

A Terry Teachout Reader

By Terry Teachout

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Reviewed by Paul Devlin

From a literary point of view, the silliest piece in this useless collection of condescending essays is “Tolstoy’s Contraption”, which was published in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1999. The title of the piece comes from something Tolstoy said toward the very end of his life (and everyone should know that by that point he was a religious crank who professed a strong anti-literature sentiment) that the phonograph (supposedly) will change literary art forever. Teachout declares in this piece, one that he surely hopes will prove him to be a genius in a couple of decades (it is that kind of pseudo-prophetic hackery which should make us all cringe), that “the novel is an obsolete artistic technology” which is being succeeded by film as the medium of choice for entertainment. Where to even begin breaking down the stupidity of this?

Teachout begins the piece by theorizing that because Tom Wolfe’s 1998 novel *A Man in Full* did not sell as well as his 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, this “comparative failure is a sign of far-reaching changes in the once-privileged place of the novel in American culture”. Let’s call a spade a spade for a second: *A Man in Full* was a shabby novel on the borderline of junk. It was torn to pieces in reviews by reviewers (John Updike among them) of far more literary competence than Teachout. Tom Wolfe’s novels, whatever they may or may not be, are not bellwethers of massive changes in human communication or harbingers of doom for the genre at large. The problem here is that Teachout has no idea of what makes a novel, never mind a good one. He thinks the novel is *simply* about telling a story, which it can be and often is, but so can the prose romance, which Teachout ignorantly lumps together with the novel. But what the form of the novel allows the novelist to do, which film will never be able to do, is *play* with language. “The novel”, above all, is really about the swirl of language(s) within it. This is what separates it from the linguistically one-dimensional prose romance which preceded it and sets good novels apart from this-week’s-must-read-potboiler. Guillermo Cabrera-Infante phrased this problem nicely when interviewed by *The Paris Review*. In response to the interviewer’s comment “None [of your books] seems terribly concerned with plot, or, for that matter, character”, he replied:

"I don't know what plot and characters are. Dickens created all possible (and impossible) characters, so that takes care of character. And plot, for me, belongs in mystery stories and movies. I am concerned with literary space, which is language, and not literary

time. I would argue that most great novelists, Dickens included, were primarily concerned with literary space."

But aside from such ultimately personal aesthetic preferences, the following ahistorical gibberish of Teachout's, from which he then extrapolates, is his real problem:

"Well into the eighteenth century, for example, most of the West's great storytellers wrote plays, not novels. But the development of modern printing techniques made it feasible for books to be sold at lower prices, allowing storytellers to reach large numbers of readers individually; they then turned to writing novels, and by the twentieth century the theatrical play had come to be widely regarded as a cultural backwater."

Where to even begin when correcting something so entirely wrong? First of all, many of "the West's great storytellers", prior to the modern era (with the big exceptions of Greek and Roman playwrights) were actually mostly poets. Do you recall any plays by Homer, Virgil, Dante, or Chaucer? Are *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, or *El Cid* plays? But the *prose romance*, which Teachout ignorantly confuses with the novel, was not only around, but *ubiquitous*, from the time of the Greeks (think of Apuleius, Petronius, etc.).

Let's not even start with the early modern period – keep in mind that Alonso Quijano *becomes* Don Quixote because he has read too many prose romances! These seemed to be easy enough to acquire for a shabby provincial hidalgo in the most Inquisition-stifled nation in Europe.

None of the great literary Arthurian romances, such those of Chrétien de Troyes, Thomas Malory, Gottfried von Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach (the stories of Tristan and Isolde and Lancelot and Parzival and so forth) were written as plays. They were all prose narratives. The Vikings of Iceland and their literary descendants in Denmark and Scandinavia (such as Snorri Sturlsson) wrote prose narratives and poems – no plays there.

Gargantua and Pantagruel is one of the first prose narratives which can properly be called a novel, along with a book of the generation preceding it, the best-seller and first picaresque novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Both books were huge publishing phenomena selling all across Europe over *thirty years before Shakespeare was born*. By the time Moliere was born in 1622, Cervantes had been dead for six years and his runaway best-seller *Don Quixote* was available in numerous editions. "Storytellers" simply did not turn away from the play (if playwrights *ever* became less proportionate to the number of total writers) and to the novel because of technological reasons. Furthermore, to suggest they did bespeaks a rather base understanding of how and why art is created – for Teachout, in this case, purely economic-

historical reasons. Maybe he is an economic and historical determinist just like those zany “post-modernists” he claims to be so much wiser than? Of course he is.

Furthermore, if Teachout knew what he was talking about, he would know that before the mid-eighteenth century, some of the greatest novelists wrote both novels *and* plays. *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes* claims that their subject is one of the best playwrights in the Spanish language. Can you name one of his plays? Apparently his *Siege of Numantia* is one of the most highly regarded Spanish plays. George Bernard Shaw considered Fielding second only to Shakespeare as a playwright in English. Can you name one of Fielding’s plays? I can’t off the top of my head. But I can name his prose works - *Tom Jones*, *Shamela*, *Jonathan Wild*. Even into the nineteenth century, novelists (as they also do today!) wrote novels *and* plays – think of Goethe and Victor Hugo, writers who were highly accomplished in and famous for their work in both genres.

From a bogus historical background Teachout tries to predict what is going to happen to the novel as the costs of film making continues to drop. “Gen-X’ers”, Teachout believes, would rather make and watch movies than write and read novels. Teachout seems oblivious to the fact that that reading a novel is an entirely different experience than watching a movie (to say nothing of *creating* either form). But um, is not watching a movie similar to watching a play? Ah, indeed it is! Did Teachout ever consider that an increase in *literacy*, combined with the rise of the middle class, rather than his (imagined) improvement in printing techniques, is responsible for the rise of the novel? Reading and writing novels – literary novels in particular – depend on a certain awareness of and appreciation of language – something which film will never be able to convey. And as long as people know how to read, they will want to read and write novels. It’s as simple as that. As long as people don’t know what they’re talking about, they will make silly predictions based on that knowledge vacuum. As long as newspaper and magazine editors keep taking Terry Teachout’s word, they will mislead their readership.