



## Phenomenology of the Novel, or How Do Novels Teach?<sup>1</sup>

Max van Manen

University of Alberta

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When I was about eleven or twelve and still in elementary school, it was a novel, one of the few books my working class home possessed, which made me want to become a teacher. This novel, a trilogy by the Dutch author Piet Bakker, tells an inspiring story about a teacher and his failures and successes with a young slum child “Ciske,” nicknamed “the Rat.” The Ciske novels would go under the genre of *volksroman* (folk-novel), a sort of hopeful classic-romantic realism. In a subtle kind of way they glorified the pedagogic significance an adult can have for the growth of a tough yet vulnerable young person. At the immature time of my reading I do not know whether I identified more strongly with Ciske or with his teacher. As I grew older, I reread the novels several times and they always brought my alternating plans for a future back to the vocation of teaching. So I wonder, did these novels express a pedagogic orientation? What was the power of this text? I ask the more general question: How do novels teach?

Once we have lost the innocence of orality, once we have learned how to read and write, it is almost impossible not to be drawn by some text. I am riding the subway and absent-mindedly I read a torn bit of newspaper at my feet or the advertisements on the carriage walls. I cannot help but read signs, announcements, discarded flyers—bits of text everywhere around me. Just as the sandy beach invites play, so a text invites us to read. This is what we may call the pathic quality of a text. Books are texts transfixed by this same pathic quality—a quality that any lover of precious and beautiful books recognizes in Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking my Library.” Books ask to be read. No matter how trivial, they conjure up images or worlds for us. The literary text of creative imagination, however, sets up the most complex and various of all worlds, says Walter Ong (1982, p. 177). “Because its world can be so exquisitely massive and dense, the novel can in certain ways stand as a paradigm of all writing.” The novel enchants us—reading is magical, engrossing, incantative. The novel stakes a claim and in that moment it may teach us, transforming us in a special way. What is revealed in the experience of fictional literature is not fact or incidence, news or controversy, but the reality of possibility: the reality of imaginable human experience.

Readers who have opened themselves to novels thereby are obliged to feel something, to care, to experience action and consequences of action without, however, having to act and commit themselves. In concentrating on the priority of the *experience* of reading (rather than bypassing the reading experience for the sake of the critical response) value is placed on the pedagogic nature of the experiences in the act of reading. So what fictional literature reveals to us is a knowing that is more like a living. We indirectly come to know what we cannot grasp, see, hear, or feel in a direct or conceptual way. As Booth (1983) explains: fiction is not, first of all, made of language, or of reality, or of text. *Fiction is made of our experiences of the lives of imagined characters in action.* And these experiences are mediated by the narrator's voice through the language of the text.

### The Lived Experience of Reading

A book has its own voice and thus speaks to our sensibility with a sensuous power of its own. Of course, no one is a stranger to the experience that novels "teach." And any particular book that captures us may edify our consciousness—it is unlikely to leave us indifferent or unaffected. Let me illustrate how the nature of the lived experience of a novel is, in one sense, more consequential than the question of the validity of any interpretation.

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There is a particularly compelling ending to an intoxicating novel I read some time ago. It is Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. Through the eyes of Ruth, I learn what it is like for a sensitive and dreamy girl to grow up under the care of a grandmother, and when she dies, of her sisters-in-law, and when they flee, of her daughter Sylvie. The girl's mother, a single parent, had one day taken the girls to the house of the grandmother and then she had driven off and committed suicide in a borrowed car. So *Housekeeping* in a sense is the tale of Ruth's experience, her perceptions and reflections of growing up through adolescence alongside her younger sister and in the company of the transient Aunt Sylvie. As I am witness to Ruth's feelings so that I can soon hardly distinguish them from my own, my sensibility grows possessed by a nostalgic mood, an enigmatic sphere settles in, and eventually cuts me off from Lucille, Ruth's sister, and finally from the world itself, it seems. How can any text take possession of me, the reader, so that I can no longer shake its spell-binding effect?

I begin to understand the never-articulated but deeply felt significance of the woods, the lake shore, the railroad bridge, and the waters of the lake which had so mysteriously closed over the grandfather. There is the strange behavior of Aunt Sylvie and the flooding fear that she, too, might just walk away one day. And so, there is a certain, although uneasy, comfort in the security of the intensifying intimacy between Ruth and Sylvie.

Occasionally, as I lower the book to daydream or to dwell on the startling eloquence of Marilynne Robinson's metaphors, I may admit that there is something like a longing, an aloneness in that sphere. I cannot rid myself of a feeling of missing something, a waiting for something. There is a waiting in this reading. And I find this feeling confirmed when Ruth reminisces to herself. *I hated waiting. If I had one particular complaint, it was that my life seemed composed entirely of expectation. I expected—an arrival, an explanation, an apology* (p. 166).

Of course, my quoting these lines is only a reconstruction. How can I let you know that these lines at the time of my reading experience were utterly transparent? I did not see them, did not reflect on them and yet, somehow, they deposited in me a childlike sadness, or maybe a sadness for children, a kind of questioning understanding of a lived knowledge that this possible experience, this lived experience of life as a kind of hopeless waiting is the lot of many children—a lot for which I am to blame as much as you are, even though neither you nor I wanted it to be that way.

But then I am back again with Ruth. Or have I become Ruth? How can anyone write so hauntingly beautiful a first novel? I experience something so other and yet so same. And when eventually there is a kind of recollecting, a questioning for when or where things went so terribly wrong, I am being questioned as Ruth questions herself: *When did I become so unlike other people? Either it was when I followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain* (p. 214).

I remember that it was with these lines—it is here that I woke up from the dreamlike state of reading. As if by the sudden action of a single word or phrase, a text can shift a sentence from pure perception to reflection. How does one suddenly recover the words on the page? For to the reader the words and the pages they are printed on are transparent. While reading I do not see language, I do not see reality; what I see is not even a feeling, not even a vertigo. I read but do not see these words: *Then, there is the matter of my mother's abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience. They walk ahead of us, and walk too fast, and forget us, they are so lost in thoughts of their own, and soon or late they disappear. The only mystery is that we expect it to be otherwise* (p. 215).

How do words unexpectedly slow us down? The words drew me back—reflectively this time—for I now know more than I knew. A moment of learning? As if I am being filled with a thought which already possessed me. But now a fullness of thought—the way I know

it in the presence of children and, yes, in the recollective presence of myself as child.

When I eventually close Marilynne Robinson's book, I am vaguely aware that what the book has given me is a life experience, a living understanding of what it is like to grow up in the haunting presence of an absence. How many children grow up this way? How is it that it speaks so strongly to me? Would it have spoken to you that way?

But as I ask these questions, I am no longer the naive reader. Have I turned into a critic? Arguing for the validity of a certain interpretation of Robinson's book? Am I not just reading something *into* this text? A personal or pedagogical concern? Are there not other readings possible? A deeper interpretation, maybe, which sees this book to be a mystical novel—an opportunity to dialogue about the reality of dreams and the dream of realities? Or maybe the present absence of the mother is really symbolic of the philosophic Other: the true Other—our ground of moral experience? Or, is not the closing paragraph of the novel pointing at yet another theme in which the sister Lucille figures prominently? But to be sure the feeling of an experienced absence is dramatically climaxed in those very last lines. It leaves me, the reader, shaken with a knowledge which is like a living.

And this is precisely what I want to question: Does the phenomenological value of a great novel lie first of all, *not* in a critical reading, but in the living knowledge of the precritical response which is always a unique and personal response? And now when I open the book again, I open the possibility of a reflective experience of my original experience. And as I try to make something of this particular experience of reading, then the metaphors, the syntactic conjunctions, the juxtaposition of words, the peculiarities of phrase and tonal qualities, the logical passages and the poetic evocations, are not pieces of disembodied language, a textual object; rather, I encounter words that I have already lived through.

### Reading and Reflection

We speak of the structure of the text but of course the word "text" itself already means texture, structure. So modernist authors who razzle-dazzle us with experimental textural structures are working with the very essence of textuality. For example, writers such as Italo Calvino, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth or Julio Cortazar engage the reader in the question what it means to write and read a novel. Although this device is powerful in one sense, it is gained at the cost of what is to be gained in the uninterrupted naive reading experience itself. But the reading experience itself does not simply yield a critical theory, or concepts of history, society, or philosophy.

There is a tendency among literary critics to treat novels as philosophical or human science texts which should provide us with in-

sights and understandings of historical events, of the processes of political conflict, of issues of language philosophy, metaphysics, or of social theory or psychology, and so forth. If any theory is to be gained, it is theory of the unique. The strength of a great literary novel is that it provides us with a valuable and powerful human experience. The novel teaches us what a unique experience is like. Only upon putting the novel down (whether at the end or at the bottom of the page) may we muse, daydream, or bring to speech, a practical theorizing of the unique, what the significance or deeper meaning of the experience was for us.

It is true that literature mobilizes many kinds of knowledge. It may encounter historical knowledge, scientific, philosophical, geographical, social, psychological knowledge; novels may even offer semiotic or phenomenological knowledge of the text, of writing, and of reading. But as Roland Barthes points out, "literature displaces these various kinds of knowledge, does not fix or fetishize any of them [as human and social science disciplines do]; literature gives such knowledge an indirect place" (1972, p. 145). And this indirection is both precious and provisional of a certain clue: that from as discursive an activity as reading a novel, we stand to gain an essentially nondiscursive kind of knowledge.

Fiction, by definition unreal, is often experienced as more real than life itself. Fiction is so "unreal," so unreally real, because it is so believable. It makes us uncannily believe in a world which has been formed, shaped (fiction, from *ingere*) by imagination. Before we begin to read a novel we know that even its most vivid and sensuous images are only indirect descriptions of the world. Fictional literature does not address the world directly (as science or common sense do), rather, it approaches indirectly by creating some image, "a certain type of consciousness" (Sartre, 1962, p. 146). During the first so many pages, we may be quite aware of an author's style, the peculiar way a story is structured, the feel or the tonal quality of a text. But then we "get into the book," as we say. And now the words, the pages, and textual structures become immaterial. As if we are looking at a picture in a certain way, no longer seeing the paint and canvas; but seeing through the surface, as it were.

It is this indirection of seeing in the experience of reading, that may grant us something that is so difficult to put to words. It is not a matter of determinate insights, or of certain ideas, concepts, or conclusions we draw. It is not even a matter of having found certain answers to certain questions or even the questions themselves. And yet, at the completion of a great novel, we often cannot help but feel the sensation of something unsettling. The sense of being burdened by a very important question, maybe. But the question is so total, so deep that it defies the kind of formulation that would permit answers. Therefore, literary critics who want to put questions and

answers to literary fiction are trying to do the impossible. By engaging in interpretive excavations of the meaning of a text, they destroy the very structure of meaning which would somehow need to be made intelligible. Indirection cannot be approached directly: "If you treat an indirect structure directly, it flees, it empties out, or on the contrary, it freezes, essentializes . . . a *literary* review can only fail literature: since Orpheus, we know we must never turn back to look at what we love, or risk destroying it" (Barthes, 1972, p. 156).

In Philip Roth's grotesquely sensual novel *The Breast*, Kepesh says: "As a student, as a professor, I experienced literature as something unavoidably tainted by my self-consciousness and all the responsibilities of serious discourse; either I was learning or I was teaching. But responsibilities are behind me now; at last I can just read" (p. 80). Actually, Philip Roth wrote, "at last I can just *listen*," because several months earlier Kepesh had turned overnight from a man with a genital itch into a faceless woman's breast. When Kepesh begins to realize that his metamorphosis from man to breast is not just a terrifying dream, nor the illusionment of serious mental breakdown or nervous aggravation (he had on the evening before his metamorphosis become quite anxious that the itchy discoloring in the genital area might be skin-cancer)—when none of these explanations seem likely, he turns suspicious of the power of the reading experience itself. "Did fiction do this to me?" asks Kepesh. "This might well be my way of being a Kafka, being a Gogol, being a Swift. They could envision the incredible, they had the words and those relentless fictionizing brains . . . So I took the leap. Made the word flesh. 'Don't you see, I have out-Kafkaed Kafka . . . After all,' I said, 'who is the greater artist, he who imagines the marvelous transformation, or he who marvelously transforms himself?'" (Roth, pp. 81-82).

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Upon reading modern novels and short stories by authors such as Italo Calvino, Julio Cortazar, Philip Roth, or Robert Coover it is hard to say, "It moves you! It makes you laugh, it makes you cry!" *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* by Italo Calvino is a tale about reading. The story announced by the title turns out to be only the first of a score of tales which are begun but everytime cut off at the moment of greatest suspense. As a result the unity of the novel is profoundly disturbed in true Derridean fashion. Like many of his contemporaries, Calvino's novels seem to illustrate, rather than require literary critical theory. The fragmentation of the text into numerous sections, the cursory treatment of characters, the limited points of view, the multiple textual structures and voices, the never-ending authorial interruptions, all lend distance rather than

engagement—the tale flattens into diminished believability. As in many new forms of social theorizing, the interest of modern novelists has shifted from topic to method, from content to form, from depth to surface in the reflexive attempt to describe not life, but the analytic of life—hardly a formula for capturing the heart and mind of the reader.

But what is interesting about *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* springs from the nature of the textual involvements of You the Reader with whom Calvino maintains occasional chats about the phenomenon of reading a novel. Subtly and imperceptibly (say, between pages 70 and 100) the structure of the novel has reversed itself. You the Reader have become the novel, and the novel promised by the title has become the occasion. Thus, what is traditionally deep (the content) turns shallow and what is usually shallow (the textual structure) turns deep (Dillard, 1982). The experience of reading Italo Calvino's novel ultimately turns out to be more important than any particular reading, that is, any particular critical reading of what reading is. And this is so on two levels: on the level of the novel as story or narrative it succeeds because it offers a true reading experience; and on the level of the theme of the novel it succeeds because it affirms the priority of the natural attitude of reading in the character of Zudmilla, the idealized reader, who is desirously wanted by everyone involved in the novel: by the real and the fictional author, by the translator-falsifier, by You the fictional Reader, and finally, by the way that you the real reader of the novel cannot help but begin to care and become intrigued.

How is it that Italo Calvino can start and interrupt ten times a new novel and ten times has us believing in it so that we wish to know the end? What makes me believe? What speaks? Do the words speak? Is it the author I hear in the narrating voice? Or is it the book itself that I experience speaking in my reading? As readers we come to know situations and relations in such a way that persons and lives begin to matter. We cannot remain untouched. It is a pre-reflective kind of knowing that materializes and is felt as a kind of hope. That also means we care for the end. Like the reader of Calvino's novel, we cannot put a book down. We must know what is to become of things. In cultivating the vicarious experience of hope and expectation, the novel cultivates our desire for the ending or end.

### **Reading is Believing**

We know that one essential condition for a novel to succeed is its believability. When I sense that my four-year-old gets a bit too impressed with the reality of giants and witches, I may say, "But Mark, of course *we* know that this is only a story!" And yet, how can I keep saying to myself: I know these are only words, but all the same . . . I am moved as though these words were uttering a reality?

(Barthes, p. 47). So I had better not be too naive that critical reflection can erase, or fundamentally modify, the experience a text has provided to a four-year-old and, yes, to a forty-year-old reader. I can read or reread a story while knowing its plot or ending and nevertheless “let” myself experience hopes and fears, expectations and desires, in my caring feelings for the characters who make up the narrative. My “pretend” can go so far that I may weep real tears that I know to be false, says Booth (p. 424): “The fictive experience, in contrast to the experience of most narrative in history and journalism, is thus made out of a special kind of double role-playing.”

Reflecting on our own responses to literary fiction, we can hardly disagree with Booth. But phenomenologically speaking, Booth still understates this principle. At the moment of shedding the tears I do not pretend, I do not allow myself to disbelieve the truth of something. If I were to reflect on, and disbelieve, my grief or anger, the grief or anger would instantly dissipate. So what I experience in the tears, is a free moment of time or space—an indulgence of a certain truth experience. As I shed tears in the time-space of a reading experience, then I *am* grieving: I am emotionally and physically in grief. The novel has to be believable. This means that, not unlike children, we must be able to give ourselves trustingly to the reality of the novel. The loving relation between parent and child is itself pervaded by the same sphere of believability. Pure love is a case of pure belief. It is not accidental therefore that the words “believe” and “love” share the same etymological roots. To love someone is reflected in an unshakeable belief in that person.

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Buytendijk (1962) once likened the narrating voice of the text to that of the lover or the mother. In the presence of such pure love there is the experience of solid ground, of deep trust which pervades the words as well as the silence about the words. “We must *believe* in the novel,” says Buytendijk, “more than a child in a fairytale and only thus do we enter a new world as reality and discover a life and meaningful relationship of an order different than the one given to us in our own existence” (p. 37).

So in way, the parent is the original narrator—not in an analytic or symbolic sense, but in the real sense of lived life. It is in the early experience of the presence of the mother and father that oneness and separateness are experienced. The mother’s voice is the child’s knowledge of a symbiotic ground from which the child’s experience of both oneness (intimacy) and separateness (otherness) originates. The telling of story is the way in which the parent separates from the child while at the same time is reminded of an original oneness which makes the believability of the story possible—the story is intrinsically believable because it is grounded in the believability of love, logos, oneness. Love, *lief*, means trusting believability.

Every parent who tells bedtime stories to a child is an artist by virtue of the loving ground upon which the stories are cultivated. So in some sense the interest the child or anyone of us has in story is an interest in the original intimacy toward which the believability of the story points. But this interest has two directions: it is trustingly directed toward the parent, and it is directed toward the trusting believability, the loveliness of the world. By way of the story the parent, as narrating Other, points at the world and establishes the believability (the loveliness) of the world—even though the stories themselves are not always lovely.

Similar themes of the importance of the narrating Other in the text are expressed by the semiotic phenomenology of Barthes and the more ontological phenomenology of the later Merleau-Ponty. Barthes asks, “how do I need the author?” I need the author as a figure, and “in the text, in a way, I desire the author” (1975, p. 27). The text of the novel is a recognition that I need the Other to think and speak, that speaking and listening, writing and reading, are reversibly dependent upon another. “The other’s words make me speak and think because they create within me other than myself,” says Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 224), “The other’s words form a grillwork through which I see my thoughts.”

### **Textual Experience is a Subtle Pedagogy**

In one sense it is true that the reader produces the text, interprets it, first naively then reflectively. Reading is the making of meaning as well as a form of communication via the text. But more basic, in fact more profound, is that in opening a book *I open myself to it: I make myself vulnerable*. I risk experiencing thoughts and feelings which may not leave me the same. In turning to a novel I submit myself to *Paideia*, the Mother’s or Father’s voice in whom I must believe and want to believe. Thanks to the revealing power of the voice of the parent, I can be in the world, live in the world.

So everything depends on how, and how well, an author is able to mobilize a caring presence that touches us. It is this presence that constitutes the reality experience of the novel, the believability of the text. Every great novel has something like a mood or an “air” about it which fills us even after we have put it down. Or, better, a mood comes into being in the space of reader and text. The language of the novel assumes the same “air” which pervades the language of lovers, says Buytendijk; that is, it creates a climate of communication—a silent being present to each other.

When, in spite of my hopes and expectations, Raskolnikoff murders his landlady, I in a sense have become the murderer and I cannot help but experience the persecution, guilt and punishment which befall him. Thus, the experience of reading Dostoevski washes over

my mind and leaves its residue so that even after I have put the book down temporarily I am still soaked with guilt and persecution. It even (or maybe especially) invades my dreams. From here on I will never be the same again. As I open the novel, like a lover it opens me and touches my heart in a way that few can do. No wonder we may feel a certain jealousy at our lover's love affair with a great book. It may reach him or touch her in a way which will forever remain our desire. W.H. Auden says:

Occasionally I come across a book which I feel has been written especially for me and for me only. Like a jealous lover, I don't want anybody else to hear of it. To have a million such readers, unaware of each other's existence, to be read with passion and never talked about, is the day-dream, surely, of every author. (p. 12)

We say, "I love reading. I love books." When a friend of mine split up with her spouse after fourteen years of marriage, the only worldly thing she took along were her books. The same person will occasionally recommend a novel to me. But as a true book lover she won't reveal the book's secrets. It is for me to read. Afterwards we may share or differ, and mutually interpret, the personal significance of the reading experience. But that is, I believe, the true pedagogic value of a great novel: It provides me in an intimate way with a great human experience and then, as bonus, offers me the phenomenological experience of interpreting the first one. Herein lies an important distinction. One cannot be a critic and a reader at the same time. Critics are poor lovers. They cannot let go. Their minds are on the wrong things. It is only after the communal experience that we may meditate its cathartic nature and thus may be transformed further or deeper as we retroactively and self-reflectively once again appropriate the original experience.

Any great novel is rich, not primarily because it allows multiple interpretations or readings as literary critics would have it, but because the experiences we gain in the reading act are themselves infinitely rich and interpretable. What I critically reflect on after the natural act of reading is not first of all the text itself but my (reading) experience of the text. The function of the novel is not to interpret in a strong sense but to let itself be interpreted, or better, to allow interpretation: to make interpretation possible of that which the novel itself only appears to interpret. Fiction solicits an experience of the world and then elicits a reflective interpretation of the textual experience. Thus, fiction offers a double, but subtle, pedagogy: It cultivates our pre-reflective and our reflective life. To read is to become experienced. And due to the reflective consequences of the reading experience, it means to come to know oneself.

Novels teach and change us. But we become different not as a casual effect of certain experiences (as if each of us were an ego instrumentally affected by certain experiences external to it); rather, we become different *in* experience, said Scheler. We must not neglect the priority of the pre-reflective *experience* of the reading act, bypassing the reading experience for the sake of the critical response. Pedagogy has to do with what is to be gained in the lived experience of reading. Novels teach by being read.

## Notes

1. This paper was presented at the Second Annual Human Science Research Conference, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, May, 1983.

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