s *Historical Novel*, Rico’s *Novela picaresca*, Bollème’s *Bibliothèque bleue*, and Vinaver’s *Rise of Romance* to, more recently, Catherine Gallagher on the industrial novel, Katie Trumpener on the “national tale,” and Stefano Ercolino’s dyptich on the maximalist and essayistic novel.<sup>14</sup>

“A group containing many diversified species,” wrote the British ecologist G. E. Hutchinson in an essay that has become legendary, “will be able to seize new evolutionary opportunities more easily than an undiversified group.”<sup>15</sup> They are the right words to understand the planetary success of the novel: as new social groups gained access to literacy, the novel’s formal diversification allowed it to swiftly occupy – “the novel permeates with its colour all of modern literature” observed Schlegel in the *Athenaeum* – the cultural niches that were opening up. Here, too, the difference with tragedy is unmistakable. The latter had long dominated the literary field, of course, but without ever *changing* the field itself: majestically towering above all other forms, it had left them free to pursue their less exalted aims. Not so the novel, which, by relentlessly “parod[ing] other genres,” interfered directly with their development until, as Schlegel had prophesized, the entire literary space became indeed pervasively “novelized.”<sup>16</sup>

A philosophy of the tragic; a phenomenology of novelistic subgenres. Not surprisingly, the interaction between history and form differs markedly in the two traditions. “Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two,” wrote Aristotle, “reduced the choral component, and made speech play the leading role. Three actors and scene painting came with Sophocles.”<sup>17</sup> And this was it: “tragedy ceased to evolve, since it had achieved its own nature.” Tragedy continued to evolve, to be sure, but not that much, really, in the two-and-a-half millennia that have elapsed since the *Poetics*. Between the direct reincarnations of great ancient figures – mostly women: Medea, Elektra, Iphigenia, Helen, Hekuba, Phaedra, Antigone – and more subterranean metamorphoses (Oedipus turning into Hamlet, Sigismundo, Don Carlos, Gregers Werle), the theory of tragedy has had to measure itself against this stubborn vitality of the tragic past: a spectral *longue durée* in which the initial form has been exceptionally successful at resisting historical change. Though never quite a narrative of decline – after all, how could it: Shakespeare, Calderon, Racine, Büchner, Ibsen – the study of trag-

edy has thus been characterized by an increasingly fatalistic mood, well encapsulated – *The Death of Tragedy* – by its major postwar bestseller.

*The Death of Tragedy*, *The Rise of the Novel*. No gloom at all in the other camp, and not much respect for the past, either. Theory of the novel, theory of the new. “We have invented the productivity of the spirit,” declares one of Lukács’s most eloquent pages,<sup>18</sup> and one couldn’t choose a better motto for an aesthetics of modernity. “Other kinds of poetry are finished,” had observed Schlegel in the *Athenaeum*, but “the romantic kind of poetry should forever be becoming”; “only that which is itself developing can comprehend development,” echoed Bakhtin in “Epic and Novel.”<sup>19</sup> Here, historical change – Bakhtin’s “present in all its openedness” – is no longer an obstacle to morphological achievement, but the very basis of its unprecedented plasticity.

**W**hy tragedy? Answers have converged around its ethico-political significance,<sup>20</sup> from Aristotle’s Delphic dictum – “through pity and fear accomplishing catharsis”<sup>21</sup> – to Christian warnings on the hazards of worldly greatness, early modern awe at the implacable energy of ambition and the antinomies of freedom in German idealism. “Speaking in general,” Leo Strauss has observed, “pre-modern thought placed the accent on duties, and rights, when they were considered at all, were viewed only as a consequence of duties.”<sup>22</sup> An emphasis on duties: “the jurisdiction of the stage begins where the domain of secular laws ends,” declared Schiller in his 1784 speech on the influence of the theater: “only here do the great of the world hear what they never or seldom hear – Truth – and see what they never or rarely see: Man (*den Menschen*).”<sup>23</sup>

This ethico-political dominant has made it notoriously difficult to spell out what kind of pleasure is associated with tragic form. Schiller’s “Of the Cause of Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects” has much to say about reason, ethics, and even pain – “the highest moral pleasure is always accompanied by pain”<sup>24</sup> – and very little about enjoyment. Even *The Birth of Tragedy*, which provided the most celebrated attempt in the opposite direction, sounds often like a *petitio principii* about the “health” of pre-Socratic Greece – “what then would be the origin of tragedy? Perhaps joy, strength, overflowing health, excessive abundance?”<sup>25</sup> – rather than a genuine account of the sources of tragic pleasure; while the famous paragraph on the world being “justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” rests for its part on a Wagnerian mood that would have been inconceivable in the ages before *Tristan*.<sup>26</sup>

Why the novel? “Caramelos y novelas andan juntos en el mundo,” wrote Domingo Sarmiento around the middle of the nineteenth century: “candy and novels go hand-in-hand in the world, and the culture of a nation can be measured by how much sugar they consume and how many novels they read.”<sup>27</sup> Sugar had been a protagonist of the eighteenth-century “consumer revolution,” and Sarmiento’s

sarcasm highlights the novel's status as the archetypal literary commodity – one that promises easy and immediate gratification. “Unlike other genres,” observed Lukács, the novel “has a caricatural twin almost indistinguishable from itself . . . : the entertainment novel.”<sup>28</sup> Where the problem, it seems, is less the existence of *Jack Sheppard* or *The Wide Wide World* than the fact that *all* novels incorporate at least some of the vulgarity of *Unterhaltungslektüre* (entertainment novel). Too much sugar, in the novel's recipe, whence the Sisyphean attempt to “nobilitate” it (Fielding, Flaubert, James, Proust) by severing all links with plebeian taste.

Too much pain, too much candy. Each in its own way, tragedy and the novel seem to drift away from the “right” amount of aesthetic pleasure, forcing their respective theories to struggle with this lack of measure. A problem? I don't think so. As two extreme cases, tragedy and the novel help us delimit opposite dimensions of the aesthetic realm, suggesting that its pleasure should not be seen as a fixed category, but as a spectrum of divergent outcomes. It is one thing to concentrate on a play about the fate of the *polis* knowing that we may be involved in it, and quite another to lose ourselves in an improbable adventure that we'll never experience; but there is pleasure in both, and we should try to recognize the centers of gravity around which it has clustered over time. A historical anthropology of literary pleasure(s) will not by itself unify the two theoretical traditions, but will at least place them within a single conceptual landscape. *That* would be a new starting point.

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Franco Moretti**, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2006, is the Danily C. and Laura Louise Bell Professor in the Humanities, Emeritus, at Stanford University. He is the author of *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005), *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (2013), *Distant Reading* (2013), and *Far Country* (2019) and editor of *The Novel* (2006).

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the case of the *Antigone* network, created by Holst Katsma, an interaction is defined as an explicit verbal exchange among characters; in the case of *Les Misérables*, to be found at “Visualizing *Les Misérables*,” <https://lesmiserables.mla.hcommons.org/>, they include “all encounters, whether they are shown or told.” The two texts, incidentally, have not been chosen at random. Apart from being very well-known, they embody, if not exactly extreme cases—*Persians* has a smaller cast than *Antigone*, and *The Story of the Stone* a larger one than *Les Misérables*—the inner tendency of each genre toward compression or expansion of their character-systems.

- <sup>2</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> William Marx, *Le Tombeau d'Édipe: Pour une tragédie sans tragique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2012), 57. The shift from tragedy to the tragic is at the core of Peter Szondi's *Essay on the Tragic*, which opens with the trenchant assertion that "since Aristotle there has been a theory of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic." Peter Szondi, *Essay on the Tragic* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1961]), 1.
- <sup>4</sup> The never-ending debate on the Greek chorus is the most arresting instance of this state of affairs, from the grand cognitive metaphors of German philosophy ("living wall," "ideal spectator," "Dionysian cortege") to the factual and interpretive controversies among contemporary classicists (Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, Calame, Goldhill, Young, and more).
- <sup>5</sup> Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments" [1798], in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 249; italics mine.
- <sup>7</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965 [1961]); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners* (London: Cape, 1968); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology II* (New York: Basic Books, 1976 [1973]); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983); Mona Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman: Le XIXe siècle entre Ancien Régime et Révolution* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); and Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980 [1972]).
- <sup>8</sup> If one looks at the most influential recent collection on the topic—Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004)—world literature appears to be unimaginable without the novel, but barely affected by the existence (or not) of tragedy: not only is the presence of the two forms disproportionately tilted in favor of the former (with a ratio of about twenty to one), but the term tragedy does not even qualify for an entry in the index to the volume.
- <sup>9</sup> See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 18–33.
- <sup>10</sup> Cesare Segre, "What Bakhtin Left Unsaid: The Case of the Medieval Romance," in *Romance: Generic Transformations from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover and London: New England University Press, 1985), 34.
- <sup>11</sup> See Andrew H. Plaks, "The Novel in Premodern China," in *The Novel: History, Geography, and Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006 [2002]), where he points to the existence of various noncanonical genres, including "talent and beauty" stories, "military romances," "wandering heroes," "court cases," "fantastic journeys," and "encounters with ghosts and demons," plus, of course, the variegated erotic corpus of Chinese prose.
- <sup>12</sup> Tomas Hägg's key texts are *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and the more synthetic and radical statement in "The Ancient Greek Novel: A Single Model or a Plurality of Forms?" in *The Novel*, vol. 1, ed. Moretti, where—along-



side the better-known forms of the Greek novel—he examines the “oral-popular background” of Ephesian tales, the “oriental military novel with a love subplot,” fictionalized biographies of historical individuals, epistolary novels, and the *unicum* of *The Wonders beyond Thule*.

- <sup>13</sup> See Thomas Pavel, *Lives of the Novel: A History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017 [2011]): two studies that are also unusual for the philosophical intensity with which they address the ethical (Pavel) and epistemological (Mazzoni) aspects of the novel as form.
- <sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1937]); Francisco Rico, *La novela picaresca y el punto de vista* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1970); Geneviève Bollème, *La Bibliothèque bleue: Littérature populaire en France du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971); Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon’s “Gravity’s Rainbow” to Roberto Bolaño’s “2066”* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); and Stefano Ercolino, *The Novel-Essay, 1884–1947* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- <sup>15</sup> G. E. Hutchinson, “Homage to Santa Rosalia, or, Why Are There So Many Kinds of Animals?” *The American Naturalist*, May–June 1959, 155.
- <sup>16</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 4–5.
- <sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a.
- <sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971 [1914–1915]), 31–32.
- <sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Ethico-political in the sense that tragic conflict activates supra-individual (political) values by showing their force at the (ethical) level of individual choices: a hybrid dimension between public and private that appears to be the specific domain of the tragic imagination.
- <sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b.
- <sup>22</sup> Leo Strauss, *Gerusalemme e Atene: Studi sul pensiero politico dell’Occidente* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), 55.
- <sup>23</sup> Friedrich Schiller, “Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?” [1784], in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Carl Hanser (München: Verlag, 1980), 823, 828.
- <sup>24</sup> Friedrich Schiller, “Of the Cause of Pleasure We Derive from Tragic Objects,” [1791], in *Aesthetic and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Nicholas Dole (Hadley, Mass.: Hadley Press, 2015), 537.
- <sup>25</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872], trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2003), 6–7.
- <sup>26</sup> Here is the entire passage, from the penultimate chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy*:

existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Accordingly, the tragic myth has to convince us that even ugliness and discord are an artistic game in which the will, in the eternal abundance of its pleasure, plays with itself. But this primal and difficult phenomenon of Dionysiac art is only intelligible and can only be immediately grasped through the wonderful significance of musical dissonance. . . . The pleasure produced by the tragic myth has the same origin as the pleasurable perception of dissonance in music.

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 115. Adorno's diagnosis of the role played by dissonance in Wagner is the most appropriate comment:

In Beethoven and well into high Romanticism the expressive values of harmony are fixed: dissonance stands for negation and suffering, consonance for fulfilment and the positive. . . . That suffering can be sweet . . . is something that composers and audience learned uniquely from [Wagner] . . . and few aspects of Wagner's music have been as seductive as the enjoyment of pain.

Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2009 [1966]), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Sarmiento's 1856 article "Las novelas" is quoted by Alejandra Laera in *El tiempo vacío de la ficción: Las novelas argentinas de Eduardo Gutiérrez y Eugenio Cambaceres* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971 [1920]).