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A conversation with Thomas Pavel

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Abstract

Si propone l'intervista inedita a Thomas Pavel del 2017 coordinata dal gruppo dottorale FORLab (Laboratorio sulle Forme e le Origini del Romanzo).
Parole chiave: Thomas Pavel, romanzo, personaggio, *Le vite del romanzo*, *Mondi di invenzione*.

We offer the 2017 interview with Thomas Pavel coordinated by the doctoral group FORLab (Laboratory on Forms and Origins of the Novel), still unpublished.
Keywords: Thomas Pavel, novel, character, *The lives of the novel*, *Fictional Worlds*.

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Thomas Pavel is a leading scholar in the field of literary theory and the history of the novel. He studied at the University of Bucharest and the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, later pursuing his academic career at several universities in Canada (University of Ottawa, Université du Québec à Montréal) and the U.S.A. (University of California-Santa Cruz, Princeton University, University of Chicago). His works devoted to the novel, from *Fictional Worlds* (1986) to *La pensée du roman* (2003), later reworked as *The Lives of the Novel* (2013), have been translated into several languages, Italian included[1].

[1] Pavel, Thomas G., *Mondi di invenzione. Realtà e immaginario narrativo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1992; Pavel, Thomas G., *Le vite del romanzo. Una storia*, Milano, Mimesis, 2015.

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On 16th November 2017, Pavel delivered at the University of Verona a *lectio magistralis* entitled «What do novels speak about?». On that occasion, he also met the young scholars, PhD students and postdoctoral fellows, who formed the FORLab, discussing with them the peculiarities of the novel and its diachronic developments. In the interview that follows the issues addressed during that conversation have been expanded, reworked, and systematized. Here Thomas Pavel analyzes the relations between the novel and other literary genres, highlights the essential role that characters play in novels, and reflects on contemporary literature.

You worked a lot on the novel and its history. How did your interpretation of the novel change from Fictional Worlds *(1986) to* The Lives of the Novel *(2013)?*

Born in Romania, literature being my main interest, I studied at the University of Bucharest at a time when it was not very safe to work on literature. It was dangerous, for instance, to write about authors who were rejected by the official ideology. Linguistics, by contrast, being considered a science, wasn't subjected to ideological controls. When the great Roman Jakobson was invited to speak in Bucharest, I attended his lecture on linguistics and poetics. I also learned a lot from my folklore teacher Mihai Pop, who having served as the Romanian consul in Prague before the war had been in touch with the influential Linguistic Circle of Prague, where structuralism was born.

I became actively involved in the structuralist approach to literature yet had one reservation. Structuralism, a model of rigor for formalist literary studies, had little to say about literary content. My personal experience, however, taught me that when one reads a novel, watches a movie, or attends the performance of a play, the first thing one wants to know is *what happens*: who does what, why, and to what effect. It seemed to me that a rigorous study of literature should also examine plots, characters, and the imaginary worlds sketched out in various literary works.

Concerning plots, Vladimir Propp's important *Morphology of Folktales* had then recently been translated into English. Inspired by it and by Roland Barthes's idea that a story is a «long sentence», I sketched a formal grammar of plots, based on Noam Chomsky's transformational syntax. But, beyond the sequence of actions, I wondered how the worlds evoked by literary narratives could be understood and represented. I was already teaching at the University of Ottawa, when a friend from the Department of Philosophy told me about the modal logic of possible worlds and counterfactuals developed by Jaako Hintikka, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga. In *Fictional Worlds* I tried to extend their powerful models to the study of literature and replaced the term 'possible' by 'fictional,' given that literature often goes way beyond the narrow borders of possibility and imagines less and less plausible situations and actions.

When later, at Princeton and at the University of Chicago, I taught the history of the novel, the general features of literary invention discussed in *Fictional Worlds* were not enough. Examining the concrete aspects of a genre's evolution, the impulses to invent new kinds of narrative, develop them, propose rival innovations, and often return to old kinds of stories, I realized that the history of the novel, far from being a systematic, predictable chains of events or trends, is an *adventure* that takes various paths, faces multiple challenges, and constantly needs to imagine solutions, some successful, some not.

How did you employ the tools given by literary theory to approach the historical development of the novel? In other words, how can we study, in your opinion, the ancient Greek novel if the historical idea of the novel, as well as the so called «author's awareness», did not exist at that time?

This question raises a crucial issue. It reminds us that we first perceive things and, little by little, build concepts, rather than start from concepts and, thanks to them, begin to notice things. The concept of the novel was built over time, based on a variety of literary experiences. Even today, we do not yet have a single term for this notion in various languages. In Italian and French, the novel is called *romanzo* and *roman*, that is, a story

written in the current, Romance, language, rather than in old, respectable, Latin or Greek. In English, the term *romance* designates older, long prose stories and recent sentimental ones, while the newer fictional stories in prose are called *novels*. In Italian and French *novella* and *nouvelle* designate a shorter, but not too short, prose story. So, these terms label a family of quite diverse sub-genres that constantly evolved in various ways. One must see first what happened in this field and then, figure out how to reach a certain amount of conceptual clarity.

An important early 19th-century debate opposed, on the one side, the idealist philosophy of history formulated by Hegel and his disciples and, on the other side, the realist historicism of Leopold von Ranke and the historians that continued his approach. Hegel proposed a theological vision of history, considering that the human spirit is a divinity whose *birth* initiates a long-term historical process, whose *growth* then generates the progress towards a better, more mature humanity, and whose *maturity* represents the ultimate stage of world civilization, reached, in Hegel's view, by the early 19th-century ascendency of Prussia among European nations. In other terms, given that the growing, maturing human spirit is the historical incarnation of Providence, each stage of history must be explained by referring to the conceptual arc of its necessary development. Ranke, by contrast, thought that history consists in what really happened at this or that time and place. Studying the history of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, for instance, he provided a new, detailed understanding of the period based on actual documents, contemporary testimonies, and less known conflicts of interest.

In *The Lives of the Novel*, being guided by Ranke, I tried to find out what actual writers wrote and what their public read and liked. Like other specialists in the history of this genre, I saw that the novel was not, as Hegel claimed, the «bourgeois» form of the ancient epic, but an independent narrative genre having a long history and multiple forms, the earliest probably being the Ancient Greek novels.

So, do you think we should resort to contemporary theoretical approaches to understand the ancient novel?

In my youth I was happy to apply Chomsky's theory of syntax to literary plots because it allowed the representation of distant links between plot events. What happens at the end of a tragedy, for instance, is closely linked to what happened at its beginning and, similarly, what happens a little before the end might be related in some way to what happened in the middle. Hamlet kills his uncle Claudius at the end because this uncle killed Hamlet's father just before the beginning of the play. At some point, Ophelia lets herself drown in a river because earlier she lost both her suitor and her father. Some grammatical structures allow us to represent these distant mutual dependencies. Wonderful. But do we really need formal grammars to identify them? Readers and spectators of *Hamlet* see them anyway.

Why should we always «apply»? When one meets a friend, does one need to study a mathematical theory of friendship before having a drink? What if there is a human side in literature that encourages and develops insights into precisely this kind of human relations, trust, prudence, empathy? Should one always read manuals? Perhaps it would be equally good to read literature, let it resonate in us, compare what it lets us sense with our own experiences.

Why did you choose to write a history of the novel through the lens of characters, making them the centre of your theory of the novel?

May I offer a naïve answer? Characters are central in my work because, as I mentioned earlier, when I read a novel, I am interested in what happens, what the characters do, why, and how. And I believe that most people read this way. When I was young, a new literary trend, called the *nouveau roman*, emerged in France. One turned the pages of some of these «new novels» and read, and read, and read, but nothing happened. I never found out why.

How do you think the characters of the novel differ from the ones of epic and tragedy?

May I reply by asking a couple of additional questions? Are novel characters necessarily different from epic characters or from the characters of tragedies? And, consequently, do novel characters have some kind of specific features, always present? It would be difficult to answer affirmatively, given the frequent adaptations of novellas and novels as theater plays, and, conversely, the less frequent case of novels based on existing plays. Italian and Spanish Renaissance novellas, for instance, provided the plots and characters for so many tragedies and comedies in 16th- and 17th-century Italy, Spain and England. Conversely, the story and characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* have recently been revived in John Mardsen's *Hamlet: a Novel* (2008). Moreover, characters and their adventures can migrate not only between literary works or literary genres, but also jump from myth to literature, as it happened with so many Ancient Greek myths, and even from myth and literature to other disciplines. Oedipus is a good example. In Greek myths, he was an innocent new-born, who became a victim of his parents' previous sexual transgressions. Laius, his father, having earlier raped a teenage boy, Gods punished him by forbidding him to have children. If he didn't obey, the oracle announced, the child would kill his father and, in an even more terrifying version of the myth, marry his mother. Laius and his wife Jocasta failed to refrain from intercourse, a son was born, and to prevent the godly punishment, the mother asked a shepherd to drop the newborn in a deserted place, where the wild beasts would devour him. Sophocles' tragedy tells us what happened next. After appearing in other tragedies, in the 20th century this character moved from literature to a psychoanalytical theory, lost his innocence, and became the founder of a psychological complex supposed to affect every family life. So, characters, far from being stuck in one genre, often move from place to place.

In The Lives of the Novel *you write that «the novel moved from depicting strong souls to sensitive hearts and, finally, to enigmatic psyches». Following this character's issue, what can psychoanalysis, to which you have just alluded, add to the theory of novel?*

True, I suggested these three kinds of characters, but I confess that things are in fact more complicated, given that when one looks carefully, one finds a variety of characters and plots in the literature of every single historical period. Certainly, in the second half of the 19th century and in the 20th century many novel writers were interested in «enigmatic psyches», that is, in human beings whose feelings and reasons for acting are not fully transparent and sometimes remain inexplicable until the end of the story. Such are, for instance, the female protagonist in Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895), or Riccardo Molteni in Alberto Moravia's *Il Disprezzo* (1954). Yet, on the other hand, the 'strong souls' did not disappear. Courage, dignity, generosity, the fight for freedom were also present during this period, for instance in novels by women writers like Sigrid Undset, Willa Cather, and Sybille Bedford, by authors who, like Albert Camus, Arthur Koestler, Vasily Grossman, and Varlam Shalamov, opposed totalitarian systems, or by African writers like Chinua Achebe and Yambo Oulonguem, who celebrated anti-colonial resistance.

As for the «enigmatic psyches», their presence may have something to do with the increased mobility, social and geographical, that prevailed in the last couple of centuries, requiring human beings to face new situations and adapt to them. Perhaps we do belong to a highly adaptable species. In such situations, however, anxiety is difficult to avoid. How to answer it? Søren Kierkegaard suggested a religious answer. Other philosophers, Heidegger and Sartre, secularized his ideas, the latter also writing anxious novels and plays. Psychoanalysis, by trying to reach the subconscious levels of the individual psyche is also indebted to this context. As psychoanalysts argue, these hidden levels often involve sexual anxieties. True, but perhaps not always. Novels pay attention to the difficulty, be it sexual or not, of making sure that we are in charge of ourselves and can establish and keep meaningful links with those who surround us.

How did the relationship between centre and periphery change both history and the theory of the novel? Can we still consider it a valid paradigm?

I was born and raised in a part of Europe that is considered less central. Since during my life I travelled a lot, I understood that the national pride of each country plays an important role in the way people see their own literary history as well as the literature of the rest of the world. This is quite normal, given that national literatures started to be taught in school as a way of asserting each country's specific profile at a time when, after the traumas of the late 18th- and early 19th-century European wars, the study of Greek and Latin languages and literatures was felt to be insufficient. One after the other, European countries began to teach their own language, history, and literature in school, as part of educating children about their country's importance. Nowadays nationalism is far from being the most respected political option. Yet many scholars are still convinced that the birth of the novel took place in their own country.

The best known, most successful Ancient Greek novel, Heliodorus's *The Ethiopian Story*, was written in the early centuries of the first millennium, at a time when around the Mediterranean Sea the world was often felt as one. The Roman Empire established its political unity, Neoplatonic thought gave this world its philosophical coherence and placed love at its centre, whereas Christianity offered a religious view in accord with the newfound unity. *The Ethiopian Story* narrates the adventures of a young woman adopted by a Greek merchant and of a young Greek descendent from Achille, who fall in love at first sight and who, after running away from Greece and crossing several countries in North Africa, reach Ethiopia where the young woman finds out that she is the daughter of the King and Queen of the country. The Ethiopian people, priests, and monarch approve her marriage with her beloved. Implausible, highly idealized, this novel, a huge success at its rediscovery in the 16th century, posits a single, unified nature of humanity beyond races and borders, as well as the individual freedom of selecting one's unique life-partner. When, later, every country, every language in Europe and elsewhere, gained a sense of its own specificity, novels turned their attention to the historical, national, and class profiles of characters and conflicts.

What is the current direction of contemporary novels?

We still live in a period of unusual prosperity which produces a huge amount of literary writing. Modernism is still around, a rediscovery of realist approaches is also noticeable, postcolonial literature is alive and energetic, mystery novels are very good. It is difficult to say who will be remembered, but a possible criterion would be to find out who, among present-day writers, *has something to say*. It seems to me that in the European context, in Italy, in the UK, in the Eastern part of Europe, some writers tell us a lot. This does not mean that in France, Spain, Portugal and Northern Europe literature isn't productive and fascinating. It's just that I don't know enough about their latest successes. In France, for instance, I really appreciated Houellebecq's first couple of novels, published in the 1990s.

You have just suggested that Italian literature has a great ability to say something important and to tell stories, but not many people know Italian writers, even seminal ones, outside Italy. Which are the reasons, from your point of view?

Perhaps each culture has a certain amount of permeability. In my youth, I admired Italy as one of the most permeable countries from the cultural point of view. The books considered important were translated right away. A seminal theoretical work, *Mimesis* by Eric Auerbach, was immediately available in Italian, while it took longer to have it in French. The examples could be multiplied. American culture, without being closed on itself, is somewhat slower in publishing works written in other languages. The *NYRB* (*New York Review of Books*) series has published and still publishes important, well chosen, works translated from other languages. It obviously cannot cover the whole globe fast enough, but other publishing houses like *New Directions*, *Archipelago*, and *Deep Vellum*, equally focus on world literature.

Related to permeability, what do you think about the role of translation in exporting models? Is the translator a special kind of reader of novels?

Among teachers of literature, supporters of 'world literature' think that there is nothing wrong with reading foreign writers in translation, whereas more traditional comparatists are persuaded that translations cannot convey the specific vibrations of a literary text. The latter have a point, especially when one reads poetry. For novels, however, in many cases action and dialogue require more attention than stylistic virtuosity. Yet here too translation can fail. At an undergraduate Comp Lit course in Bucharest, the teacher devoted a good three-hour course to *Pamela* by Richardson. At the library I found only an 18th-century French translation of the novel, read it, and didn't like it. When years later I read it in English, it deeply impressed me. The initial French translator cut, simplified, and transformed the original into an 18th-century French novel. Later, *Pamela* was again translated into French, this time very, very well. Translations depend on the taste of the time and on the talent of the translator.

Concerning translations and the difficulties they have encountered, Italian novels are not always easy to translate, because of the complexity of the language and the peculiar stylistic and rhetorical choices Italian writers sometimes make. We all know that it is easier to translate a novel if it is written in a simplified language that responds to the needs of the book market. Do you think that a writer's linguistic choices can influence the success of a novel abroad?

It seems to me that readers of translated novels are not always over-sensitive at the refined linguistic choices. They rather try to capture the details of the action and the characters' feelings and decisions in a culture that is different from theirs. A minimal amount of simplification might be necessary. It is a question of tact. Bruce Penman's translation of Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, as the title itself shows it, succeeds in suggesting at least some of the implications of the Italian title. Less striking than *I promessi sposi*, which includes the guiding idea of «promise», the term «betrothed», rarely used in oral English, impresses nevertheless its readers. Speaking of titles,

the excellent English translation of Tarchetti's *Fosca* (Lawrence Venuti, 1994) has the less intriguing title *Passion*, probably by reference to Ettore Scola's movie *Passione d'amore* and to the successful musical *Passion* launched also in 1994. Fashion, contemporary events count.

In The Lives of the Novel *you also talk about novellas, more specifically Italian ones and Boccaccio's* Decameron. *You consider Griselda, the protagonist of the last novella of the tenth Day, the prototype of the submissive woman, while she is usually described as a great example of chastity and patience. How can we explain such challenging a character from your point of view?*

Thank you for this relevant critique of my claim. If we look at the way Boccaccio imagined Griselda and told her story, yes, patience is indeed her most impressive feature. It is pushed beyond everyday plausibility to make it visible. Yet, when I thought about this novella, I also asked another question, namely: «What kind of husband is Gualtieri?» the answer being «A terrible one!» It seemed to me that a man voluntarily united with a woman by the institution, and at that time also by the sacrament, of marriage should not have *tested* her in such a cruel way. Marriage was then and is still now a *union* rather than an opportunity to set traps for one's partner. It is not a game at which one player tacitly puts the other one in a difficult situation to see whether he or, here, she can lose or win. The very idea of tempting one's legal marriage partner is deplorable. In Boccaccio's story, Griselda's chastity and patience (as you rightly mentioned) defeat Gualtieri's attempts to challenge her. A few centuries later, *The Story of Improper Curiosity* by Cervantes, included in *Don Quixote*, Part I, strongly objects against such testing and against the lack of marital trust it involves. Gualtieri's behaviour seemed to me unacceptable both today and in his time. So, when I realized, thanks to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther *Types of International Folktales*, that Griselda-like stories are some of the most widespread oral tales in the world, I asked myself whether the reason was the universal admiration for this kind of female strength, or a less praiseworthy, silent complicity with the cruelty of her husband.

In Fictional Worlds*, you say that literature is not only about possible worlds, but also about impossible worlds, and you add that, being humans, we need to see the world is a better place than it is. If so, why, in late 19th and 20th centuries, some writers wrote novels pivoting on dystopia? Moreover, given what Walter Benjamin said about writing after the wounds caused by war, do you think that literature can still talk about positive feeling and happy endings in a plausible way even today?*

What Benjamin said was right at that time, as well as, for a while, after World War II. The 20th-century wars that sacrificed an unprecedented number of human beings, the totalitarian regimes, the Gulag, the Holocaust were traumatic experiences that influenced literature. One could perhaps suggest that some literary works written at that time seem so difficult to read and understand precisely because their authors could not bear looking at the world around them. But apart from this historical trauma, there is another, earlier, explanation for the distance that can be detected between 20th-century literature and life. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer showed in his admirable *Art of the Modern Age* (1992), late 18th- and 19th-century philosophers, from Kant to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, emphasized the aesthetic side of art, its artistic qualities rather than its content, the *how* rather than the *what*, arguing that the aim of art is *ecstasy*, a transcendent experience inaccessible to the usual human capacities. A new religion was born, the religion of art. The only artists who count in it are the «geniuses», those who created immortal works by abandoning existing conventions and freely inventing new artistic procedures. Since in religion saints and mystics turn away from the world, when modern art became a religion, it turned away from reality. Its public could not *recognize* what this kind of art offered, and many readers turned to popular literature, adventure novels, romances, and mystery novels.

Whatever the religion of art may preach, readers need implausible fictions and even impossible ones in order to identify and recognize the values that guide human life. Are Renzo and Lucia, the main characters in Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, plausible? Are their never-ending adventures credible? Not quite. Yet their courage, energy, and mutual fidelity, as well as, conversely, the nastiness of evil characters, cannot be forgotten. Literature employs characters and plots to emphasize both the visible and

the less visible, the lower and the higher, areas of human experience. Do readers and spectators need to believe literally what happened to Renzo and Lucia, to Griselda, to Hamlet? After finishing the novel, the novella, the play, aren't the readers/spectators still resonating with the ideals and norms that these works presented to them, either splendidly embodied by some characters or revoltingly transgressed by others? To conclude, I would suggest that we need both literary works that pivot on dystopia, warning us about the highest values' possible defeat, and works that help us sense the possible victory of human ideals and norms.