

Braudelian Scale and the History of the Novel

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Could Braudel's *Mediterranean* be a model for literary history? I am currently toying with a history of the novel with passably Braudelian features—though probably not the ones his book is most known for. Geography itself isn't of much importance to me, or at least the idea of unchanging geographical inputs, contrasted with humankind's technological or cultural responses to them. Nor am I so interested in the spread of novels as merchandise, taking their place in a world of markets. And books are small—they don't need water routes for their dissemination. The sea won't matter much for me, either. By contrast, I am interested in the problem of how to model change at scale. And then the long history of the novel is, literally, somewhat Mediterranean, since it extends from Byzantium in the east to Spain in the west. So at the very least, *The Mediterranean* might be a potential inspiration for yet another take on the history of the genre.

As far as scale is concerned, the history of the novel has slowly been losing it. The earliest historians, from the late 1700s in England but a good century earlier in France, thought the history of the novel had to be a long one. They recognized and celebrated the distinctiveness and even superiority of new novels—the ones by Richardson, and Fielding, and Defoe, and also those by Lafayette, Lesage, and Marivaux. But it seemed obvious that the novel itself—though, to open a parenthesis, the question of what kind of entity “the novel itself” is, is at the heart of my project—had a longer history. These early commentators couldn't help backing up into what in English (but only in English) is called romance and then fanning out into places that weren't France or England. Over time, this changed. Things became more specialized, for one, which is normal; but also, critics started to look for causes, for, dare I say it, “historical specificity.” Cultural phenomena were supposed to be produced by their “historical moment”; and critics were supposed to be able to read that moment in the forms they studied. And the moment was, inevitably, the moment of a shift, a key shift, of the turn to the modern. There was before; we're in the after.

All this is what's commonly known as historicizing. But Braudel, who wished for a kind of history that could do more "than study walled gardens," as he put it in the original preface, can show us another way.¹ Sure, partly from the sheer scale. But also because at scale, the idea of the hinge moment becomes impossible to maintain. Instead, he reaches for other models for change. In his original conclusion of 1949, for instance, he spoke of envisioning history "as a series of crises, between which one can detect pauses, moments of equilibrium."² But above all, he's interested in the idea of multiple types of temporality. Of course, there's the three-speed model of environmental interactions, social groups, and individuals, plus the two-level model of "structure and conjuncture" he evokes in the 1966 conclusion.³ If the search for "historical specificity" usually means locating a moment on a linear time line, a moment taken as somehow homogenous (because everything clustered there is connected), a Braudelian view would stress the multiple layers composing the "one single moment in time"—"all the different histories that coexist in reality," as he states in the 1966 conclusion.⁴ Since Braudel didn't set out to explain the change in cultural artifacts, I'm not sure his models are the best for, say, doing this new history of the novel. I personally look to his slightly younger contemporary George Kubler, the historian of pre-Colombian art, for ways of understanding the multiple temporalities of artifacts.⁵ But the general point is just to get away from what seems to me a very narrow conception of the "historical moment."

The novel itself, I've written. But what is it? And should we worry when we start using the term to talk about books from times the term wasn't in use? Here's where I would bring in the Braudel of his later capitalism work. He just gives the whole problem a pragmatic shrug. "This does not bother me much," he writes of using the word *capitalism*. "Historians invent words and labels to identify retrospectively problems and periods in history: the Hundred Years War, the Renaissance, Humanism, the Reformation."⁶ But this doesn't mean that we shouldn't be prepared, and before doing his own history of the word *capitalism*, he says, "The advice of Henri Berr and Lucien Febvre was that the key words of the vocabulary of history should only be used after asking a number of questions. Where do they come from? How have they come down to us? Are they likely to mislead us?"⁷ The novel, like capitalism, is not a thing; it is not born, like an animal, which is either there in a given year or it's not. The novel is a concept that humans have invented to group a variety of artifacts produced by other humans, artifacts that appear to enough people to be worth grouping. Of course, we do this literally all the time, for on one level it's just what language, all language, is, whether we're talking about artifacts or things in the nonhuman world. The history of the word is important, but we mustn't assume that at any time words are adequate windows onto the artifactual world, any more than when we name a species we are isolating the essential difference of the organisms we're pointing to.

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972--73), 1:23.

² Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Armand Colin, 1949), 1095.

³ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 2:1242.

⁴ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 2:1238.

⁵ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Yale University Press, 1962).

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, vol. 2: *The Wheels of Commerce*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Collins, 1982), 22.

⁷ Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, 232.

Lastly, we might think about “great books” being like events in Braudel’s scheme, “those essentially *ephemeral* yet moving occurrences, the ‘headlines’ of the past.”⁸ In the literary archive only a small part—the canonical part—“stands out” against a possibly more slowly changing mass of literary habit. (And it’s not self-evident that the change of the mass is really an effect of the outliers’ difference.) There would be differences, since art objects are reexperienced in the present in a way that historical events can’t be.⁹ Nonetheless, Braudel’s discounting of the event would again help move us away from the more familiar models, in which great books, if they’re not crystalizing the specificity of their historical moment, are the motor of literary history. And it would provide an alternative to the “distant reading” metaphor that dominates a lot of digital humanities work that we associate with literary history at scale.

The Mediterranean probably can’t be a model for a history of the novel—it is founded on environmental materiality in a way that would make little sense for talking about how literary practices diffuse, spread, and sometimes fail—but, at seventy-five, it nonetheless offers some fresh ways for thinking about long-term change and about what “doing history” means. A

⁸ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 2:1243. Italics in original

⁹ Antoine Lilti, “Rabelais est-il notre contemporain? Histoire intellectuelle et herméneutique critique,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 59, no.4 bis (2012): 65–84.