

Guido Mazzoni. *Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. viii + 392 pp. ISBN: 9780674333727.

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In the West academic books about the novel are in vogue. It might be tempting to place this very welcome English translation of Guido Mazzoni's *Teoria del Romanzo* (2011) alongside, for instance, Steven Moore's *The Novel: Beginning to 1600* (Continuum, 2013) and *The Novel: An Alternative History, 1600-1800* (Bloomsbury, 2013) or Michael Schmidt's *The Novel: A Biography* (Harvard, 2014). *Theory of the Novel*, however, differs from these and similar works because it focuses less on novels themselves and more on discourse concerning the novel. Of course, the history of writing about the novel and the history of the novel do not generally coincide. It invariably takes time for the former to catch up with developments within particular novels, especially because of the novel as a genre's frequent habit of reinventing itself in relation both to developments in other genres and in response to cultural and even scientific changes which impact the way in which we human beings live our day-to-day lives.

Mazzoni begins his Introduction by quoting the well-known passage from D. H. Lawrence's "Why the Novel Matters" (1925) in which the novelist is pitted against "the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet;" and the novelist is deemed superior in terms of ability to render actual life (3). Mazzoni indicates his own sympathy for this perspective by even quoting Lawrence's dictum "Nothing is important but life" again as the last sentence of his book (376). Indeed, from start to finish, *Theory of the Novel* may be read as both a defense and a championing of the novel as a "grasper of life" (5), far superior in this regard not only to other literary genres like lyric poetry, but also philosophy, science, and theology.

As any defense of the novel will inevitably draw attention to the merits of storytelling, it is appropriate that Mazzoni devotes his first chapter to narrative theory. Here he draws on the ancient Greek tendency, especially in Plato, to distinguish between two forms of knowledge: "knowledge that mimics" and "knowledge that reasons" (27). Mazzoni emphasizes the former, associated with the term *mimesis*; and he argues that this kind of knowledge looks ahead to the term *Lebenswelt* employed especially by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, to encapsulate the reflection of particular lives grounded in "different epochs and cultures" (33). Distinguishing between *mimesis* on the one hand and "abstract thought" on the other, Mazzoni then describes "the material of stories," the substance which he believes constitutes the novel as presenting "not the generality of an idea but the particularities of contingent life and forms of life" (35). He supports this thesis especially

by referring to novels by Dostoyevsky and Sartre, which contain characters and situations conveying to readers a renewed sense of “Being in the world” (57).

Mazzoni later draws attention to the distinction in French between the “*roman*” and the “*nouvelle*” which in England would approximate the distinction between “romance” and “novel.” Only the latter, according to Mazzoni, by about the end of the seventeenth century could lay claim to be representing “true history” (“*histoire véritable*”) (89). This approximate dating is in keeping with Mazzoni’s attempts to pinpoint critical moments or “historical thresholds” (180) within the evolution of the novel. He claims that around 1550 the distinction between novel and romance was quite watertight, but around 1670, “the *novel* became the novel par excellence”, and a third threshold occurred around 1880 (180). Mazzoni argues quite convincingly that “Between 1670 and 1800 [...] the *novel* gradually occupied the center of the literary space and became ‘the novel,’ in the emphatic sense, while the *romance* was pushed to the periphery of the system” (92).

Elsewhere Mazzoni indicates another historical shift in terms of the importance attached to the private life of individuals. Using the term *Stiltrennung* denoting “separation of styles,” he traces the movement of “private life” into the space of the novel, arguing that earlier this space had been considered only the stuff of slapstick and satire (104). This turnaround was brought about partly, he claims, because of Christian adaptation of what he calls “the moralistic gaze imminent to aesthetic Platonism” (119).

Mazzoni also draws on the rhetorical device of the *exemplum* which encapsulates the idea of the personal anecdote as a means of persuasion (137), and he locates a fine example in the frame narrative of *The Decameron* which encourages the habit of “connecting the particular events to general categories or maxims” (155). The crucial year, 1800, then corresponds not only to the aforementioned gaining of momentum for the novel in contrast to the romance but also represents a moment when “allegorism and moralism began to disappear” (188) and “the reality principle” began to take over from far too heavy-handed “moral orthopedics” (190).

In around the mid-1800s in novels, especially by Balzac, Mazzoni locates forms of realism – for example, “psychological realism” – which have continued to this day to maintain a firm footing in novel writing. Thus, of Balzac’s character Rastignac, the protagonist in *Le Père Goriot* (1835), Mazzoni writes simply, “[H]e is a young man belonging to the provincial nobility, who, like many of his peers living in France during the Restoration, threw himself into the competitive regime of modern civil society in order to work his way up in life.” “Most contemporary novelists,” adds Mazzoni, “still use this lexicon” (204). Instead of novelists’ often clumsy attempts to persuade using devices culled from classical rhetoric or their tendency to interlace narrative with philosophical essays; in the hands of Balzac the novel became, according to Mazzoni, “a game of truth rivalling philosophy, history, and the sciences” (211). Mazzoni goes on to show how the novel’s legitimacy became further enhanced by powerful European novelists like George Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and

Flaubert whose work appeared later in the nineteenth century and has often been recognized for its foreshadowing of literary modernism.

Mazzoni describes the modernist novel in familiar terms – for example, new ways of treating time and manipulations of point-of-view – and he devotes special attention to what he calls “an *inward-turning* of the modernist novel,” a term borrowed from Leon Edel (314-15), in keeping with the dawn of psychoanalysis. Mazzoni then sees the novel as focusing on “private individuals” as opposed to “great universal forces” (331) while somehow also being able to incorporate the ubiquitous need for technical invention. Mazzoni appropriates Ezra Pound’s maxim concerning poetry, “No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty year’s old,” as resonant of what was happening to the novel in the hands of modernists and the avant-garde (332-33). He also shows how narrative techniques regarded as contemporary in one country may be considered outdated in another (336); but, nevertheless, techniques have tended to travel smoothly from one country or continent to another. Some aspects of American postmodernism (Vonnegut, Barthelme, Pynchon, DeLillo), for example, flow quite seamlessly into novels written by the Italians, Calvino and Eco (338).

Mazzoni notes in his Conclusion that *Theory of the Novel* is a follow-up to his book about modern poetry *Sulla poesia moderna* (2005). Both show how treatment of a genre’s past always sheds light on the present; and both are especially indebted to the German aesthetic tradition established by Friedrich Schlegel and Hegel. From Hegel in particular Mazzoni borrows the idea that “the sensuous aspect of art is *spiritualized*” and that spirit can function in the arts in a way that is inimical to abstract thought (361). Perhaps this idea should be put alongside Lawrence’s insistence that “nothing is important but life” because Mazzoni has painstakingly attempted to demonstrate that the novel is the genre par excellence to express both the particularities of everyday life and the spirit with which human life is endued.

Theory of the Novel is dense. It covers a plethora of ideas concerning the novel and Mazzoni endeavors tirelessly to place them in historical context. The territory covered is vast. No one should be surprised that Mazzoni toiled over this project for fifteen years. It will surely become a seminal text for anyone interested in theorizing the novel. One quibble, however, might be that although theory related to the work of novelists like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky is discussed, generally there are very few references to non-Western novelists or to theory related to the novel produced outside of Europe or the Americas. This could be the subject of another volume.