

Elizabeth Kovach

Novel Ontologies After 9/11

The Politics of Being in Contemporary Theory
and U.S.-American Narrative Fiction

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Giessen, October 2016
Elizabeth Kovach

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1. INTRODUCTION: NOVEL ONTOLOGIES AFTER 9/11

This dissertation demonstrates how several widely read U.S.-American novels explore contemporary being after 9/11, meditating what it means to be a subject within U.S.-dominated political and economic structures of power; what forms of complicity, complacency, moral and ethical responsibility are tied to globalized existence; and how new media and digital technologies rearrange the world's becoming. It asserts that a significant number of post-9/11 novels can be read as belonging to an 'ontological turn' occurring within theory and culture today.

The novels selected for analysis portray characters who react with dismay and dissent to socio-political developments specific to the post-9/11 era – namely, a rhetoric of vulnerability and politics of fear that mobilized support for war in Iraq and Afghanistan; the global war on terror; the extending reach of neoliberal ideology and policy; and the augmenting of state surveillance and security apparatuses under the auspices of Homeland Security. Within their depictions of these developments, post-9/11 novelists stage impasses. Their protagonists – often writers, artists, and intellectuals – lament the seeming futility of resisting the status quo and themselves hover in positions of stasis. Such story-level themes are accompanied by formal displays of ambivalence about how stories can and should be told. This prompts a striving for orientation in premises about being, existence, and becoming – for new ontologies.

This form of striving is not unusual for the novel. Since its inception the genre has chronicled the experience of living in a world of mutable foundations. It was born just as ontological certainties – unshakeable truth, unmediated reality, things in themselves, a complete universe crafted and ruled by God – gave way to new Enlightenment-era sensibilities. Truth, being, and reality shifted from signifying absolutes to denoting perspective-bound categories open to interpretation. Central to the novel's biography and cultural function, not to mention its trademark irony, is the effort to capture the mixture of fears and hopes, expressive opportunities and limitations associated with this shift.

The genre has thus repeatedly been characterized as one that narrates the vain quest for orientation amidst contingent and malleable values, truths, and states of being. Just before the eruption of World War I, Georg Lukács diagnosed the novel as the expression of "transcendental homelessness" – "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (1971 [1920]: 41, 88). René Girard describes the novel as the literary form that portrays a human desire for unmediated reality, which he labels "ontological sickness" (1975 [1964]). Lucien Goldmann states that the novel form is devoted to "the story of a degraded search for authentic values in an inauthentic world" (1975 [1964]: 4). More optimistic about the genre's potentials yet in agreement with respect to its origins, Mikhail Bakhtin finds that the hallmarks of the novel, in contrast to those of the "absolute and complete [...] closed circle" of the epic (2011 [1981]: 16), are "indeterminacy, [...] openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving reality (the openended present)" (*ibid.*: 7). Novelist Milan Kundera, ref-

erencing Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, writes that the form's reason for being is "nothing other than the investigation of [...] forgotten being" (1988 [1986]: 4-5):

As God slowly departed from his seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values [...] Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. (Ibid.: 6)

"[F]earsome ambiguity" and "myriad relative truths parceled out by men" are threats of nihilism, the philosophical project designed "to unmask all systems of reason as systems of persuasion" and reduce "truth to value" (Snyder 1988: xii-xiii). The demand for a sense of orientation arises when the prospect of nihilism threatens to overwhelm.

This appraisal continues into the twenty-first century. In the 2007 collection of theoretical essays *The Novel* edited by Franco Moretti, for instance, John Brenkman states that the novel's "very coming into the world is attended by a nihilistic midwife," and that the novel straddles both "the anguish and wisdom of uncertainty with suppler tools than philosophers" (2007: 829, 837). The novel exhibits a "supple" capacity for embracing ambiguity while it is simultaneously haunted by lost certainties. Its ability to entertain such ambivalences has continuously given nuanced expression to that which philosophical, theoretical modes of discourse also struggle to capture. As Bakhtin suggests, abstract concepts in the novel are "drawn in to a chain of represented events and yet at the same time not the subject of static description, but rather the subjects of a dynamic story" (2011 [1981]: 251). Concepts that are named and described by philosophers and theorists appear, in the novel, in narrativized, dynamized forms. Beyond what is thematically addressed, conceptual content is communicated obliquely via aesthetic experiences determined by narrative form. In the post-9/11 novels analyzed in this project various searches for orientation points and premises are staged and negotiated not simply by characters within fictional worlds but also on the level of form.

Four centuries after "Don Quixote set forth from his house," novels about post-9/11 U.S.-American society and politics demonstrate that the "ambiguity" of the world, which assumes facets particular to this historical juncture, has become no less "fearsome." If anything, the lack of foundations that define contemporary human experience becomes especially worrying in a U.S.-political context in which rhetoric and spin – "relative truths parceled out by men" – are refined machineries that result in global conflicts that continue to rage to this day.

Post-9/11 novels shed light on these dynamics, often to instructive degrees. In Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, for example, one character, the head of a think tank that advises the Bush administration, states at a family gathering:

"We have to be comfortable with stretching some facts," he said, with his smile, to an uncle who had mildly challenged him about Iraq's nuclear capabilities. "Our modern media are very blurry shadows on the wall, and the philosopher has to be prepared to manipulate these shadows in the service of a greater truth." (2010: 267)

Compare this excerpt with comments made by the Editorial Board of *The New York Times* in response to a debate amongst Republican candidates for the 2016 U.S.-presidency:

It felt at times as if the speakers were no longer living in a fact-based world where actions have consequences [...]. Where basic laws – like physics and the Constitution – constrain wishes. [...] Jeb Bush spun a particularly repellent fantasy. Speaking reverently of his brother the [former] president, he said, “He kept us safe,” and invoked the carnage of 9/11. Wait, what? Did he mean George W. Bush, who was warned about the threat that Al Qaeda would attack? Who then invaded a non sequitur country, Iraq, over a nonexistent threat? (2015: n. pag.)

Both the excerpt from *Freedom* and this editorial commentary capture the levels of destruction, as well as exasperation, which can be reached in a world of “blurry shadows” in which “basic laws” disintegrate into opinions and the historical record is exchanged for more convenient narratives. When boundaries between fact and fantasy are easily transgressed in arenas in which the global political consequences are massive, an observable spike in a demand for points of orientation and premises to hold on to comes as no surprise.

This project identifies and examines the narrative forms and functions that arise from this demand for points of orientation. The aim is to describe what is particular about the expression of this demand in narratives that address post-9/11 social and political contexts. To achieve this aim, post-9/11 novels are contextualized as part of a broader ‘ontological turn’ that has gained traction in contemporary theory across humanities disciplines in recent years. The phrase ‘novel ontologies,’ therefore, refers both to post-9/11 literary narrative worlds and to new theoretical ontologies with which these fictional narratives are brought in conjunction.

By suggesting that there is an analogy to be made between the themes and structuring devices of post-9/11 novels and theoretical responses to post-9/11 politics that rest upon specific uses and notions of ‘ontology,’ I do not mean that the authors and theorists engage in dialogue, nor do I simply apply theoretical frameworks to literary texts. I trace conceptual homologies between the thematic and formal features of post-9/11 novels, on the one hand, and the arguments presented in theory, on the other hand, to identify dispositions that cut across literary and theoretical discourses. Literary and theoretical ‘novel ontologies after 9/11’ move in similar conceptual and imaginative directions, because they react to and grapple with the same historical triggers of a need for fundamental premises about being, existence, and becoming from which critical arguments and literary imaginings can proceed.¹

These novel ontologies after 9/11 arise from states of grave concern. They are efforts to establish conceptual sites upon which the troubling socio-political status quo – characterized by precarity rhetoric, neoliberal expansion, and the augmentation of sur-

¹ The terms ‘being, existence, and becoming’ are central to the three respective theoretical frameworks handled in this project. They are elaborated upon in detail throughout chapters 3-5.

veillance and security apparatuses – can be criticized, countered, and perhaps even redirected. New theoretical ontologies are not attempts to revert to a mythic past or to harness a static, stable conception of being that is divorced from worldly experience. Rather, they recuperate the signifier ‘ontology’ and employ it in revised and politically relevant ways. There is a pattern of resurgence in ontological questions in both contemporary theory and, as I contend, this pattern can also be traced in literary expression. This project thus closely analyzes the ways in which theoretical and literary discourses are engaged in implicit partnerships.

1.1 The Ontological Turn in Contemporary Theory

This study identifies three specific contemporary theoretical uses and approaches to ‘ontology’: social ontology, post-Marxist ontology, and posthumanist ontology.²

More specifically, it examines how theorists who contribute to each of these frameworks have applied their respective understandings of being, existence, and becoming to critiques of the post-9/11 social and political horizon. Their respective notions of ontology serve as the orientation points for critical assessments of concrete historical circumstances. The phrase ‘the politics of being’ in this project’s subtitle thus refers to the way these ontologies are of political significance.

As I trace the uses and meanings of ‘ontology’ within the work of poststructuralist theorists of social ontology, post-Marxist theorists and philosophers, and theorists of posthumanism, it becomes clear that, in most cases, the term does not function in the traditional philosophical-terminological sense – that is, as a branch of metaphysics exclusively devoted to the study of being.³ Rather, it exemplifies a term that is on the

² These terms are specified most explicitly in chapters 3-5, which are devoted to each respectively. Social ontology refers to a poststructuralist conception of being formulated by Judith Butler in a series of philosophical essays that react to post-9/11 political developments. Post-Marxist ontology refers to ontological premises about the nature of being and its relation to existence that appear in works by post-Marxist philosophers Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau, who respond to consensual politics after 9/11. Posthumanist ontology denotes the way the term ‘ontology’ has been appropriated by theorists from the field of science and technology studies, including Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and Dimitris Papadopoulos, to address, among other things, contemporary politics after 9/11. These ontologies are not post-9/11 phenomenon but rather fundamental to theoretical frameworks developed well before 9/11 that are reiterated and reinforced by their proponents with urgency in reaction to post-9/11 contexts and developments.

³ Oliver Marchart refers to Jacques Derrida’s notion of ‘hauntology’ formulated in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) to describe the majority of new ontologies that have appeared in contemporary theory. In the following passage, Marchart offers an albeit sweeping depiction of the historical evolution from the traditional meaning of the use of ‘ontology’ to present-day ‘hauntologies’: “While ontological inquiry started with Aristotelian metaphysics, it was only with Christian Wolff and German ‘Schulphilosophie’ that ontology appeared as a name for a philosophical discipline – only to be increasingly displaced by epistemology