Northrop Frye

From Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays

In assigning the term fiction to the genre of the written word, in which prose tends to become the predominating rhythm, we collide with the view that the real meaning of fiction is falsehood or unreality. Thus an autobiography coming into a library would be classified as non-fiction if the librarian believed the author, and as fiction if she thought he was lying. It is difficult to see what use such a distinction can be to a literary critic. Surely the word fiction, which, like poetry, means etymologically something made for its own sake, could be applied in criticism to any work of literary art in a radically continuous form, which almost always means a work of art in prose. Or, if that is too much to ask, at least some protest can be entered against the sloppy habit of identifying fiction with the one genuine form of fiction which we know as the novel.

Let us look at a few of the unclassified books lying on the boundary of "non-fiction" and "literature." Is Tristram Shandy a novel? Nearly everyone would say yes, in spite of its easygoing disregard of "story values." Is Gulliver's Travels a novel? Here most would demur, including the Dewey decimal system, which puts it under "Satire and Humor." But surely everyone would call it fiction, and if it is fiction, a distinction appears between fiction as a genus and the novel as a species of that genus. Shifting the ground to fiction, then, is Sartor Resartus fiction? If not, why not? If it is, is The Anatomy of Melancholy fiction? Is it a literary form or only a work of "non-fiction" written with "style"? Is Borrow's Lavengro fiction? Everyman's Library says yes; the World's Classics puts it under "Travel and Topography."

The literary historian who identifies fiction with the novel is greatly embarrassed by the length of time that the world managed to get along without the novel, and until he reaches his great deliverance in Defoe, his perspective is intolerably cramped. He is compelled to reduce Tudor fiction to a series of tentative essays in the novel form, which works well enough for Deloney but makes nonsense of Sidney. He postulates a great fictional gap in the seventeenth century which exactly covers the golden age of rhetorical prose. He finally discovers that the word novel, which up to about 1900 was still the name of a more or less recognizable form, has since expanded into a catchall term which can be applied to practically any prose book that is not "something. Clearly, this novel-centered view of prose fiction is a Ptolemaic perspec-
tive which is now too complicated to be any longer workable, and some more relative and Copernican view must take its place.

When we start to think seriously about the novel, not as fiction, but as a form of fiction, we feel that its characteristics, whatever they are, are such as make, say, Defoe, Fielding, Austen, and James central in its tradition, and Borrow, Peacock, Melville, and Emily Bronte somehow peripheral. This is not an estimate of merit: we may think Moby Dick "greater" than The Egoist and yet feel that Meredith's book is closer to being a typical novel. Fielding's conception of the novel as a comic epic in prose seems fundamental to the tradition he did so much to establish. In novels that we think of as typical, like those of Jane Austen, plot and dialogue are closely linked to the conventions of the comedy of manners. The conventions of Wuthering Heights are linked rather with the tale and the ballad. They seem to have more affinity with tragedy, and the tragic emotions of passion and fury, which would shatter the balance of tone in Jane Austen, can be safely accommodated here. So can the supernatural, or the suggestion of it, which is difficult to get into a novel. The shape of the plot is different: instead of maneuvering around a central situation, as Jane Austen does, Emily Bronte tells her story with linear accents, and she seems to need the help of a narrator, who would be absurdly out of place in Jane Austen. Conventions so different justify us in regarding Wuthering Heights as a different form of prose fiction from the novel, a form which we shall here call the romance. Here again we have to use the same word in several different contexts, but romance seems on the whole better than tale, which appears to fit a somewhat shorter form.

The essential difference between novel and romance lies in the concept of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes. It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, and villain respectively. That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes. Certain elements of character are released in the romance which make it naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel. The novelist deals with personality, with characters wearing their personae or social masks. He needs the framework of a stable society, and many of our best novelists have been conventional to the verge of fussiness. The romancer deals with individuality, with characters in vacuo idealized by reverie, and, however conservative he may be, something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages.

The prose romance, then, is an independent form of fiction to be distinguished from the novel and extracted from the miscellaneous heap of prose works now covered by that term. Even in the other heap known as short stories one can isolate the tale form used by Poe, which bears the same relation to the full romance that the stories of Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield do to the novel. "Pure" examples of either form are never found; there is hardly any modern romance that could not be made out to be a novel, and vice versa. The forms of prose fiction are mixed, like racial strains in human beings, not separable like the sexes. In fact the popular demand in fiction is always for a
mixed form, a romantic novel just romantic enough for the reader to project his libido on the hero and his anima on the heroine, and just novel enough to keep these projections in a familiar world. It may be asked, therefore, what is the use of making the above distinction, especially when, though undeveloped in criticism, it is by no means unrealized. It is no surprise to hear that Trollope wrote novels and William Morris romances.

The reason is that a great romancer should be examined in terms of the conventions he chose. William Morris should not be left on the side lines of prose fiction merely because the critic has not learned to take the romance form seriously. Nor, in view of what has been said about the revolutionary nature of the romance, should his choice of that form be regarded as an "escape" from his social attitude. If Scott has any claims to be a romancer, it is not good criticism to deal only with his defects as a novelist. The romantic qualities of The Pilgrim's Progress, too, its archetypal characterization and its revolutionary approach to religious experience, make it a well-rounded example of a literary form: it is not merely a book swallowed by English literature to get some religious bulk in its diet. Finally, when Hawthorne, in the preface to The House of the Seven Gables, insists that his story should be read as romance and not as novel, it is possible that he meant what he said, even though he indicates that the prestige of the rival form has induced the romancer to apologize for not using it.

Romance is older than the novel, a fact which has developed the historical illusion that it is something to be outgrown, a juvenile and undeveloped form. The social affinities of the romance, with its grave idealizing of heroism and purity, are with the aristocracy (for the apparent inconsistency of this with the revolutionary nature of the form just mentioned, see the introductory comment on the mythos of romance in [my] previous essay). It revived in the period we call Romantic as part of the Romantic tendency to archaic feudalism and a cult of the hero, or idealized libido. In England the romances of Scott and, in lesser degree, the Brontes, are part of a mysterious Northumbrian renaissance, a Romantic reaction against the new industrialism in the Midlands, which also produced the poetry of Wordsworth and Burns and the philosophy of Carlyle. It is not surprising, therefore, that an important theme in the more bourgeois novel should be the parody of the romance and its ideals. The tradition established by Don Quixote continues in a type of novel which looks at a romantic situation from its own point of view, so that the conventions of the two forms make up an ironic compound instead of a sentimental mixture. Examples range from Northanger Abbey to Madame Bovary and Lord Jim.

The tendency to allegory in the romance may be conscious, as in The Pilgrim's Progress, or unconscious, as in the very obvious sexual mythopoeia in Madame Bovary. The romance, which deals with heroes, is intermediate between the novel, which deals with men, and the myth, which deals with gods. Prose romance first appears as a late development of Classical mythology, and the prose Sagas of Iceland follow close on the mythical Eddas. The novel tends rather to expand into a fictional approach to history. The soundness of Fielding's instinct in calling Tom Jones a history is confirmed by the general rule that the larger the scheme of a novel becomes, the more obviously its
historical nature appears. As it is creative history, however, the novelist usually prefers his material in a plastic, or roughly contemporary state, and feels cramped by a fixed historical pattern. Waverley is dated about sixty years back from the time of writing and Little Dorrit about forty years, but the historical pattern is fixed in the romance and plastic in the novel, suggesting the general principle that most "historical novels" are romances. Similarly a novel becomes more romantic in its appeal when the life it reflects has passed away: thus the novels of Trollope were read primarily as romances during the Second World War. It is perhaps the link with history and a sense of temporal context that has confined the novel, in striking contrast to the worldwide romance, to the alliance of time and Western man.

Autobiography is another form which merges with the novel by a series of insensible gradations. Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern. This pattern may be something larger than himself with which he has come to identify himself, or simply the coherence of his character and attitudes. We may call this very important form of prose fiction the confession form, following St. Augustine, who appears to have invented it, and Rousseau, who established a modern type of it. The earlier tradition gave Religio Medici, Grace Abounding, and Newman's Apologia to English literature, besides the related but subtly different type of confession favored by the mystics.

Here again, as with the romance, there is some value in recognizing a distinct prose form in the confession. It gives several of our best prose works a definable place in fiction instead of keeping them in a vague limbo of books which are not quite literature because they are "thought," and not quite religion or philosophy because they are Examples of Prose Style. The confession, too, like the novel and the romance, has its own short form, the familiar essay, and Montaigne's livre de bonne foi is a confession made up of essays in which only the continuous narrative of the longer form is missing. Montaigne's scheme is to the confession what a work of fiction made up of short stories, such as Joyce's Dubliners or Boccaccio's Decameron, is to the novel or romance.

After Rousseau—in fact in Rousseau—the confession flows into the novel, and the mixture produces the fictional autobiography, the Künstlerroman, and kindred types. There is no literary reason why the subject of a confession should always be the author himself, and dramatic confessions have been used in the novel at least since Moll Flanders. The "stream of consciousness" technique permits of a much more concentrated fusion of the two forms, but even here the characteristics peculiar to the confession form show up clearly. Nearly always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art plays a leading role in the confession. It is his success in integrating his mind on such subjects that makes the author of a confession feel that his life is worth writing about. But this interest in ideas and theoretical statements is alien to the genius of the novel proper, where the technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships. In Jane Austen, to take a familiar instance, church, state, and culture are never examined except as
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social data, and Henry James has been described as having a mind so fine that
no idea could violate it. The novelist who cannot get along without ideas, or
has not the patience to digest them in the way that James did, instinctively
orts to what Mill calls a “mental history” of a single character. And when
we find that a technical discussion of a theory of aesthetics forms the climax
of Joyce’s Portrait, we realize that what makes this possible is the presence in
that novel of another tradition of prose fiction.

The novel tends to be extroverted and personal; its chief interest is in
human character as it manifests itself in society. The romance tends to be
introverted and personal: it also deals with characters, but in a more subjective
way. (Subjective here refers to treatment, not subject-matter. The characters
of romance are heroic and therefore inscrutable; the novelist is freer to enter
his characters’ minds because he is more objective.) The confession is also
introverted, but intellectualized in content. Our next step is evidently to dis-
cover a fourth form of fiction which is extroverted and intellectual.

We remarked earlier that most people would call Gulliver’s Travels
fiction but not a novel. It must then be another form of fiction, as it certainly has
a form, and we feel that we are turning from the novel to this form, whatever
it is, when we turn from Rousseau’s Emile to Voltaire’s Candide, or from But-
ler’s The Way of All Flesh to the Erewhon books, or from Huxley’s Point Cound
terpoint to Brave New World. The form thus has its own traditions, and, as the
examples of Butler and Huxley show, has preserved some integrity even under
the ascendancy of the novel. Its existence is easy enough to demonstrate, and
no one will challenge the statement that the literary ancestry of Gulliver’s
Travels and Candide runs through Rabelais and Erasmus to Lucian. But while
much has been said about the style and thought of Rabelais, Swift, and Vol-
taire, very little has been made of them as craftsmen working in a specific
medium, a point no one dealing with a novelist would ignore. Another great
writer in this tradition, Huxley’s master Peacock, has fared even worse, for, his
form not being understood, a general impression has grown up that his status
in the development of prose fiction is that of a slapdash eccentric. Actually, he
is as exquisite and precise an artist in his medium as Jane Austen is in hers.

The form used by these authors is the Menippean satire, also more rarely
called the Varroian satire, allegedly invented by a Greek cynic named Menip-
pus. His works are lost, but he had two great disciples, the Greek Lucian and
the Roman Varro, and the tradition of Varro, who has not survived either
except in fragments, was carried on by Petronius and Apuleius. The Menip-
pean satire appears to have developed out of verse satire through the practice
of adding prose interludes, but we know it only as a prose form, though one
of its recurrent features (seen in Peacock) is the use of incidental verse.

The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental
attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious
and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their
occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior. The Menip-
pean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract
ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is

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stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent. Here again no sharp boundary lines can or should be drawn, but if we compare a character in Jane Austen with a similar character in Peacock we can immediately feel the difference between the two forms. Squire Western belongs to the novel, but Thwackum and Square have Menippean blood in them. A constant theme in the tradition is the ridicule of the *philosophus gloriatus*, already discussed. The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriatus* at once symbolizes and defines.

Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Swift, and Voltaire all use a loose-jointed narrative form often confused with the romance. It differs from the romance, however (though there is a strong admixture of romance in Rabelais), as it is not primarily concerned with the exploits of heroes, but relies on the free play of intellectual fancy and the kind of humorous observation that produces caricature. It differs also from the picaresque form, which has the novel's interest in the actual structure of society. At its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern. The intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative, though the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader or his tendency to judge by a novel-centered conception of fiction.

The word "satire," in Roman and Renaissance times, meant either of two specific literary forms of that name, one (this one) prose and the other verse. Now it means a structural principle or attitude, what we have called a *mythos*. In the Menippean satires we have been discussing, the name of the form also applies to the attitude. As the name of an attitude, satire is, we have seen, a combination of fantasy and morality. But as the name of a form, the term satire, though confined to literature (for as a *mythos* it may appear in any art, a cartoon, for example), is more flexible, and can be either entirely fantastic or entirely moral. The Menippean adventure story may thus be pure fantasy, as it is in the literary fairy tale. The Alice books are perfect Menippean satires, and so is *The Water-Babies*, which has been influenced by Rabelais. The purely moral type is a serious vision of society as a single intellectual pattern, in other words a Utopia.

The short form of the Menippean satire is usually a dialogue or colloquy, in which the dramatic interest is in a conflict of ideas rather than of character. This is the favorite form of Erasmus, and is common in Voltaire. Here again the form is not invariably satiric in attitude, but shades off into more purely fanciful or moral discussions, like the *Imaginary Conversations* of Landor or the "dialogue of the dead." Sometimes this form expands to full length, and more than two speakers are used: the setting then is usually a *cena* or symposium, like the one that looms so large in Petronius. Plato, though much earlier in the field than Menippus, is a strong influence on this type, which stretches in an unbroken tradition down through those urbane and leisurely conversations which define the ideal courtier in Castiglione or the doctrine and discipline of angling in Walton. A modern development produces the country-
people as mouthpieces of the dary lines can or should be
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ice between the two forms.

The novelist shows his exuberance either by an exhaustive analysis of hu-
man relationships, as in Henry James, or of social phenomena, as in Tolstoy.
The Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows
his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudi-
tion about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an ava-
lanche of their own jargon. A species, or rather sub-species, of the form is
the kind of encyclopedic farrago represented by Athenaens' Deipnosophists and
Macrobius' Saturnalia, where people sit at a banquet and pour out a vast mass
of erudition on every subject that might conceivably come up in a conversa-
tion. The display of erudition had probably been associated with the Menip-
pean tradition by Varro, who was enough of a polymath to make Quintilian,
if not stare and gasp, at any rate call him vir Romanorum eruditissimus. The
tendency to expand into an encyclopedic farrago is clearly marked in Rabelais,
nobably in the great catalogues of torcheculs and epithets of codpieces and
methods of divination. The encyclopedic compilations produced in the line of
duty by Erasmus and Voltaire suggest that a magpie instinct to collect facts is
not unrelated to the type of ability that has made them famous as artists. F1au-
bert's encyclopedic approach to the construction of Bouvard et Pecuchet is quite
comprehensible if we explain it as marking an affinity with the Menippean tra-
dition.

This creative treatment of exhaustive erudition is the organizing principle
of the greatest Menippean satire in English before Swift, Burton's Anatomy of
Melancholy. Here human society is studied in terms of the intellectual pattern
provided by the conception of melancholy, a symposium of books replaces dia-
logue, and the result is the most comprehensive survey of human life in one
book that English literature had seen since Chaucer, one of Burton's favorite
authors. We may note in passing the Utopia in his introduction and his "di-
gressions," which when examined turn out to be scholarly distillations of
Menippean forms: the digression of air, of the marvellous journey; the digres-
sion of spirits, of the ironic use of erudition; the digression of the miseries
of scholars, of the satire on the philosophus gloriosus. The word "anatomy" in Bur-
ton's title means a dissection or analysis, and expresses very accurately the in-
tellectualized approach of his form. We may as well adopt it as a convenient
name to replace the cumbersome and in modern times rather misleading
Menippean satire.

The anatomy, of course, eventually begins to merge with the novel, pro-
ducing various hybrids including the roman à thèse and novels in which the
characters are symbols of social or other ideas, like the proletarian novels of
this century. It was Sterne, however, the disciple of Burton and
Rabelais, who combined them with greatest success. Tristram Shandy may be,
as was said at the beginning, a novel, but the digressing narrative, the cata-
louges, the stylizing of character along "humor" lines, the marvellous journey
of the great nose, the symposium discussions, and the constant ridicule of
philosophers and pedantic critics are all features that belong to the anatomy.

A clearer understanding of the form and traditions of the anatomy would
make a good many elements in the history of literature come into focus. Boe-
thius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, with its dialogue form, its verse interludes and its pervading tone of contemplative irony, is a pure anatomy, a fact of consider-
able importance for the understanding of its vast influence. *The Compleat Ang-
ger* is an anatomy because of its mixture of prose and verse, its rural "ena set-
ting, its dialogue form, its deipnosophistical interest in food, and its gentle Menippean raillery of a society which considers everything more important than fishing and yet has discovered very few better things to do. In nearly every period of literature there are many romances, confessions, and anatomies that are neglected only because the categories to which they belong are unrec-
ognized. In the period between Sterne and Peacock, for example, we have, among romances, *Melmoth the Wanderer*; among confessions, Hogg's *Confes-
sions of a Justified Sinner*; among anatomies, Southey's *Doctor*, Amory's *John Bunce*, and the *Nodes Ambrosianae*.

**To sum up then:** when we examine fiction from the point of view of form, we can see four chief strands binding it together, novel, confession, anatomy, and romance. The six possible combinations of these forms all exist, and we have shown how the novel has combined with each of the other three: Exclusive concentration on one form is rare: the early novels of George Eliot, for instance, are influenced by the romance, and the later ones by the anatomy. The romance-confession hybrid is found, naturally, in the autobiography of a romantic temperament, and is represented in English by the extroverted George Borrow and the introverted De Quincey. The romance-anatomy one we have noticed in Rabelais; a later example is *Moby Dick*, where the romantic theme of the wild hunt expands into an encyclopedic anatomy of the whale. Confession and anatomy are united in *Sartor Resartus* and in some of Kierke-
gaard's strikingly original experiments in prose fiction form, including *Either/ Or*. More comprehensive fictional schemes usually employ at least three forms: we can see strains of novel, romance, and confession in *Pamela*, of novel, romance, and anatomy in *Don Quixote*, of novel, confession, and anatomy in *Proust*, and of romance, confession, and anatomy in *Apuleius*.

I deliberately make this sound schematic in order to suggest the advan-
tage of having a simple and logical explanation for the form of, say, *Moby Dick* or *Tristram Shandy*. The usual critical approach to the form of such works resembles that of the doctors in Brobdingnag, who after great wrangling fi-
ally pronounced Gulliver a *lusus naturae*. It is the anatomy in particular that has baffled critics, and there is hardly any fiction writer deeply influenced by it who has not been accused of disorderly conduct. The reader may be re-
minded here of Joyce, for describing Joyce's books as monstrous has become a nervous tic. I find "demogorgon," "behemoth," and "white elephant" in good critics; the bad ones could probably do much better. The care that Joyce took to organize *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* amounted nearly to obsession, but as they are not organized on familiar principles of prose fiction, the impression of shapelessness remains. Let us try our formulas on him.

If a reader were asked to set down a list of the things that had most im-
pressed him about *Ulysses*, it might reasonably be somewhat as follows. First,
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be somewhat as follows. First,

the clarity with which the sights and sounds and smells of Dublin come to
life, the rotundity of the character-drawing, and the naturalness of the dia-
logue. Second, the elaborate way that the story and characters are parodied by
being set against archetypal heroic patterns, notably the one provided by the
Odyssey. Third, the revelation of character and incident through the searching
use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Fourth, the constant tendency
to be encyclopedic and exhaustive both in technique and in subject matter,
and to see both in highly intellectualized terms. It should not be too hard for
us by now to see that these four points describe elements in the book which
relate to the novel, romance, confession, and anatomy respectively. Ulysses,
then, is a complete prose epic with all four forms employed in it, all of practi-
cally equal importance, and all essential to one another, so that the book is a
unity and not an aggregate.

This unity is built up from an intricate scheme of parallel contrasts. The
romantic archetypes of Hamlet and Ulysses are like remote stars in a literary
heaven looking down quizzically on the shabby creatures of Dublin obediently
interwining themselves in the patterns set by their influences. In the "Cy-
clopes" and "Circe" episodes particularly there is a continuous parody of realis-
tic patterns by romantic ones which reminds us, though the irony leans in the
opposite direction, of Madame Bovary. The relation of novel and confession
techniques is similar; the author jumps into his characters' minds to follow
their stream of consciousness, and out again to describe them externally. In
the novel-anatomy combination, too, found in the "Ithaca" chapter, the sense
of lurking antagonism between the personal and intellectual aspects of the
scene accounts for much of its pathos. The same principle of parallel contrast
holds good for the other three combinations: of romance and confession in
"Nausicaa" and "Penelope," of confession and anatomy in "Proteus" and "The
Lotus-Eaters," of romance and anatomy (a rare and fitful combination) in "Si-
tus" and parts of "Circe."

In Finnegans Wake the unity of design goes far beyond this. The dingy
story of the sodden HCE and his pinched wife is not contrasted with the
archetypes of Tristram and the divine king: HCE is himself Tristram and the
divine king. As the setting is a dream, no contrast is possible between confes-
sion and novel, between a stream of consciousness inside the mind and the
appearances of other people outside it. Nor is the experiential world of the
novel to be separated from the intelligible world of the anatomy. The forms
we have been isolating in fiction, and which depend for their existence on the
commonsense dichotomies of the daylight consciousness, vanish in Finnegans
Wake into a fifth and quintessential form. This form is the one traditionally
associated with scriptures and sacred books, and treats life in terms of the fall
and awakening of the human soul and the creation and apocalypse of nature.
The Bible is the definitive example of it; the Egyptian Book of the Dead and
the Icelandic Prose Edda, both of which have left deep imprints on Finnegans
Wake, also belong to