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Thinking through *Thinking through Fiction*: a round table

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ABSTRACT: This paper takes a round table discussion of the ‘novel of ideas’, with Andrew Crumey, Sarah Moss, and Joanna Kavenna, as a starting point from which to consider some of the questions raised by the conference *Thinking through Fiction* as a whole; offering a conclusion to this selection of papers as well as an invitation to further contemplation.

Keywords: fiction; the novel; form; philosophy; pedagogy; subjectivity

Imagine:

... a salon; a drawing room; a secluded garden; a public house; a seminar room, if you must. Take a seat—on the chair or chaise or stool of your choice—at this table (see it? It’s marble or wrought iron or battered, sturdy oak; it’s round.) Do have a drink. Andrew Crumey¹ is here; Joanna Kavenna² is here; Sarah Moss³ is here. Others

¹ Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Northumbria University; *The Secret Knowledge*, 2013, Dedalus; *Sputnik Caledonia*, 2008, *Mobius Dick*, 2004; both Picador.

² *A Field Guide to Reality*, 2015, riverrun; *Come to the Edge*, 2012, Quercus; *The Ice Museum*, 2005, Penguin.

³ Professor of English and Creative Writing, University of Warwick; *The Tidal Zone*, 2016; *Signs for Lost Children*, 2015; *Names for the Sea*, 2012, all Granta Books.

may chip in. Don't be alarmed by the ghosts. I'm⁴ your host. We've been talking and listening for two days now, and we're here to discuss the novel. What does this form—polyglot, polyphonic, expansive, greedy, rhizomatic, malleable, open, inventive, ever-renewing—offer us as thinkers? How does it make a space for the exchange of ideas? No doubt you have ideas to contribute. I hope we offer more questions than answers. I hope your thoughts will prompt further thinking; thinking that might feed further fictions, or at least further conversations—food for thought to share at other tables.

Amy Sackville: To begin: what do we mean by the 'novel of ideas'?

Sarah Moss: I don't think anybody sits down and thinks, 'I'm going to write a novel of ideas, this year'—as opposed to the one I wrote last year which didn't have any ideas...

AS: A novel of whims and notions, but no ideas at all . . .

SM: This novel is an idea-free book!

H.W. Boynton: Mr Wells and his disciples [...] are not simply storytellers; they have a larger function. When they sit down to write novels, it's a pretty serious business [...] their real affair is not to entertain people but to propagate the faith, and their weapon is the idea. Unluckily it is rather hard in practice to tell an idea from an abstract theory or a personal prejudice or a poetic fancy or fact recorded or platform or a mere notion . . . ⁵

⁴ Amy Sackville.

⁵ *The Dial*, 13 April, 1916

Joanna Kavenna: Everything is an idea; the self is an idea, our impressions of people are an idea... It's a funny taxonomical distinction: between 'an idea' that you would impart in a didactic way, and just, everything that we live in, which I also call ideas—all the stuff we're doing, and all our suppositions and precepts and ideas about other people and our minds; so in a way to *me* there's no distinction at all.

Andrew Crumey: The basic problem of the novel of ideas, then, is, 'what do we mean by ideas?' My books might be called 'novels of ideas' in that they look at things like physics—I used to be a physicist in a former life, and then I moved into the novel from a philosophical point of view—really to me the novel is philosophy by other means.

Geoff Dyer: Philosophy, as I inadequately understand it, is about asking questions; ideas *are* questions as often as they are answers...⁶

AC: Going back to the Socratic model—why people still read Plato is because there is this aporia, this 'what exactly is he saying; who was right?' It's throwing open the question. So the novel is not some monologic discourse, it's polyphonic, it's not just some sermon or lecture... Really the problem is the distinction between the explanatory

⁶ *The Financial Times*, 7 April, 2012. Mr. Dyer goes on to reject, for inclusion in his list of philosophical novels, 'fictions in which characters debate ideas and philosophise in the drawing room or pub within the unquestioned conventions of a realist novel'; this prompted a discussion of the tradition of the 'philosophical novel' that the constraints of space have obliged me to excise. But I think this model of the realist novel (of ideas) is worth bearing in mind as you read on, and as we read against it.

and the expressive; science is fundamentally an explanatory way of thinking, and the novel is kind of, fundamentally *not* explanatory...

AS: What does the novel offer, then, that other modes of writing don't? You mention polyphony...

M.M. Bakhtin: ... laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present).⁷

AC: I think it might have to do with the notion of subjectivity; potentially the novel of ideas is something where subjectivity is at play in the idea? In just about every undergraduate class that I teach there will be somebody that says, 'isn't it all just subjective?' To which I say, 'yes, it's all subjective; it's not all *just* subjective. What we're dealing with is perception. And perception is a very complex thing; critical judgement is a very complex thing.'

AS: Yes, I agree. There's a tendency to align a 'subjective' response with a kind of knee-jerk, unconsidered or uncritical response; or conversely, a somehow more valid, because 'authentic', one. I have discomfort around notions of authenticity as an uninterrogated state; the idea that we have an 'authentic' response and then we

⁷ Bakhtin, M.M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: UTP, 7

somehow overlay critical structures; rather than the critical structures being a way of talking about that response, but also knit up in it.

JK: My first book (*The Ice Museum*, 2005, Penguin) was a kind of travelogue, and a lot of writers in that mode—people like Sebald, Iain Sinclair, Geoff Dyer—they go into the first person because they're saying 'this is the way reality looks to me; so I'm still, just about, in the real world, but it's just my vantage point, it's not anybody else's.'

SM: What's interesting for me about writing historical fiction as opposed to writing history, which I've also done, is that you can think about yourself as a historical subject, you're thinking about your own embodiment and your own socialisation in your own moment. Historical fiction lets you play in the space between where you are and where you're writing about. I'm often asked of my historical novels, 'how do you think it's okay to take history and play with it like that?' Which I find very surprising; how could it not be? What else would you do with history? I'm not going to go back to the nineteenth century and come back with 'the truth'. If verisimilitude is the main criterion then why write fiction?

JK: As a reader at fifteen, novels sort of shoved other people's ideas and consciousnesses towards me; they were these whispers in the dark, where someone would say, 'I've got this funny idea about something'. Is it simply the access to people's minds? That otherwise totally impossible thing of entering someone's mind and imagining their thoughts...

Virginia Woolf: ... it is to express character... that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words.⁸

SM: Is it to present a reality that's not otherwise accessible, or expressible... ?

JK: You garner a different layer of reality.

AC: What, then, is the novelist's relationship to things like fact, information?

AS: Is it a different way of thinking about *how* we want to learn? The destabilising of the idea that there is a chunk of wisdom that I can transfer to you from me. And whether it is the intention to convince someone of an argument, or just simply make them think about the context in which they're in, in a way they haven't.

SM: It's a huge generalisation but I'd say for nineteenth century readers the idea was that the novel would improve you in particular ways. The fiction is the jam and the pill is what you learn... we probably don't like that any more. Academics are not supposed to say, 'I want writing to have an instrumental function, I want it to make the world a better place, I want it to change readers...' There's something here about ideas and education and learning that we are no longer keen to associate with fiction.

⁸ Woolf, Virginia. (1924) 1966. 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.' In *Collected Essays*, vol. 1. London: Hogarth Press, 324

JK: The term ‘novel of ideas’, certainly as I read it in reviews, is often used pejoratively. As if ideas are somehow interpolated into a perfectly good novel—‘Why are they there? Why don’t they just write an essay?’

SM: If you look at Amazon or Good Reads, readers do often say, ‘this changed the way I think’, and I’m quite pleased when readers say that because I’m otherwise not sure what the point of writing would be, if it didn’t change anything.

JK: I was just thinking about oppression, actually... If you say something’s ‘just fictional’, in many societies you save yourself a little. Chan Koonchung wrote a brilliant novel called *The Fat Years*, a couple of years ago, and he’s saying, ‘this is a sci fi dystopia, it’s not now’, and actually the whole thing is a huge satire of contemporary authoritarian Chinese politics, and it’s brilliant; and it was still banned, but he probably saved himself from worse punishment.

AS: Another form of the pill in the jam, I suppose.

SM: If it’s just jam, it’s probably not dangerous.

Rod Edmond⁹: From your point of view as contemporary practitioners—are ideas treated with suspicion in *contemporary* fiction specifically?

⁹ Professor Emeritus, School of English, University of Kent

JK: That's a very interesting question. I think there's several things going on at the moment. I think there's a nostalgia for the nineteenth century realist novel, because it's huge and satisfying and immersive; and that's been reworked in the 'autofic' novel—like Knausgaard—these big absorbing novels which have given it a new subjective twist. And then there's another movement towards Modernism, which is sometimes equated with the avant-garde; a nostalgia for this really exciting moment of huge ideas in fiction, this enormous attempt to try to represent a changing society, and the city, and technocratic progress. And the other thing that I've noticed is—well I'll call it 'high irony'. A massive, international, ironic project which is all to do with ideas; it's very indebted to writers like Borges, and to earlier, misanthropic writers like Celine. People like Chan Koonchung; Enrique Vila-Matas, a Catalan author; Bolaño; Deborah Levy... these very philosophical yet extremely dark comedy books. Comedy is a way to deal with that almost embarrassment on the part of the philosophical novelist: it seems so preposterous to deal with ideas, who am I to deal with them, what am I doing here? But I do it anyway because I have to because I'm here.

AS: Thank you.

(An (un)apologia: This conversation didn't happen, as such. But the sentences contained in it did, in somewhat different order. I have made selections, cut and rearranged; I have extracted, mixed up, reshaped, to make something ordered, sort of; something somewhat sorted; something still, in a sense, true. This isn't really an apology; this is what novelists do—I think. I'm still thinking about that.)