

# Enactment or Exploration: Two Roles for Philosophy in the Novel of Ideas

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**Abstract.** I examine the often-denigrated concept of the novel of ideas from its inception and critical decline to its relatively recent revival. Using a variant of the exploitation-exploration dilemma in psychology, I suggest that early usage referred to works that exploit philosophical principles—or better, enact them—by setting philosophical positions in conflict. By contrast, use of the concept for more recent works sees characters and plots exploring philosophical stances. The shift corresponds with the greater attention paid to complexity and ambiguity that are hallmarks of continental philosophy and neopragmatism, and with its greater need to explore philosophical stances through fiction.

## I

The novel of ideas is a concept whose time has come, again. Critics have embraced the term in recent years to categorize a widening range of novels. Many bear little resemblance to the social consciousness-raising ones of the nineteenth century that were so labeled when the term “novel of ideas” first came into vogue, applied to works by authors including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, and Emile Zola. They also seem different from those of the middle years of the twentieth century, depicting the supposed horrors of one political movement or another (such as works by Yevgeni Zamyatin, George Orwell, and Ayn Rand). The label has been further applied to works based on perceived social disruption from science or technology development (Mary Shelley, H. G. Wells, and Robert Heinlein).

This revival of interest comes as writers of a different philosophical persuasion began to attract critical attention applying that banner. The themes of science and uncertainty in the

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works of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis, sometimes called “systems novels,” have been labeled as being “of ideas,” as well as some works considered “postmodern.”

That this category—“novel of ideas”—is in vogue is evident from fresh critical discussion of its shortcomings as much as its merits. Positive echoes can be found in studies concerning the overlap between the essay and novels,<sup>1</sup> and between such novels and drama.<sup>2</sup> Not all the attention is supportive, however. While defending the category, Michael LeMahieu notes that it is “consistently subject to denigration.”<sup>3</sup> A recent example is Sianne Ngai’s critical account of a limit range of techniques used in works that fall under that label, mechanisms that limit characterization.<sup>4</sup> Timothy Bewes challenges the “intellectual honesty” of works written in this tradition.<sup>5</sup>

My article extends these critiques but steps back from their normative stance. Instead, I analyze the concept using a lens drawn from psychology and cognition studies: the distinction between *exploration* and *exploitation* and the dilemma it presents. I argue that critics use the term “novel of ideas” in different ways. Initially it referred to works in which characters embody philosophical positions; they then engage through the devices of plot and narrative in a contest of those stances with others. These authors, and the characters they create, exploit settled philosophical positions or, more precisely, enact a philosophical debate.

By contrast, I argue that a different understanding applies in the recent revival of the term, as applied to works belonging to traditions including existentialism, phenomenology, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. It can apply as well to works conceived in neopragmatist ontologies, which seek to overcome the relativism of the other approaches while also avoiding reliance on the foundationalism and idealism that characterized fictional works in earlier uses of the term “novel of ideas.” These philosophies are messier, dealing with complexity, historical contingency, ambiguity, randomness, and the anxieties that arise from them. Such works use plot and narrative not to enact competing philosophies in combat but rather to explore what these approaches mean to the characters standing in for real people as they seek to draw sense from confusion.

First, I outline the dilemma of exploration and exploitation and suggest how it might be translated into the field of fiction. Next, I examine the definitions of “novel of ideas,” its origins, and the uses to which it has been put. I then consider the controversy the term has provoked and how the novel of ideas has been revived, before analyzing it via the dilemma of exploitation and exploration. Through examination of literary criticism of works called novels of ideas, I argue that the resurrection of the term has something to do with the increasingly complex environment for ideas, that is, philosophical approaches that seek to cope with

complexity and uncertainty through exploration, rather than staging a confrontation of fixed ideas, which is exploited by the writer to test ideas by enacting them in the work.

## II

In a sense, all fiction—all writing—concerns ideas. LeMahieu says the legendary critic and novelist Mary McCarthy saw the term “novel of ideas” not as contradictory so much as tautological, particularly among nineteenth-century writers like Herman Melville, George Eliot, Honoré de Balzac, or Fyodor Dostoevsky. During that time, “novels and ideas were . . . cut from the same cloth.”<sup>6</sup> However, Iris Murdoch, a philosopher who became a novelist of repute, saw a fundamental difference between the disciplines and argued they should be kept apart. While philosophy seeks to clarify, she said, “literature is very often mystification.”<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, Anthony Quinton has drawn a distinction between ways that philosophy and fiction interact. He speaks of “philosophy in fiction,” where the ideas are expressed indirectly and the content is latent, and “philosophy through fiction,” where imaginative literary works communicate philosophical conceptions that are already fully worked out. Jukka Mikkonen sees this as meaning that “literary works are subordinated to the function and purpose of philosophical argument.” Gilbert Plumer sees similarities between these concepts and his two forms of narrative argument, one in which the argument is offered overtly and the other, where the narrative as a whole expresses the argument.<sup>8</sup> Both these formulations describe philosophy that is well developed, and the ideas are clear, if disputed. Quinton’s “philosophy in literature” and Plumer’s overt philosophy seem to involve writing that presents what Noël Carroll refers to as popular philosophy—“philosophy for the masses.” But it begs the question of how a work of fiction might facilitate what Carroll calls “doing philosophy,”<sup>9</sup> that is, supporting a theme with an argument, and not just for the masses. To that end, I here develop a different distinction, contrasting works in which the ideas are well developed with those where the ideas themselves are complex, far from settled, and often unsettling.

In real life, we are bombarded with ideas; they demand our attention and command our ability to choose. Among the choices are whether to use an idea already to hand or search instead for something different and perhaps better. In epistemology, the choice is between specialization and innovation.<sup>10</sup> For economists, the question is classically one of efficiency, that is, the allocation of effort.<sup>11</sup> The dilemma drives organizational decision-making, where situational messiness meets the bounded rationality of human behavior, defying simple economic considerations, including decisions about whether to engage in research and

development.<sup>12</sup> This dilemma also plays out in group dynamics: When individuals selfishly exploit knowledge discovered by the exploration of other group members, the term “exploitation” can take on a sinister meaning.<sup>13</sup>

We decide whether to explore (that is, gather information and fresh ideas) or exploit (use known information and ideas for benefit). We may choose based on personality factors and personal needs, or on whether we are anxious or confident about the future. Utilizing exploration and exploitation at the same time strains the attention of individuals and groups, who then never quite specialize and never quite innovate. That creates the “conflicting choice of opting either for a rewarding familiar option (i.e., exploitation) or for a novel, uncertain option that may, however, yield a better reward in the near future (i.e., exploration).”<sup>14</sup> In limited circumstances, the dilemma can be resolved, as evidenced by brain scans taken during experiments; these insights are increasingly built into the designs of artificial intelligence systems.<sup>15</sup> While a recent study offers evidence that selective attention to ready-made ideas—a term I examine further below—may help individuals overcome this dilemma,<sup>16</sup> in many settings, attention is the scarce resource. One needs to choose.

Translated to the realm of fiction, those seeking to engage with ideas seem to face a similar choice. Does a writer exploit well-articulated systems of ideas, finding drama by enacting how the ideas conflict and so clarifying the choice between them? Or does a reader—or indeed a writer—turn to stories to explore and perhaps clarify the messiness of the situation, that is, to look for the philosophical significance of the imagined experience? With this distinction in mind, let’s consider the idea of the novel of ideas, historically and critically.

The concept of a novel of ideas is confusingly vague. According to LeMahieu, the concept emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “out of and against a modernist aesthetic ideology, *l’art pour l’art*, which in its most radical form excludes the possibility of a novel of ideas” (“NI,” p. 178). Adherents to modernism set aesthetic value as a final good, dismissing as unworthy the instrumental campaigning of some nineteenth-century novels, including those of Eliot and Dickens, and the didactic character of many French novels of the same period, as well as the works of the Russians Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and much of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s fiction.

The novel of ideas is often set in contrast to the work of Henry James, a novelist whom T. S. Eliot is said to have described in these terms: “He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.” McCarthy famously chastised Eliot for that remark; it presented a “snubbing notion, radical at the time but by now canon doctrine, of the novel as a fine art and of the novelist as an intelligence superior to mere intellect” (“James”). Alan Holder, however, sees the matter

rather differently, and in a way that is relevant to the analysis presented in this paper.<sup>17</sup> He takes the quote from Eliot to mean “that the novelist’s mind did not permit any *a priori* formulations about experience to blind it to experience itself.”<sup>18</sup>

Among the mid-twentieth-century writers who have attracted the label “of ideas” were those on both sides of the great political-philosophic contests: Fascism versus democracy, Marxism versus capitalism, collectivism versus individualism—Arthur Koestler, Aldous Huxley, Orwell, William Golding, Rand. Another type of work concerned with ideas focuses on the threat posed by technology and modern life to individual identity: books by Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Robert Musil. In more recent times, however, the term novel of ideas has been applied to a wide range of work by writers including Pynchon, Gaddis, Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, J. M. Coetzee, David Foster Wallace, Ian McEwan, and others. Their work is less easy to classify, as I shall demonstrate. The next step in the process is to examine how critics define and use the term novel of ideas.

As a tool for description or analysis, the term has a somewhat checkered critical reputation. In 1955, Frederick Hoffman defined the concept starting with the negative: “not the novel which incidentally illustrates ideas but the novel which uses them in default of characterization and other qualities of the traditional narratives.”<sup>19</sup> In the 1999 edition of their dictionary of literary terms, J. A. Cuddon and C. E. Preston adopt a dismissive tone in trying to define it:

**novel of ideas** A vague category of fiction in which conversation, intellectual discussion and debate predominate, and in which plot, narrative, emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization are deliberately limited. Such a form of novel is perhaps best exemplified by Aldous Huxley’s *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Point Counter Point* (1928) and *After Many a Summer* (1939).<sup>20</sup>

Huxley’s own account comes in the voice of his protagonist, the writer Quarles, in the novel *Point Counter Point*:

Novel of ideas. The character of each personage must be implied, as far as possible, in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece. In so far as theories are rationalizations of sentiments, instincts, dispositions of soul, this is feasible. The chief defect of the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas.<sup>21</sup>

Quarles then complains of how few such people exist, snobbishly illustrating the superiority of such authors to mere mortal novelists.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than choose explicit imprecision, the mathematician and philosopher John Lane Bell employs a broad brush. His manuscript, subtitled “A Survey of the Novel of Ideas,” uses

as its criterion for selection those in which “philosophical, social, ethical, or scientific ideas play a significant role.” That approach embraces a wide range of works in a variety of languages, and two special cases of subject matter (politics and science fiction). He also explicitly equates “novels of ideas” with “philosophical novels.”<sup>23</sup> His classification, however, contains many gray areas.

Given the range of themes and the variety of approaches such works present, those searching for a definition might indeed settle for calling it “a vague category.” Notwithstanding laments in popular criticism about a qualitative decline in the category, or its denigration in literary prize-giving, the novel of ideas is an idea and refuses to die. If so, perhaps we need better ideas about the novel of ideas.<sup>24</sup>

Two such attempts have been made, by Bewes and Ngai, both notable for their dismissal of the value in and their moral rejection of a large component of works in this messy category. Bewes asserts a normative typology of idea-focused writing that splits the novels of ideas from those he terms “philosophical fiction.” He denounces the former as manipulative and dishonest. To qualify as philosophical, however, Bewes states that a work must pass two tests. First, it must explore ideas in a way marked by “the absence of authorial *predetermination* or ulterior motives.” Second, it must show “existence of a point of resistance to the values of the objective world.” The latter point identifies the novel of ideas as “a work for the market”; to be called “philosophical” a “text should not appeal primarily to the market” (“PH,” p. 428). There are thus “two forms of literary dishonesty: the thesis-led *manipulation* and the market-led *gratification* of the reader” (p. 424). Failing either test makes a work philosophically dishonest.<sup>25</sup> He acknowledges that some readers will find this argument “excessively crude” and declares his assessment “provisional” (“PH,” p. 422). But he then makes normative assertions (a philosophical novel “should be a *meditation*”; “the author and the reader should be in quest of a *common* objective”), which color the rest of his argument (p. 428). I will return to these points later, in examining more recent fictional works.

A second critique comes in the long “Readymade Ideas” chapter of Ngai’s book *Theory of the Gimmick*. She describes the concept of the novel of ideas as a response to the industrial revolution. Works of ideas-led fiction arose as scientific advances and new technologies raised questions about established ontologies. Ngai writes that discussion of it, and even the form itself, arose “by most accounts” in the late 1800s. It represented a challenge to the form by integrating externally developed concepts, anticipating the direction taken in conceptual art. The presentation of ideas, she says, “seems to have pushed a genre [i.e., the novel itself] famous for its versatility toward a surprisingly limited repertoire of techniques” (*TG*, p. 109).

In doing so, it works against expectations of the form: the didactic replaces nondidactic representation; static or simple settings replace complex physical and temporal relations between events and their representation; characterization is simplistic, and character development limited. They rely, in Ngai's argument, on gimmicks, and gimmicks are the ultimate tricks of the capitalist trade, which finds its ultimate form in the use of magic.

Both critiques highlight a reduction of complexity in works they think of as novels of ideas. The range of narrative devices is narrower. Time can play a lesser role in two ways; novels of ideas show time as either linear or suspended. Beyond that, characters embody and enact propositions. Problems are examined, even forensically. Monologues replace dialogue. LeMahieu makes the argument this way: Because they require spokesmen, novels of ideas "struggle not to subordinate plot and character to dialogue and commentary; they struggle, that is to say, not to tell more than they show."<sup>26</sup>

These analyses, therefore, challenge and even condemn the category epistemologically. These weaknesses, if we chose to judge them so (as Bewes and Ngai do), appear in some of the works they analyze, but it is less clear that they are defining characteristics. The differences between works in this supposed category are perhaps as great as the similarities. Moreover, like the genre of the novel itself, might the works labeled "novels of ideas" demonstrate the same sort of "versatility" that Ngai ascribes to the genre as a whole? Has the novel of ideas undergone a category creep?

Both these critiques have roots in a reified conception of fiction and the novel. Each presents the novel of ideas as if the novel were a preexisting Platonic form, against which another form—"of ideas"—is assessed and found wanting. In a sense, they echo the modernist attack on much nineteenth-century fiction. For the category to make sense at all, the novel of ideas and its synonym (or perhaps close sibling), philosophical fiction,<sup>27</sup> ought to involve works that exhibit strong ties to issues debated in philosophy. But what if we examine instead the works in question and assess their similarities and differences, and build categories from the bottom up? In keeping with the infinitely flexible form of the novel, what emerges is not a simple dichotomy between novels of ideas operating as a system under exterior, philosophic direction, as opposed to ones that exhibit a psychologically led focus on interiors in works that fall outside this category.<sup>28</sup> Nor do we see a linear development over time. In the next sections I will consider how critics recount the mechanisms of the works they see as novels of ideas, looking first at Eliot, with special attention to *Middlemarch*, then Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four*, and then—through some loops and diversions—to glance at the fictional side of science before moving into more contemporary works.

### III

Eliot has attracted attention from popular critics and literary scholars as a writer of fiction with philosophical intent. George Levine finds ontological and epistemological concerns in her life and fiction. He reminds us of Eliot's efforts to complete the G. H. Lewes's treatise *Problems of Life and Mind* and her extensive interaction with scientists, and argues that her novel *Daniel Deronda* can be seen, like Lewes's *Problems*, as an attempt to reconcile religion and science.<sup>29</sup> But Gillian Beer, who clearly identifies Eliot's fictions as novels of ideas, nonetheless argues that she stands out among novelists of ideas, with characters that are more than mouthpieces, and prose that is aware of ironies: "Abstract systems and intimate feelings are not kept in separate boxes in her writing."<sup>30</sup>

Yet novels of ideas they are. Often seen as describing the emergence of liberalism against hierarchy, Eliot's novels depict the conflict of tradition and individualism. Neal Carroll has argued that her novels—and particularly the earlier ones, *Adam Bede* and *Mill on the Floss*—have a different basis: "Irrational or illiberal types of decision-making in Eliot's novels intervene as if by providence and tend to be formally manifest in the trappings of delegitimized generic types opposed to realism, such as romance."<sup>31</sup> But this interpretation still makes her a writer interested in illustrating the ethical tension emerging in Victorian England's political and social life.

Indeed, Claire Carlisle asserts that Eliot deserves a place as one of Britain's leading philosophers. Among her many projects, Eliot had translated Spinoza's ethics treatise from German to English. Miriam Henson argues that Eliot's writing is, in effect, a translation of Spinoza's ethics into fiction. By contrast, Brian Fay considers *Middlemarch* to be a kind of philosophical dialogue between Eliot and Spinoza, in which the latter's abstractionism is illustrated as lacking and thus undercutting the rightful role of sympathy in human affairs.<sup>32</sup> Fay's more nuanced reading of *Middlemarch* details character development in Dorothea and the failure of Casaubon to recognize the human capacity for sympathy. Yet this opposition shows Eliot enacting Spinoza's abstraction against David Hume's priority for passions as a motivator. Whether her novels—and *Middlemarch* in particular—illustrate a philosophy or set various philosophies in contrast, they use plots and characters to enact these stances.

More recently, Maxwell Sater has made the case for an even more subtle reading of the role of philosophy in Eliot's fiction, seeing her as developing an "anti-dogmatic skepticism," a claim that goes "against the grain of Eliot criticism."<sup>33</sup> He draws upon a letter she wrote to a reader, Frederick Harrison, who had urged her to expound the positivism of Auguste Comte

more directly in her next novel. Although sympathetic to Comte, Sater says, Eliot pushed back: aesthetics is the “highest of all teachings” because it deals with the “highest complexity”; when the aesthetic “lapses” from providing a picture to giving a diagram, “it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.”

Eliot goes on to remark on the “unspeakable pains” she took in writing *Romola* to achieve idealization, leading her to set the novel in the past.<sup>34</sup> The implication is that this distance permitted her to escape the complexity of reality. This too points to what I have called enactment: Eliot recognizes and values the complexities, though she distances herself from them to make her ideas come clear. Extending Sater’s argument, Eliot’s skepticism keeps her from committing to a single stance; settled philosophical ideas contest through her aesthetics for our and her attention.

#### IV

In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight-Four* we see a different novel of ideas entirely, though one that shares with Eliot the practice of enacting philosophies in conflict. John Rodden asserts that arguments in the novels of Henry Fielding, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy may succeed because of the richness, the lifelike quality of their narratives. But he says richness is not necessary for persuasion. He sees *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an “argument against political tyranny and totalitarianism,” which succeeds despite its heavy plotting and without rich narrative or rounded characters because of the close interactions of its themes and the concerns of readers.<sup>35</sup> Heavy plots and flat characterizations are among the distinguishing—and for many critics, the damnable—features of novels of ideas.

Bell comments on how the novel’s satire has roots in its parody of the discourse of paradox and ambiguity employed by the state. He notes that “Newspeak,” the language of the novel, includes words like “doublethink,” which involves holding contradictory thoughts while believing both (“PL,” p. 20). While the truth might be clear to Orwell and to the many readers he managed to persuade, truth in many fields was becoming increasingly difficult to pin down.<sup>36</sup> The undercurrent of skepticism that Sater sees in Eliot was becoming mainstream. We might have to settle for belief.

Plumer discusses how narratives are often discussed as “invitations to imagine.” But he contends that fiction that presents arguments shared with scientific, historical, and journalistic accounts of the status of being “invitations to believe.” The test comes less from a realistic portrayal of life, with its emotional pulls, than from cognitive engagement with the argument:

not just is it believable but is it believable under certain rules of the real world? And if so, then those rules must apply to the real world. Being believable is the starting point (“TA,” p. 152).

We might be uncomfortable when he suggests that the believability of a story leads us to believe that the story presents a law of nature, which makes the story’s argument transcendent. But we believe what we read about the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, despite the novel’s lack of realistic anchors in the world Orwell knew in 1948. That must be because the narrow argument persuades us that the work’s broader argumentation for that fictional world corresponds with our experience. Orwell’s enactment of the tension between individualism and the collective, and of the path to totalitarianism alerts us to the dangers of the exercise of power in an ambiguous world, not to the dangers of ambiguity itself. Not long after the publication of the novel, this vice would come to be a hallmark of much postwar philosophizing, under the influence not least of the philosophy of science, where renewed emphasis on exploration seemed in order, as I consider next.

## V

To open another direction in novels of ideas, let’s look backwards for a moment, drawing on Matthew Beaumont’s analysis of late-nineteenth-century utopian fiction, while keeping the enactment-exploration dilemma in mind. Beaumont examines the critique of capitalist ideologies in the novel *Looking Backward*, by Edward Bellamy, and the critique of Bellamy’s version of socialism in William Morris’s novel *News from Nowhere*, as well as Edwin Abbott’s anonymously published *Flatland*. Utopian fiction, Beaumont writes, is “committed almost by definition to looking outside, or questioning at least, the current social formation” and “secretly aspires to repair the damaged relations between writer and readers under capitalism.” While both Bellamy and Morris articulate well-defined alternatives, *Flatland* takes us to an imagined universe in which equality at first seems manifest in a two-dimensional world, and yet a social structure emerges based on the angles of each flat-shaped person.<sup>37</sup> This account points us toward the view of *Flatland* as more exploratory than enacting, though still grounded in opposition to the emerging social structure of nineteenth-century industrialization. While directing us into an uncomfortable and unfamiliar world, *Flatland*, like *News from Nowhere*, enacts through imagination competing against ideas of social and political order.

As Beaumont recounts, *Flatland* is also an early example of a novel inspired by developments in science of the period, perhaps the most profound of which was Darwin’s theory of natural selection. With its challenge to conventional religion, evolutionary thinking

undermined established ideas of a hierarchical cosmic order. Evolution sets both established idealist thought and Utopian-Romantic focus on a transcendent ontology against emerging philosophical uncertainties. Philosophically, these scientific advances destabilized idealism, underpinned skepticism, fueled greater attention to empiricism, and ignited nonfoundational approaches of the type we see in American pragmatism. In Europe, the challenges to conventional religious ontologies gave rise to the early existentialist writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, then Martin Heidegger and what in the twentieth century came to be called “continental” philosophy.

Coupled with Albert Einstein’s focus on relativity and Sigmund Freud’s on the unconscious, fiction writers found much to think about in their works, including relativism. Then came Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle; Kuhn’s depictions of scientific revolutions as social constructions; the counterintuitive findings of quantum, superstring, and chaos theories. Apparently we had lost the anchor-points for the heuristics of philosophical thought—that is, the verities—that had previously seemed to order the universe.

These developments in natural science unsettled more than the physical sciences. Moral perspectives, in the face not just of the horrors of Nazi Germany but also the prospects of nuclear Armageddon, left many seeking absolutes and finding only relativism. The ideas worked their way into artistic and literary life as well. If we fast-forward, we can begin to glimpse the path separating into two strands: one where believability in imagined settings depends on what Plumer calls transcendent arguments; and another, more overgrown and difficult to navigate, which demands exploration of both ideas and settings that lack the anchor of the transcendent. But permit me one more loop before I continue.

## VI

If the novel of ideas originally referred to the explication of concepts through narrative enactment, the term has also been applied, belatedly, to a baffling masterpiece from the heart of the Enlightenment. Sometimes called a “postmodern” novel ahead of its time, Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*<sup>38</sup> offers a chaotic would-be autobiography in which the subject depicts the moment of his own conception and barely manages to get past the first day of the self-described gentleman’s life. Brian Shaffer draws similarities with Salman Rushdie’s prose, while Ngai sees Sterne anticipating the forms of Musil and Coetzee.<sup>39</sup> The work challenged the nascent norms-in-becoming of the English novel, frequently turning time on its head, conducting defamiliarization through temporal

disorientation and misordering of chapter numbers to confound (and delight) the reader,<sup>40</sup> and defying all correspondence of the narrative to reality.

Tristram Shandy's is a life without firm anchor points ("CC"), a life not so much socially constructed as self-concocted, a life of seemingly random events leaving a door wide open for interpretation or revulsion. One might be tempted to see Shandy, or even Sterne, as a relativist, if one could find in the novel any sort of relation between anything and anything else. Judith Hawley declares the narrator Shandy to be a philosopher, in part through his long digressions to satirize the ideas of the real-life John Locke, and in part through his musings about the philosophy of noses ("no more likely to have been a branch of academic study then as now," Hawley adds, with Sterne-like sarcasm).<sup>41</sup> It is hard to see in this work the presentation of a fixed philosophical stance, except perhaps in the way it undermines and mocks contemporary thinking. Instead, Sterne, through Shandy, is exploring the nature of reality as viewed through the lens of rationality, only to find the lens itself very blurred. In so doing one might be tempted to say he is inventing a language for the antirationalism, nonfoundationalism of philosophers that followed.

At the onset of the Enlightenment and its concern for rationality, *Tristram Shandy* raises questions about what is real or ironic, and what is just made up, magical, and yet might still on some level be true. Fiction of some three hundred years later returned to these themes in two different ways. The first are discussions of the technology-led "systems novels" of writers like Gaddis and Pynchon, and the second those of the new novels of ideas from more realistic writers like McEwan and Coetzee.

Tom LeClair uses the term "systems novels" to describe Pynchon, John Barth, Gaddis, Robert Coover, and DeLillo, American writers now often seen as postmodernists. They describe living systems as dynamic and self-correcting processes, with organized complexity, which nonetheless defy "mechanistic study." Systems thinking, he writes, provides for them "a source of ideas and language." Anchoring the language in this emergent but still alien background illustrates the interconnectedness inherent in systems theory. It allows readers to explore how systems thinking describes the complexity of human life in a more tangible way than the physical and social sciences accounts afford. In discussing Pynchon, Katie Muth argues that, if anything, LeClair has underplayed the extent to which systems thinking underpins such novels. She draws upon Pynchon's prior career in missile development at Boeing Company to show how his concerns for technical writing and programming create the vocabulary and grammar of *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, with implications for readers' experience of the ideas behind the stories they relate.<sup>42</sup>

In a rather different way, McEwan's novels are also viewed as being "of ideas." As with the nineteenth-century examples I have presented, McEwan writes of worlds we recognize. But then critical opinion divides. His novels, LeMahieu writes, present "very old questions and debates: faith versus reason, religion versus science, logic versus emotion" ("NI," p. 182). Judith Seaboyer agrees, but sees McEwan as using this "contemporary realism" as a medium to explore these issues through analogy and speculative fiction.<sup>43</sup> According to Daniel Zalewski, McEwan believes that something emotionally stirring should happen in novels: "Though he is animated by ideas, he would never plop two characters on a sofa and have them expound rival philosophies."<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Weston describes McEwan's *Atonement* as a novel that traces the twentieth century's swing from "modernist amorality to postmodern relativism."<sup>45</sup>

Viewed against conventional morality, that swing brings readers into an exploration of the troublesome issues about how to choose when anchor points are missing or obscured. It walks us with the characters through the issues at stake without resorting to the philosophizing apparent in works that more obviously enact debates. LeMahieu puts it this way: "At times, his novels of ideas enact what they denote—form follows content; at other times, their performative function diverges from their constative meaning, but, either way, they consistently explore and demonstrate unexpected capabilities of the genre. In his novels, ideas animate but never overwhelm aesthetics."<sup>46</sup>

Coetzee's novels provide another example of how the novel of ideas has morphed in the face of philosophical uncertainties, represented less by characters than by the paradoxes their activities reveal. Puchner observes that in *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee has written works that "barely contain the ideas" presented by their protagonists, while in *The Life and Times of Michael K.*, the character is barely able to speak. In Puchner's eyes, in these and Coetzee's other works, "ideas are sometimes presented as ready-made, but they are also embodied, placed in dramatic scenes and feeling characters who tend to lose control over them."<sup>47</sup> That is, being ready-made does not guarantee the ideas hold together. In her chapter on ready-made ideas, Ngai notes that after the first of the "lectures" the character Elizabeth Costello gives, the "self-cancelling" narrator says that realism "has never been comfortable with ideas" and that characters must in some sense embody ideas, even as the narrative creates uncertainty as to whether any of them is worthy of embodiment. This notion therefore might not be one of the "gimmicks" that Ngai wants to identify with the novel of ideas. The book contains a sense of irony about each of Costello's pronouncements. If we are sure of one thing, it is that Costello's certainties stand on shaky ground. We explore that ground through the

narration, never sure of much except that the debate between realism and idealism is far from over.

## VII

What are we to make of this stretch of the category “novel of ideas” to such a range and diversity of works? By using the dilemma of exploitation and exploration from psychology as a lens to look at literary criticism and theorizing, this article has illustrated the presence of several distinct types of work called novels of ideas, with different narrative techniques and underlying philosophical stances. Applied to social critiques of the nineteenth century, the novel of ideas is a label for works that enact (that is, exploit) well-articulated sides of an intellectual and political debate, sometimes drawing upon advances in evolutionary studies that undermined the verities of religion and the social order it created. Advances in technology afforded others to explore the possibilities of different ontologies in a genre that quickly came to be called science fiction. Still others engaged in debate in political philosophy, using characterization and plotting to enact the contestation of ideologies. And through much of this time, and before it, writers have sought to explore the meaning of complex and unsettled lines of reasoning, philosophical stances often labeled by critics as postmodern.<sup>48</sup> That these all have been categorized as novels of ideas is not particularly surprising, either. The novel of ideas, you will recall, is a category that theorists like Cuddon and Preston call “vague.” The recent revival of interest in the category among fiction writers and critics suggests a need for greater clarity.

The lens I use here offers insights that a paper of this length can only hint at. First, the raw material for this study has been the writings of critics, not the works themselves. Much could be achieved by applying this lens to individual works and authors, and to collaborative fictions in drama, on stage and screen, allowing a more meaningful typology to emerge.

Second, the category itself, as vague as it may be, warrants further critical thinking. Recall that the enactment-exploration dilemma is one of attention. As Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman demonstrated, categories overcome attention deficits through heuristics, cognitive shortcuts that convey meaning when information is limited. Heuristics rely on being 1) representative of a type, 2) available because they work well enough, while 3) providing anchor points that show similarity amid variety.<sup>49</sup> But heuristics create biases, one of the most prominent of which is confirmation bias: we see what we expect to see. In the world of fiction, the conventions of a genre set readers’ expectations. What is novel about a novel, however, is

how it distinguishes itself from the rest. Confounding such bias through fiction may depend on breaking the anchor points (“CC”), a few examples of which I have suggested here may lie behind exploration. This confounding may also be what distinguishes the richer forms of enactment from the flat characters and predictable plots associated with works that might be better called novels of ideology.<sup>50</sup>

Third, what is clear from the revival of interest in the novel of ideas as a form of inquiry—among both critics and writers—is the difficulty many writers in our times find in ascribing agency and blame. Our available ontologies of interdependence create ambiguities, and moral truths seem to be historically contingent. The dangers of relativism lurk everywhere we look. These are frequently the problems that the new novels of ideas explore, often without answers.

Finally, this three-pronged approach might be useful in understanding both the mechanisms and the philosophies in other types of novels of ideas than the ones examined here—for example, in magical realism, the sudden injection of a world that follows different ways to experiment with new ideas and explore for truth, not just through the believable but also the unbelievable (“TA,” p. 158). Could this be why philosophers, like novelists, engage in thought experiments?<sup>51</sup> The philosopher Simon Blackburn describes Hume’s empathetic argument against narrow rationalism as working in a way that, when we imagine, we “enact in our own minds.”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps he might have added “explore” as well.

The novelist and theorist Milan Kundera, often called a postmodernist,<sup>53</sup> wants us to remember a difference between the ways that novelists and philosophers think. “Even when they express their ideas directly, in their notebooks, the ideas are intellectual exercises, paradox games, improvisations, rather than statements of thought.”<sup>54</sup> Some philosophers may beg to differ. How often might explorations of ideas in fiction be the starting point of philosophical reflection?

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<sup>1</sup> Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Stefano Ercolino, *The Novel-Essay, 1884-1947* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Michael LeMahieu, “The Novel of Ideas [2015],” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*, ed. David James, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 177; hereafter abbreviated “NI.”

<sup>4</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); hereafter abbreviated *TG*. A web post excerpts her discussion of the novel of ideas; see “The

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Gimmick of the Novel of Ideas,” [theparisreview.org/blog/2020/06/25/the-gimmick-of-the-novel-of-ideas/](http://theparisreview.org/blog/2020/06/25/the-gimmick-of-the-novel-of-ideas/).

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Bewes, “What Is ‘Philosophical Honesty’ in Postmodern Literature?” *New Literary History* 31, no. 3 (2000); hereafter abbreviated “PH.”

<sup>6</sup> LeMahieu, “NI,” p. 177. LeMahieu cites the book drawn from McCarthy’s lectures at University College London. The first and fourth of these lectures were also published in the *London Review of Books*: Mary McCarthy, “Ideas and the Novel: Henry James and Some Others,” [lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n06/mary-mccarthy/ideas-and-the-novel-henry-james-and-some-others](http://lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n06/mary-mccarthy/ideas-and-the-novel-henry-james-and-some-others), hereafter abbreviated “James”; and “Ideas and the Novel: Dostoevsky’s ‘The Possessed,’” [lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n07/mary-mccarthy/ideas-and-the-novel-dostoevsky-s-the-possessed](http://lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n07/mary-mccarthy/ideas-and-the-novel-dostoevsky-s-the-possessed).

<sup>7</sup> Iris Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee,” in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter J. Conradi (London: Allen Lane, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Quinton’s model is articulated in “The Divergence of the Twain: Poet’s Philosophy and Philosopher’s Philosophy,” a 1985 lecture given at the University of Warwick. It is cited and explicated in the introduction to Jukka Mikkonen, *The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Plumer says this view “roughly corresponds” to his. See Gilbert Plumer, “The Transcendental Argument of the Novel,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 3, no. 2 (2017): 150; hereafter abbreviated “TA.”

<sup>9</sup> Noël Carroll, *Minerva’s Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Moving Pictures* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), pp. 170, 79. See also Iris Vidmar Jovanović, “Fiction, Philosophy, and Television: The Case of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2021), online.

<sup>10</sup> Rogier De Langhe, “To Specialize or to Innovate? An Internalist Account of Pluralistic Ignorance in Economics,” *Synthese* 191, no. 11 (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Roy Radner and Michael Rothschild, “On the Allocation of Effort,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 10, no. 3 (1975).

<sup>12</sup> James G. March, “Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning,” *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (1991) 71-87; Ha Hoang and Frank T. Rothaermel, “Leveraging Internal and External Experience: Exploration, Exploitation, and R&D Project Performance,” *Strategic Management Journal* 31, no. 7 (2010): 734-758.

<sup>13</sup> Wataru Toyokawa, Hye-rin Kim, and Tatsuya Kameda, “Human Collective Intelligence under Dual Exploration-Exploitation Dilemmas,” *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 4 (2014): 1-9

<sup>14</sup> Irene Cogliati Dezza, Axel Cleeremans, and William Alexander, “Should We Control? The Interplay between Cognitive Control and Information Integration in the Resolution of the Exploration-Exploitation Dilemma,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 148, no. 6 (2019): 977.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan D. Cohen, Samuel M. McClure, and Angela J. Yu, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? How the Human Brain Manages the Trade-Off between Exploitation and Exploration,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 362, no. 1481 (2007); Samuel J. Gershman, “Deconstructing the Human Algorithms for Exploration,” *Cognition* 173 (2018): 34-42.

<sup>16</sup> Michael N. Hallquist and Alexandre Y. Dombrovski, “Selective Maintenance of Value Information Helps Resolve the Exploration/Exploitation Dilemma,” *Cognition* 183 (2019): 226–43.

<sup>17</sup> Holder seems to suggest that James was expressing a non- or even anti-foundationalist view of the variety that was current among the developing American pragmatist school of philosophy. Henry James’s brother was the pragmatist philosopher William James, whose writing gave the movement its name. See William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking—Popular Lectures on Philosophy* (1907; repr., New York: Meridian Books, 1955). Valuing experience over a priori reasoning, he influenced Dewey’s epistemology and aesthetic theory. See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1929) and *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Capricorn, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> Alan Holder, “T. S. Eliot on Henry James,” *PMLA* 79, no. 4 (1964): 490–97.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick J. Hoffman, “Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas,” *College English* 8, no. 3 (1946): 129.

<sup>20</sup> J. A. Cuddon and C. E. Preston, *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 602.

<sup>21</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947), p. 409.

<sup>22</sup> Like other writers of philosophical fiction, Quarles is quarrelsome.

<sup>23</sup> John L. Bell, “Philosophy in Literature: A Survey of the Novel of Ideas” (unpublished manuscript, Dec. 23, 2021), PDF, p. 6; hereafter abbreviated “PL.”

<sup>24</sup> Pankaj Mishra and Benjamin Moser, “Whatever Happened to the Novel of Ideas?” *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2015; John Morton, “Ideas Don’t Stop a Novel Being Fiction,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 21, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> This view has drawn support, but it is far from widely accepted. For example, Cunningham writes that despite the protestations of Bewes, “Today the term [philosophical novel] is often used interchangeably with the more recent concept of the ‘novel of ideas.’” See David Cunningham, “Philosophical Novel,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Novel* (New York: Wiley, 2011), p. 606.

<sup>26</sup> Michael LeMahieu, “The Novel of Ideas [2019],” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ian McEwan*, ed. Dominic Head, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> In Wikipedia, the search term “novel of ideas” diverts directly to “philosophical fiction.”

<sup>28</sup> For a further discussion of category dichotomies, see Donald Nordberg, “Category Choice in Creative Writing,” *New Writing* (2021), online; hereafter abbreviated “CC.”

<sup>29</sup> George Levine, “George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35, no. 1 (1980): 1–28.

<sup>30</sup> Gillian Beer, “George Eliot and the Novel of Ideas,” in *The Columbia History of the British Novel*, ed. John Richetti, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 429–55.

<sup>31</sup> Neal Carroll, “Illiberalism and the Exception in George Eliot’s Early Writing,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47, no. 2 (2019): 378.

<sup>32</sup> Claire Carlisle, “The Philosophy of George Eliot,” *Prospect*, [prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/george-eliot-philosophy-spinoza-clare-carlisle](http://prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/george-eliot-philosophy-spinoza-clare-carlisle); Miriam

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Henson, "George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as a Translation of Spinoza's Ethics," *George Eliot Review* 40B (2009); Brian Fay, "What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* Could Have Taught Spinoza," *Philosophy and Literature* 41, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>33</sup> Maxwell Sater, "The Novel's Promise: George Eliot's Skepticism," *Studies in the Novel* 52, no. 3 (2020): 270.

<sup>34</sup> George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 248–49. She penned the letter as M. E. Lewes, assuming the surname of her companion, philosopher and critic G. H. Lewes.

<sup>35</sup> John Rodden, "How Do Stories Convince Us? Notes towards a Rhetoric of Narrative," *College Literature* 35, no. 1 (2008): 156.

<sup>36</sup> David Dwan, "Truth and Freedom in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," *Philosophy and Literature* 34, no. 2 (2010); Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Penguin, 2005); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit / On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Beaumont, "The Party of Utopia: Utopian Fiction and the Politics of Readership 1880–1900," in *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice*, ed. Michael J. Griffin and Tom Moylan (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 176, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Bond, "Postmodern Mannerism: An Examination of Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice*," *Critique* 45, no. 3 (2004); Meir Sternberg, "Universals of Narrative and Their Cognitivist Fortunes (I)," *Poetics Today* 24, no. 2 (2003). For a link between Sterne, postmodernism, and the Russian Formalists, see Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (Harlow: Prentice Education, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> *TG*, p. 110; Brian W. Shaffer, ed., *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> The philosopher David Hume was a fan, when few of his contemporaries were. See *Letters of David Hume to William Strahan* (1776; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1888), p. 255, [files.libertyfund.org/files/652/1223\\_Bk.pdf](https://files.libertyfund.org/files/652/1223_Bk.pdf). For the technique of defamiliarization, see Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Judith Hawley, "Tristram Shandy, Philosopher," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 2 (2017): 243.

<sup>42</sup> Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 12; Katie Muth, "The Grammars of the System: Thomas Pynchon at Boeing," *Textual Practice* 33, no. 3 (2019): 476.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Seaboyer, "Ian McEwan: Contemporary Realism and the Novel of Ideas," in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Zalewski, "The Background Hum: Ian McEwan's Art of Unease," *New Yorker*, February 23, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Weston, "Resisting Loss: Guilt and Consolation in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 3 (2019): 92.

<sup>46</sup> LeMahieu, "The Novel of Ideas [2019]," p. 61. LeMahieu uses the language of enactment and exploration without reference to the theoretical framing I use in this paper.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Puchner, "J. M. Coetzee's Novels of Thinking," *Raritan* 30, no. 4 (2011): 1, 12.

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<sup>48</sup> Curtis discusses Richard Rorty's praise for Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a novel more akin to the novels of ideology discussed above. While voiced alongside reminders of historical contingency associated with the postmodern, Rorty's neopragmatic project had political intent, seen in his praise for liberal espousal of social hope. It is not surprising, therefore, that Rorty might welcome what I am calling an enactment of liberalism in writers like Huxley. See William M. Curtis, "Rorty's Liberal Utopia and Huxley's *Island*," *Philosophy and Literature* 35, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>49</sup> Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1124–31.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Philippe Carrard, "Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre (Review)," *Philosophy and Literature* 9, no. 2 (1985).

<sup>51</sup> Edward A. Davenport, "Literature as Thought Experiment (on Aiding and Abetting the Muse)," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 13, no. 3 (1983): 279–306; Rachel Cooper, "Thought Experiments," *Metaphilosophy* 36, no. 3 (2005): 328–47.

<sup>52</sup> This phrasing refers to David Hume's empathetic view of historical appreciation, in contrast to Wilhelm Dilthey's "Verstehen"; see Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 212; see also Austin Harrington, "Dilthey, Empathy and Verstehen: A Contemporary Reappraisal," *European Journal of Social Theory* 4, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Eugene Narrett, "Surviving History: Milan Kundera's Quarrel with Modernism," *Modern Language Studies* 22, no. 4 (1992): 4–24.

<sup>54</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 78.