

Emily Allen and Dino Franco Felluga, *Novel-Poetry: The Shape of the Real and the Problem of Form*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 200 pp. ISBN 9780198929208

According to R. W. Chambers, A. E. Housman once summed up the moral of *In Memoriam* as “things must come right in the end, because it would be so very unpleasant if they did not.”¹ Emily Allen and Dino Felluga’s compelling study *Novel-Poetry* uses the hybrid genre of the verse-novel to posit alternatives to the similarly complacent trust that readers tend to place in narrative closure – and in lyric transcendence. Aligning themselves with the critical turn to New Formalism, Allen and Felluga enlist close textual analysis to make ambitious claims about genre, about the “formal structures for time, action, and identity” (1) that it offers, and about the way in which these structures shape humans’ self-understanding. Their book is rigorously researched, incisively argued, and beautifully written.

In a useful introduction that sets the stage for their interventions, Allen and Felluga include a genealogy of the assumptions about lyric and narrative temporality that they intend to challenge. Part One of their study, “The Novel-Verse and the Shape of the Real,” examines one such assumption: that the “realist time” foundational to novelistic narrative actually structures human history and experience. This version of time “moves relentlessly forward [...] plucking the actual moment from the stream of potential ones” and thus “foreclosing alternative possibilities” as it locks us into a sequential chain of events; it promises “that we will in the future look back on the apparently random chaos of the now and see coherent pattern” (17, 19, 21). In this way, it restricts the ability of individuals to imagine profound change. Elegantly building on the work of Alain Badiou, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, and Slavoj Žižek, Allen and Felluga then propose an alternative temporality in which disruptive events—such as revolutions – turn reality into “a realm of radical contingency” (33).

Charles Dickens’s work provides the prototypical illustration of realist time. Allen and Felluga argue that this author’s depiction of coincidence comprises “a compressed and therefore exaggerated version of how realism more generally handles the random and the contingent” (45)—that is, by absorbing them back into a satisfying narrative pattern. *A Tale of Two Cities*, for instance, does this with the cataclysm of the French Revolution. In contrast, Part Two of *Novel-Poetry* takes its title from the author whose work epitomizes the alternative approach, recalibrating the generic history of both novels and lyrics: Byron. Allen and Felluga’s chief example is *Don Juan*. They make a convincing case that this poem “resists lyricism’s association with truth, love, transcendent sublimity, and pure subjectivity” (66), in part by emphasizing the concrete materiality of the poetic line and of the page itself. And *Don Juan* also destabilizes the logic of sequential causation and character motivation that undergirds realist narrative. Doing so allows it to endorse collective revolutionary action.

In an especially insightful chapter, Allen and Felluga demonstrate that many Victorian novels grapple with Byron’s legacy, finding ways to convert his revolutionary fervour into sober gradualism. But the third and final part of their study, “The Verse-Novel and the Problem of Form,” traces Byron’s influence on this hybrid genre, showing what literary history might have

¹ R. W. Chambers. *Man’s Unconquerable Mind* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), p. 371.

looked like had the realist novel and the expressivist lyric not claimed such dominant positions. Instead of understanding “verse” and “novel” as competing conceptual frameworks in the style of Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit” image, Allen and Felluga sensitively explore the gradations between these categories. They propose that generic distinctions “are at once necessary to the act of interpretation and ultimately impossible, which is what allows literature to remain infinitely open to new, transformative readings” (119).

The rest of Part Three offers just such readings, all drawing on the generic hybridity of the verse-novel. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s treatment of temporality in *Aurora Leigh* makes love and religious faith into catalysts for the radical pursuit of justice. In contrast, the “overdetermination of generic markers” (148) in Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Amours de Voyage* leads to skepticism and paralysis; this poem gestures at but rejects the heroic grandeur of epic, the neat closure of realist fiction, the sublime transport of lyric, the bravura of Byronic romance. A superb re-assessment of George Meredith’s *Modern Love* thematizes the fuzziness of generic boundaries. Just as readers may seek but never quite pinpoint the moment at which a series of poems becomes a novel, so Meredith’s speaker searches in vain for “the elusive point at which love turns into something else” (165), and for the lost moments at which decisive action could have been taken. Thus the bodily gestures (smiles, trembles, winces) that realist novels press into the service of a clear narrative arc are in *Modern Love* often left incoherent – which exposes the artifice of novelistic teleology. And finally, Allen and Felluga turn to Robert Browning. Framing their reading with the larger claim that Browning “rejects the Wordsworthian temporality of lost innocence in favor of wisdom achieved through struggle” (184), they show that *The Ring and the Book* formulates an approach to questions of truth and virtue (categories borrowed from Michael McKeon) that aligns neither with novels nor with lyrics. Instead, it points to a universe in which “all possible counterfactuals exist simultaneously in the mind of God,” yet “only our acts instantiate God’s grace” (194). Cause-and-effect logic is not the whole story, but predestination does not negate free will. This chapter leads into a touching Coda in which Allen and Felluga urge their readers not to lose hope that collective action in the present – and the freedom to imagine its branching possibilities—may yet bring about a better world.

Novel-Poetry is a joy to read, as much for its well-turned phrases as for its astute readings and powerfully ambitious scope. Though many of its chapters focus on poetry, it will be of great interest to scholars of the novel; indeed, it tends to reserve its most scrupulous analysis for narrative rather than lyric. But these are distinctions Allen and Felluga seek to trouble – and in their mission to reconsider the nature of literary genre, action, and temporality through the lens of the verse-novel, they succeed brilliantly.

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