

Introduction: The Anagonist

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protagonist (Gk “first combatant”) The first actor in a play; thence the principal actor or character. In Greek tragedy, the playwright was limited to the protagonist (first actor), deuteragonist (second actor) and tritagonist (third actor). . . . The protagonist has come to be the equivalent of the hero.

—Cuddon

If “protagonist,” from the Greek *proto-agonist*, meaning “first combatant,” designates the first or primary actor in a play and “thence the principal actor or character” in any kind of narrative, “anagonist” would designate an actor or character who does not act, a nonacting hero. But this definition is still too simple, for action in the novel takes (at least) two forms: exterior and interior. E. M. Forster summarizes the distinction between exterior and interior action as that which is “observable” in a human being, on one hand, and his or her “romanceful or romantic side” on the other (56). Raskolnikov acts; but were he to have not acted he would still be a protagonist, and he is a protagonist even while he hesitates, for hesitation, too, is novelistic action. For an anagonist to count as such, he or she would not only not act, but would not feel, not think, not search, would not even hesitate. Or rather, the anagonist’s feeling, thinking, quest, or hesitation would not have any organizing function with respect to the narrative. No object or event in a novel could account for its significance by reference to the consciousness of an anagonist; for the terms in which the anagonist narrates his or her impressions (should the anagonist happen to do so), the meanings he or she gives them, are not transferable to the perspective of the work. The sensorium of the anagonist is the site of a perception that is no longer predicated on a possible action, real or deferred.¹ This arrest of movement, actual or potential, represents a new chronotopic foundation for the novel, a break in the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” expressed in the classic chronotopes: the road, the salon, the threshold, the provincial town (Bakhtin 84)—a break, perhaps, in the structure of the chronotope itself. In fact, anagonists often seem to live and move outside time, or in what Erich Auerbach called a “symbolic omnitemporality of events” (545).²

¹ For example, for Robert Walser’s narrator Jakob von Gunten, the fact that his friend Kraus “always writes home” is precisely as valid as the fact that Jakob himself never writes home. The two tendencies or habits coexist, equally eccentric and equally removed from any principle of action (20, 47–48).

² Auerbach names Leopold Bloom and Hans Castorp, among several others, as characters who fit this model. Readers will encounter many more as they peruse this issue of *Novel*, including Maggie Verver, Odradek, Bartleby (of course), Paul Rayment, Michael K, Nao Yasutani, and every first-person narrator of every novel by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Protagonism is the form in which the novel achieves centeredness, when the significance of every element is oriented through the hero's consciousness. Of course, it is impossible to conceive of a human being without "dreams, joys, sorrows and self-communings" (Forster 56), let alone one without actions, movements, and schemes. Nevertheless, it has become clear in recent years that the access the novel gives to an individual's dreams, self-communings, and movements is a sign of the form's limitations, not its "affordances"; for the novel's understanding extends only to that which meets the criterion of "a specific mode of causality" (Rancière 1). The difference between the novel and everyday life is that, as Forster puts it, "in daily life we never understand each other," whereas "people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader. . . . Their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed" (56–57). Jacques Rancière calls this the "surfeit of rationality" of the novel (1), and it is wrapped up in the fact of a protagonist. For the biographical individual is the novel's formal solution to the "'bad' infinity" of possible content, the horizon that every novel needs in order to hold at bay the "fissures and rents" that are always present on the periphery of the novel's understanding (Lukács, *Theory* 81, 60). "Most humans, properly speaking, do not act," says Rancière; "they make objects or children, execute orders or render services, and continue doing the next day what they had done the day before. Nowhere does any expectation or reversal arise, nor do any errors made enable one to pass from one condition to the opposite" (4).

The anagonist does not *represent* this community of nonactors; nor does the figure of the anagonist—as the later Georg Lukács understood inaction in Tolstoy—simply mirror a world, dominated by capitalism, in which "decent people can no longer find any opportunity for action" ("Tolstoy" 155, 166). (If either were the case, the anagonist would be nothing but a protagonist, whose inaction would serve as the work's horizon and fulcrum.) Rather, the anagonist is how the novel registers, in formal terms, something that it otherwise cannot acknowledge: "the empirical real's absence of cause" (Rancière 4). That is, the presence of an anagonist registers—and breaks—the novel's complicity with a world that seeks to convince us of the fundamental legibility of human motivations and of the exhaustion of behavior by narratives of material interest, sexual desire, emotional entanglements, and schemes of vengeance or expiation. The anagonist is alert—in a way the protagonist cannot be—to the holes and fissures in every such narrative and explanation; to the possibility that, for example, one day "the other can suddenly become a stranger," even when you know them so well that "you can read intentions behind their actions and calculate their responses to circumstances fairly accurately"; even when "you are sure there is not a single crease in them left unexplored" (Luiselli 21).

Thus one can say that an anagonist taking center stage is a rejection of the signifying economy and structure of the novel as conventionally conceived: of the completeness of represented actions, the meaningfulness of the hero's search or mission, the logic of centeredness itself—and is thus an opening to Lukács's "'bad' infinity." The critic Alex Woloch, citing Raymond Williams, talks of the "distribution of significance" proper to the "character system" of the realist novel, whereby a group of characters is "juxtaposed and concatenated within a closed and intricately organized discursive structure" (Woloch 51). The anagonist upends this structure, replacing the principle of knowability itself (of "people like this, relations like this,"

as Williams paraphrases it, calling this “the real achievement of most serious novels and plays”) with unknowability; the principle of the novel’s center of consciousness with a dispersal of consciousness; and the principle of the protagonist’s enclosure within the diegesis with the possibility of an escape. By its means, the novel puts a fracture in that form of “hegemony” that Williams locates “in the fibres of the self” (Williams 209, 212).

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To my knowledge, there is no established term for a hero who does not act, or whose action is nothing but an object of representation, framed at every moment by a larger condition of imperception or perception cut off from action—a nonsensorimotor perception. For the protagonist has long been held to be a defining element of the novel. The main tendencies of European novel theory (with the always remarkable exceptions of Bakhtin and the early Lukács) have seen no need to conceptualize a presence outside the positive relations of representation, identification, or recognition that accompany the logic of the protagonist, a presence alert to the fissures inherent in the “historical situation” of the novel (Lukács, *Theory* 60). On the contrary, scholars—from Ian Watt to Paul Ricoeur to Thomas Pavel—insist on the centrality to the novel of “human beings, the ideals and norms that guide their lives, the passions that drive them, and the action they take” (Pavel 19). As recent a work as Guido Mazzoni’s *Teoria del Romanzo* (2011) has this to say: “For us as readers of novels, the destiny of characters is tremendously important; even when we do not agree with the goals that the heroes are pursuing, we are able to recognize ourselves in the schema of their existence. We are like them, thrown into a world, occupied in seeking a balance between desires and reality” (370–71).

But as the essays collected in this issue of *Novel* illustrate, the current critical moment demands an analysis that is attentive precisely to the “fissures and rents” that escape a conception of the novel based on action (and the ideals, norms, passions, and ambitions that guide it). For the novel, it turns out, and from as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, has had not only minor characters but *heroes* who “fail to cohere as subjects around a clearly demarcated inner world” (Scribner, this issue, 317); who fall victim not only to other, more purposeful characters within the diegesis but to the narrative directionality of the novel itself; who, as such, lack “active imagination” and so find themselves caught up in other people’s plots (Levin, this issue, 341). The implication, according to Abby Scribner in this issue, is an entirely different understanding of the subjective basis of the novel form; not (as Watt has it) “truth to individual experience . . . always unique and always new” (Watt 13), nor (in Mazzoni’s terms) “the mimesis of the interior life” (Mazzoni 179)—propositions that accompany the long-assumed imbrication of the novel with liberalism—but, rather, “a self missing an interior world” (Scribner 329). Works such as Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Scribner argues, invent or discover “an incommensurability between internal experience and external world that renders inner life incommunicable” (328). Refusing the consensus of several generations of critics, for whom Austen’s work confirms the constitutive relation between freedom and “interior experience,”

Scribner's essay reveals the possibility that the interior realm may be as "irrelevant" (323) to the subjectivity and political project of *Mansfield Park* as it seems to Fanny herself.

The articles in this issue of *Novel* do not necessarily subscribe to the principles outlined above. None, of course, uses the term *anagonist*. Nevertheless, the shift of perspective put forward in Scribner's article resonates across the essays featured in the issue, even when the focus remains on forms of "prenarrative" action that may be discerned beneath a character's hesitation and inaction, or when the theoretical basis of the reading remains something like Ricoeur's "inchoate narrativity" of human experience, or the necessary "entanglement" of consciousness in "untold and repressed stories" (Ricoeur 74–75). Janina Levin's essay "Temporality and the Unconfident Heroine in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*" takes its point of departure from the "stalled beginning" of James's novel, a period of waiting and prevarication on the part of the protagonist, Maggie Verver, that extends at least through the work's first volume. In the second half of *The Golden Bowl*, Levin observes, Maggie passes almost indiscernibly "from anxiety to courage." For Levin, Maggie's earlier anxiety is best read—with Ricoeur—as the sign of a nascent entanglement in action that only needs "the configuring act of narrative" for its purposiveness to be revealed (Levin 342). Yet Levin is also alert to the ways in which anxiety or uncertainty might at any moment—such as in the extraordinary passage describing the "little timed silence" in which Maggie's husband Prince Amerigo looks at her from her drawing-room door—expand not into knowledge or recognition but, in the opposite direction, toward "an uncertainty in the very air," as the novel's narrator puts it (James 332, 335). At such moments, contra Ricoeur and despite the conceptual and compositional efforts of James himself, this work surely intuits the existence of something that its "biographical" organization cannot accommodate, a "script," perhaps, to which neither Maggie, nor James, nor the discourse of literary criticism "has access."

The phrase "a script to which he does not have access" appears in Maria Christou's essay "Kazuo Ishiguro's Nonactors," characterizing the experience of the celebrity pianist Ryder (the protagonist and narrator of Ishiguro's 1995 novel *The Unconsoled*) in the unnamed central European city where he is an honored guest (Christou, this issue, 372). Ryder moves around the city only passively, in response to pressing invitations, earnestly communicated expectations, and straight-up requests. He never receives a copy of the "schedule" that has apparently been prepared for him, and his every idea and narrative about his role and effectiveness are revealed as woefully at odds with the reality—all of which leads to Christou's claim that Ryder, like every Ishiguro protagonist, is "part of a broader turn against action" in the late twentieth-century literary imagination (378). This turn is closely allied to a cold war logic—analyzed, among others, by Hannah Arendt—in which human action begins to be experienced as risky and "dangerously unpredictable" (Christou 379). Christou distinguishes between "action" and "agency" as a way to hold onto the insights of critical rationality. Thus agency persists in Ishiguro's novels, but it is no longer located in their actors (or protagonists) but in—for example—the biopolitical rationality of the society depicted in *Never Let Me Go*, played out upon the bodies of the clones; in the technocratic theories

of governance represented in *The Remains of the Day* by the views of the American senator Mr Lewis, urging the gentleman politicians of prewar Britain toward “professionalism”; and in “the absent yet somehow all-pervading schedule or ‘script’ that dictates Ryder’s performance” in *The Unconsoled* (372). Ishiguro’s nonacting protagonists, for Christou, retain a *critical* meaning and agency by their mobilization in the text as symptoms of “a broader condition or wider system of values.” The nonaction she finds “center stage” in Ishiguro’s work as a whole foregrounds nothing less than “the contemporary condition of the subject” (379).

Kate Wilkinson’s essay “Letters and the Contemporary Novel: Materiality and Metaphor in Ian McEwan’s *The Children Act*,” by contrast, locates the silence and nonaction of the literary text—here, the 2014 novel by Ian McEwan—not in the characters, whose actions are all too legible and purposeful, but in the formal organization of the work itself. At the heart of *The Children Act* is a *differend*, a “place of silence” at the interstices of two discursive regimens: on one hand, the discourse of the legal ruling, inhabited by the High Court judge Fiona Maye (like every late McEwan hero, a virtuoso in her field); on the other, the declarative emotional letters sent to Fiona by a seventeen-year-old Jehovah’s Witness, Adam, whose life she saved when she ruled against his petition that he be permitted, on religious grounds, not to undergo a medically necessary blood transfusion. Fiona’s silence in the face of Adam’s communications alerts us to the presence of something that “cannot yet” be put into phrases: an “intractable contemporary conflict between religious belief and the secular law” (Wilkinson, this issue, 383). Thus the *differend*—a concept developed by Jean-François Lyotard—is not only discursive, it is also chronological. The delayed action materialized in the novel by an unanswered letter (or indeed, as in Levin’s essay, an unconfident heroine) gives a temporal quality to the *differend*. Both Levin’s and Wilkinson’s essays are attuned to the ways in which the *differend* has been present in the novel form from the beginning—whenever a letter goes unanswered or whenever a heroine is unable to make a decision. The anagonist lives and moves outside linear (narrative) time; her actions and utterances are never resolvable by reference to corresponding actions or utterances by other characters, however temporally or logically connected these are. In McEwan’s novel this chronological dispersal—which we might justifiably call an omnitemporality of events—is found in the discrepancy (which is never closed or resolved) between a speech act and its response, which is to say, a duration in which it remains to be determined whether the letter is “not yet answered” or “not yet unanswered” (Wilkinson 393). We may also speak of a gap, or surplus, between an act of expression and its occasion or predicament; or in other words, of the “*wrong* at the heart of a fictional *differend*” (396; emphasis added).

In 1973, J. M. Coetzee began drafting a novel that he later abandoned, titled “The Burning of the Books.” “Fiction,” he wrote in his notes toward that work, “being a serious affair, cannot accept pre-requisites like (1) a desire to write, (2) something to write about, (3) something to say. There must be a place for a fiction of apathy toward the task of writing, toward the subject, toward the means” (qtd. in Attwell 59–60). The work of apathy that Coetzee is talking about here has not been realized—perhaps because what Coetzee was imagining at this moment was not an apathetic

protagonist (a realizable, all too familiar fictional form) but an antagonist, a form that is inherently unrealizable.

This issue features two essays on Coetzee: Benjamin Lewis Robinson's "Fiction Cares: J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*" and Benjamin R. Davies's "Growing Up Against Allegory: The Late Works of J. M. Coetzee." Robinson makes no reference to Jean-François Lyotard, but a central concern of his article is the "fundamental irreconcilability" between the discourses of "justice" and "care" as it plays out across Coetzee's early work. But another differend appears in Coetzee's later "Australian" writings featuring Elizabeth Costello, including *Slow Man*, the main focus of Robinson's article. This second differend dramatizes the discursive limits of love as against care, nursing as against devotion, but also the real as against fiction. Robinson develops an ingenious distinction specific to *Slow Man* between realism and *vraimentism* (a play on the name of Coetzee's antagonistic hero Paul Rayment). *Vraimentism* is achieved when a fictional character establishes his fictionality by the very strength of his insistence that he is a real person. "Be a main character," his creator, Elizabeth Costello, implores Paul, meaning: "Do something. Do anything. Surprise me. . . . So that someone, somewhere, might put you in a book. So that someone might *want* to put you in a book. So that you may be *worth* putting in a book" (*Slow Man* 229). As he is, Paul is not "worth" putting in a book, and yet he is in one. The paradox presents us with another defining characteristic of the antagonist.

Like Robinson, Davies locates an epistemic break in Coetzee—one identified by Coetzee himself in a short essay from 1976, "The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike*." The break that concerns Davies, however, does not divide Coetzee's body of work but defines its entirety. "To find what a sentence like 'Mr. Podsnap closed the book' or 'Philip Marlow [*sic*] closed the book' used to mean," writes Coetzee in 1976,

is an archaeological endeavor. Included in its meaning, however, was certainly the following: that there was a social and characterological typology assumed and shared among the reading public; that the sign 'Mr. Podsnap' or 'Philip Marlow' in an initial sentence, empty to begin with, would in due course be filled with social and characterological details, some of them details of such fineness as to refine the typology, . . . the process of refining the typology being known as making the character individual just as adherence to the typology is known as making the character representative; and that the fit of 'Mr. Podsnap' or 'Philip Marlow' into the typological lattice would reciprocally reaffirm the typology and therefore the sociology and psychology of the reading public. ("First Sentence" 92–93)

In the wake of that shift—the historical disappearance of an entire "social and characterological typology"—what does it mean to attribute an action to a protagonist? One answer to that question informed an earlier generation of Coetzee criticism, according to Davies: the rejection of allegory—the literary form that is codependent with the "typological lattice." In place of allegory, argued Derek Attridge (that body of criticism's most prominent spokesperson), one should read Coetzee's works "literally"—for their capacity to engender "a strangeness, a newness, a singularity, an inventiveness, an alterity in what I read" (Attridge 40). Davies does not argue against Attridge so much as extend him. Thus in Davies's account,

Coetzee's recent "Jesus" series of novels (*The Childhood of Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, *The Death of Jesus*) brings a new self-awareness to the unproductivity of allegorical reading. In the boy David—the series's enigmatic central character—Coetzee offers us a hero who not only subjectively refuses typology but is objectively inimical and immune to it. To his guardian and chronicler Simón, who will write a book about David's deeds when he is gone, David says: "But . . . you must promise not to understand me. When you try to understand me it spoils everything" (Coetzee, *Death* 103). The Jesus novels represent the coming of age of a literature "beyond allegory" (which is also to say, of a novel beyond *the* novel), with their hero David evolving the figure of the anagonist significantly beyond the state of a protagonist with issues.

Speaking of protagonists with issues, the form of action that is the focus of Joel Evans's essay "The Mob: J. G. Ballard's Turn to the Collective" is "meaningless action, the more violent the better" (Ballard 249). But is meaningless action the action of a super-protagonist or an anagonist? For Evans, the meaningless action that takes place in each of J. G. Ballard's last four novels, *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (1996), *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006)—a series of works set in closed or gated communities of various kinds—is both utopian and dystopian. Violence—action undertaken without an end in view—is a basis for community formation in a world without "transcendent structures and hierarchies" (Evans, this issue, 437). Such violence is as close as Ballard ever comes, argues Evans, to imagining a "flat collectivism"—an antihierarchical, revolutionary form of community that can shock the middle classes "out of their stupor" and "stop the universe in its tracks" (444). Evans claims that in conceiving the unifying principle of this "flat formation" in terms of violence, Ballard refuses any possibility or role for literature in imagining what a collective "might lead to in any positive, lasting, or rational sense" (445). Ballard's imagination enacts the disastrous consequences of presenting the anagonist not as a character who, though central, exists peripherally alongside his or her fellows but as one who configures a plot, cast of characters, and world around his vision of meaningless action and thereby founds a community upon it. The problem with Ballard's anagonists is simply that they step forth as such, subordinating the narratives in which they appear to the principle of their own existence.

The limits of the novel form are highlighted in a very different way in Alison Glassie's essay on Ruth Ozeki's 2013 work *A Tale for the Time Being*. Set in the aftermath of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, Ozeki's novel is the story of a schoolgirl's diary that washes up as flotsam at a beach on Cortes Island, British Columbia, a few months after the disaster and is discovered by Ruth, a novelist, and her husband Oliver. We read the diary as Ruth and Oliver do—in diegetic real time. The anagonist principle is *thematically* present in Ozeki's work in at least two forms: the character of the "famous anarchist-feminist-novelist-turned-Buddhist-nun" Jiko Yasutani, who instructs her great-granddaughter Nao, the diary's author, in the ways of "time being"—a concept Ruth traces to the thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen (Ozeki 30); and second, the ocean—the work's "most important narrative agent," writes Glassie, on account of its ability to undercut Ruth's own "narrative preferences" (Ozeki 33), such as her desire that the tsunami be the explanation for the diary's oceanic passage. In Glassie's reading, Ozeki's work strives for a "not-knowing" that might be conceived as proper to the novel form, in

opposition to both the views of the novelist Ruth and the novel theory tradition alluded to earlier. To come to terms with not-knowing is to awaken to our own nature as “time beings.” This formulation—time being—is yet another plausible definition of the anagonist.

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A journal issue—like a tree or a whale, according to Ozeki, or like a letter, according to Wilkinson—is a time being. Its essence is durational in the way that a “blog,” for example, is not (Ozeki 26). By the time you read this, says Nao in the diary entry that opens Ozeki’s novel, “everything will be different” (3). Like the articles in the issue, this introduction will be read by its addressees at least six months after the issue is sent to production.

Begin where you are, Jiko tells Nao (15). I am writing this at my home in Providence, Rhode Island, on April 3, 2020. The university where I work is off limits; the library and offices have all been closed. My partner is with her parents, under curfew, in Bangalore, India. The official death toll from the coronavirus in the United States has just passed 7,000 (“Coronavirus Map”). The count has been doubling every three days. In Italy the figure is 14,681; in India the official number is 72. What seems certain is that the world will be unimaginably altered in six months’ time. What better lesson in the futility of traditional models of novelistic agency, and the need for a new conception of narrative action, than the coronavirus pandemic. “You don’t make the timeline, the virus makes the timeline,” said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, in March.³ But the novel has known this all along. The novel has never been (only) what Amitav Ghosh, quoting John Updike, damningly characterizes as an “individual moral adventure” (Ghosh 127). Looking back at the long epoch of “surging carbon emissions,” Ghosh notes that “very few . . . of the literary minds of that intensely *engagé* period were alive to the archaic voice whose rumblings, once familiar, had now become inaudible to humanity: that of the earth and its atmosphere” (124). This may be true of the period’s “literary minds”; but the novel has always included a dimension of not-knowing and nonaction, a dimension that is sometimes even found occupying the narrative space of the work’s central characters. This principle of limitation is as intrinsic to the novel’s being and thought as the consciousness and action of the protagonist. The nonaction attests to everything that escapes human motivations and human narratives; the not-knowing knows all about such archaic rumblings.

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³ Fauci was speaking to Chris Cuomo on *Prime Time*, CNN, 25 March 2020. See Budryk.

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