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## Genre and the Novel: The Exception is the Rule

JED RASULA, *Genre and Extravagance in the Novel: Lower Frequencies*.  
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### Steve Pinkerton

Jed Rasula's latest book, *Genre and Extravagance in the Novel*, only occasionally examines James Joyce's works. Yet from those brief discussions, scattered throughout the text, we discern how Joyce's example has shaped Rasula's argument. Rasula affirms that "the novel" is best understood, paradoxically, with reference to its "extravagant outliers," its generic *exceptions*, and that novels are inherently multigeneric, marked by a "hybrid extravagance" that defines the novel as a genre, particularly when it challenges and exceeds the form's putative constraints (viii, ix). Indeed, Rasula states, "the novel may be defined as the one genre that intrinsically stands in defiance of genre—defies itself *as* genre, and in doing so appropriates for itself a plenitude of generic promptings from elsewhere"; "in the end, the novel is the one genre most invested in resisting the generic it can't help but harbor" (123, xi). Rasula's exuberant, wide-ranging study tracks this generic play in everything from *Don Quixote* to Salman Rushdie's 2019 novel *Quichotte*, from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to the moralistic uproar over comic books in the 1950s; from Henry James's "vessels of consciousness" to something Rasula calls "textual indigence" (48); from metafiction to the literary function of the arabesque, "the exemplary figure of escape as continuation, and narrative as self-interrupting" (20); and from the "encyclopedic novel" to actual encyclopedias and relatedly ambitious efforts like the two-volume *Syntopicon* that accompanied Mortimer Adler's Great Books of the Western World (20).

A lot of ground to cover, then, and this book can indeed at times feel a bit baggy and diffuse, though charmingly so. The effect also befits Rasula's focus on the extravagantly hybrid potentialities of the novel. "Baggy" inevitably evokes James's description of novels as "loose baggy monsters"—see Chapter Five—and indeed, both the baggy and the monstrous figure prominently in Rasula's account (123). "The novel as inaugurated by Cervantes is monstrous; encouraging hybridity, it sanctions exceptions rather than types" [ix]. The Acknowledgements section informs us that this study came together piecemeal over thirty years, during which time its author "published ten other books" (xiii). Rasula has been especially prolific in recent years. Including a forthcoming study of *The Waste Land*, he will have published six books between 2015 and 2022. Small wonder that we should find him ringing the changes here on the form and genre of the academic monograph.

Rasula has elsewhere written perceptively on jazz music, and this book bears a sometimes improvisatory ethos as well as its own measure of extravagance, a certain straining against the generic bounds of academic scholarship. Reading it, we find ourselves alternately on either end of his critical telescope. One chapter takes a deep dive into Conrad's *Nostromo*, another ranges sagaciously among James's Prefaces and late novels, others pay no sustained attention to the substance of any single work. Some draw liberally on Maurice Blanchot and other Continental theorists, others on less heady accounts of literary history and sociologies of reading practices. Halfway through *Genre and Extravagance*, chapters suddenly begin to include section headings, a practice not hitherto in evidence. Chapter Two contains several pages chockablock with quotations

from other writers about *Don Quixote*—rather like those extracts on whales that begin *Moby-Dick*—with Rasula’s own comments intruding only occasionally to sustain “a bare minimum of stage management” (26). Such generic departures are often welcome and enlivening. Yet in concert with some slipshod copyediting—three longish passages of the book’s preface recur verbatim in Chapter One, for example (3, 8, 9), and I’m afraid “*Syntopicon*” is spelled correctly just one-third of the time—the book can also seem to lack the tidiness of more narrowly argument-driven literary studies.

What ties it all together is Rasula’s commitment to, and infectious adoration for, “the extravagant outliers”: *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*, the *Wake*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, books we call novels despite (he would add *because*) they depart so radically “from their generic kin” (viii). In their narrative play and generic promiscuity, such texts amply illustrate that where genre is concerned, for novels and novelists “the exception may be the rule” (1)—and such exceptions embody for Rasula the literary quality of *extravagance*, a keyword he borrows from Blanchot (who used it to describe the *Quixote*). “It’s a maverick concept,” Rasula acknowledges, “having no formal terminological weight” (35). Yet perhaps, like the obscene, we recognize it when we see it: “a superfluous yet irresistible abundance” that Rasula finds most often in the novel (44). For “of all genres, the novel is allied with mutability, errancy, vagrancy” (20)—despite the “*extra-vagant*” aims that Thoreau confessed to pursuing in *Walden*, “to wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced” (qtd. on 36). At its best the novel wanders, extra-vagantly, beyond conventions to return to the truths that literature is uniquely capable of expressing. Crucial to this enterprise is an ambivalent move in relation to “the novel” itself, “a simultaneous gesture of embrace and renunciation”: “The apparently founding gesture of *Don Quixote* removes the foundations” to reveal the “illusory nature of its own, and of all, literary performance” (42).

As is probably clear by now, Rasula makes fairly sweeping claims for the novel’s literary and historical importance. “If the very notion of ‘self-development’ seems unproblematic to us, a given of ‘human nature,’ it is the novel that has acclimated us to such a prospect: we have truly become the novelists of ourselves” (15). Rasula elaborates, “the novel is the generic precondition of the unconscious,” as well as “the pre-eminent genre of modernity” (102, v). Novels “rule the roost” of contemporary cultural consumption, whether in the form of “air traveler sedative[s]” by Grisham, Koontz, Flynn, et cetera; the countless movies and television shows inspired by or adapted from such narratives; or the sort of novels engaged routinely by literature scholars, who occupy “an altogether different world” (vii). (In later chapters, Rasula critiques the institutional forces behind canonization and the related politics of cultural literacy—for example, “the Great Books”—but this critique clearly does not extend to hierarchies of cultural value as such.)

Following a preface and first chapter that provide introductory material for what follows, Chapter Two reads *Don Quixote* as a kind of urtext that “paradoxically establishes its own groundlessness as ground for further disclosures about groundlessness” (42). Chapter Three takes up the question of the encyclopedic novel. Here, *Moby-Dick* and *The Magic Mountain* serve as case studies: “In these novels by Melville and Mann we find that beneath the utopian fantasy of total data transfer—a dream of unambiguous signals and noise-free channels—there is a different dimension, one that I call *indigence*” (52). Both works demonstrate that the encyclopedic “is subject to a paradoxically restorative disabling” (48). In both, “a surface rationalism of instrumental organization conceals an atavistic endowment that is at once a ‘pre-rational’ or mythic threat as well as a repository of creative energy” (67).

Joyce’s *Ulysses* operates in much the same way, of course, with its overdetermined schema and cascading motifs which are “so sedulously reverberated in its own archival residue that repeated reading finds the whole text recapitulated on every page. (*Almost*: since Joyce doesn’t actually attempt this until inventing a language—a vehicle—for it with *Finnegans Wake*)” (63). In the *Wake*,

the indigent overtakes the encyclopedic, its “archival mass” manifesting as “a rubbish heap fermenting provocative incitements that do not so much illuminate as *thicken* or increase the texture of the darkness” (70). The next chapter advances a surprisingly specific argument about genre as it pertains to a single novel. The final third of *Nostromo*, we learn, is “not an amateurish attempt at realism,” as other critics have regarded it—in this novel that oscillates between realist and modernist modes—but rather constitutes a generic pivot to the fairytale (80). Traces of that genre are discernible throughout Conrad’s novel, but the fairytale’s “status as generic *resolution* remains submerged until the end” (75).

This discussion is succeeded by an especially rich chapter on Conrad’s comrade in literary impression, Henry James. Here, Rasula argues that James embraced “the female imagination” as “exemplary material for centers of consciousness in his fiction,” “precisely because [women and girls] were socially situated as observers rather than agents—an entire populace suffering constraints likely to prompt in them a heightened perspicacity” (116, 117). Underlying this claim is the distinction that Rasula draws between typological *characters* and psychological *subjects*, an opposition for which “the difference is conveniently given in Shakespeare: Othello [a ‘character’] is jealous, whereas Hamlet [a ‘subject’] is Hamlet” (124). By this criterion, needless to say, the fictive people who populate the novels of James and other modernist writers are less characters than subjects: psychologically complex, “more volatile, less conducive to characterization (the term itself is symptomatic)” (124). For Rasula, literary impressionism is characterized (sorry) by an “elaborate epistemology of unknowing,” of “saying and not saying, seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing,” for which female imaginations—in James’s imagination, at least—constituted especially apt “vessels of consciousness” to convey his impressionist narratives (127).

Noting that such “experiments in psychological realism were bound to venture outside normative consciousness into states of mind in extremis,” Rasula proceeds in Chapter Six to novelistic portrayals, mostly modernist ones, “of the mind at the end of its tether” (152, 140). He focuses on Virginia Woolf’s portrayals of madness in *Mrs. Dalloway* as part of her persistent efforts to capture human consciousness in the medium of fiction. In *To the Lighthouse*, she calls such consciousness a “wedge-shaped core of darkness,” “invisible to others” even as it is socially mediated (qtd. on 158) and constitutive of self despite its threats to become “unintelligible to oneself” (158). Thus, Woolf furthers Jamesian impressionism by a step or two, advancing into the “core of darkness where private and collective extremities blend” (159). Extending these novelistic innovations, Rasula states, the works of Woolf’s contemporary James Joyce “raised the stakes almost beyond recognition” (129). After all, *Ulysses* “activates several vessels of consciousness”—Stephen’s, the Blooms’, and others’—“but [Joyce] also adds a complementary vessel, that of *style* . . . . The cumulative effect is that the styles and characters (both being ‘vessels’) are revealed to be leaky in some way” (129). Only the English language itself holds firm, but that too will become an extremely leaky vessel in the polyglot *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce’s most extravagant contribution “to that legacy of exceptions proving the rule—by being unruly” (130).

The penultimate chapter of *Genre and Extravagance* feels rather as though it belongs in a different book. It concerns genre, to be sure, and novels in both their traditional and “graphic” varieties, but seems inattentive to the phenomenon of novelistic extravagance that drives all the previous chapters. At stake here is the distinction between high- and lowbrow cultures, and how these were mediated—an intriguing topic in itself!—by translations of literary classics into Classic Comics (rebranded as Comics Illustrated in 1947), as well as by such postwar undertakings as the Great Books and the Classics Club, middlebrow efforts to “market high culture to the masses” (186). Much of this chapter concerns itself with the midcentury history of comics’ rise and fall—from their initial appearance in the 1930s to the boomtime of World War II (when comic books “were, quite simply, *the* mass media sensation”) and their eventual postwar decline, precipitated by

the varied denunciations they invited for their putatively dangerous effect on innocent young minds (191). (One especially influential critic called comics “the marijuana of the nursery” [196].)

Rasula is concerned less with the comics themselves than with this larger history and its abiding reverberations in the present, tracing how this period’s sudden interest in youthful consumers of culture may have eventuated in a childlike conception of the consumer as such. Today, “the mass media audience, regardless of its actual demographic composition, is an audience of children,” hence our increasing “marginalization of coherent discourse” (206). Witness “the hesitations, the stammering incoherence that often passes for verisimilitude in film scripts”; and hear, in something like Andy Rooney’s voice, Rasula’s lamentation that “much of what passes for dialogue in the dramatic media of film and television is composed of non sequiturs and tactical sequences of sound bites” (207, 206). Given this chapter’s focus on comics, it is a wonder the Marvel movies do not make their way into the discussion. I longed for some analysis of even one “Classic Comic,” to illustrate through close-reading the dynamics of high and low culture that are here treated largely from a bird’s-eye view.

*Genre and Extravagance* ends with a brief coda that revisits those larger questions always posed by “the novel.” Most fundamentally: “What *is* a novel?” (212). And “if, in the terminological tendency of today, every book is a novel”—a tendency confirmed for me by my own students’ frequent usage of the word—then “how are such categorical probes sustainable?” (212). In the end, novels seem to be everywhere. It is our “pre-eminent genre.” We seem to find ourselves *in* a novel everywhere, or producing one, or being produced as a character by one, even when we are not reading a book but instead are watching a movie or television show, both genres governed broadly by the conventions of the novel. However, Rasula is always keen to remind us that it is when we *transgress* those conventions that we become most novelistic, if not most commercially viable. After all, “so many of the novels that inspire talk of ‘the novel’ started out at the fringes of commerce” (213). Melville’s whale book was a flop; Proust had a hard time getting *Swann’s Way* published; and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, you will recall, “was published by the proprietor of a Parisian bookshop” (213).

According to Rasula, it is Joyce who most obviously fulfilled what the German Romantics saw as “the novel’s potential as the ‘mixed composition’ of the future” (ix). Like Cervantes, Joyce wrote “quixotic novels” that remain “exemplary (not only for the novel but for modernism).” In their “felicitous resistance to becoming a novel,” *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* elude generic constraints by “saddling up the donkey of the arabesque and deliberately going astray” (20). Given how foundational Joyce is for Rasula’s theory of the novel, one cannot help but wish for an entire chapter here on *Ulysses* and/or the *Wake*. Whose works are more genre-defying, linguistically adventurous, exceptional, and extravagant than Joyce’s? However, *Genre and Extravagance in the Novel* may well inspire Joyceans to recalibrate and apply their own readings of Joyce in light of the book’s thesis. This is a lively, formidably erudite study—I learned the word *paralipomena*, which I will now likely employ far too often—and it is a timely goad to further thinking about “the poly-generic tributaries of the novel” in all its manifold, pullulating forms (123).

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