Abele on Conrad (2016)


Celia Abele, Columbia University

This multifaceted study sets out to provide a new poetics of the cycle romanesque as a prose genre consisting of a series of episodic texts bound together by a particular form of “transtextualité.” Drawing on Genette, Conrad defines this concept as “toute relation cumulative entre plusieurs textes qui les unit en les additionnant” (14). According to Conrad, the cycle is closely related to epic, but it includes neither the roman-fleuve, for him really just one work, nor the series, which is more loosely held together. The book’s definition is primarily based on analyses of the formal characteristics of nineteenth-century cycles by Balzac, Dumas, and Zola, and in the twentieth century by Giono, Asimov, and Volodine.

No doubt wisely, Conrad refuses to base any definition of the cycle on the kinds of content that such works tend to represent, a road often travelled by those who stress the totalizing or encyclopedic ambitions of such projects. The historical development of the cycle romanesque as traced chronologically in the second half of the book seems slightly secondary to the concerns of its first half, which is devoted to a tri-partite formal definition of the cycle. Firstly, the cycle romanesque employs recurring characters; secondly, it gathers together different works under a planned system of titles, and sets up internal links by suggesting reading orders; and, thirdly, it is characterized by enchâssement, which describes a form of narrative framing where the situation of narration is repeated, as in the Mille et une nuits or the Decameron. Distinctly Genettian in its method, Conrad’s study also provides a descriptive grammar of sub-categories within these major modes and analyzes how different texts develop and subvert them.

The first section of the first part of the book contains a rich and compelling analysis of the many variations on the recurrence of characters in Balzac and Zola. The second section on the “plan,” that is the use of explicit joining and ordering devices created by the use of titles and grouping, is much shorter by comparison. This is probably due to Conrad’s implicit agreement with Proust’s claim that Balzac’s creation of unity through the more organic device of recurring characters is more indicative of genius than the mechanical unity he devised “à grand renfort de titres et de sous-titres” (47). The third section examines how different kinds of discourse are confronted in a fascinating analysis of Potocki’s Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse, which, at the opening of the great modern period of cyclical writing around 1800, brings together both the static, hierarchical enchâssement of the Decameron and the open, dynamic, and auto-generative model of the Mille et une nuits.

The book’s second part, “Évolutions du cycle romanesque,” provides a diachronic survey of the cycle. It argues that there is an “epic moment” from 1830 to 1890 that responded to the uncertainties of the French Revolution. The massive recourse to recurring characters in Balzac, Dumas, and Zola is seen as a new departure for the cycle, which previously depended principally on enchâssement. That moment, Conrad says, blows over by the end of the nineteenth century in the generalized “crise du roman.” The epic model of the cycle falls apart, opening up space for new literary forms, whether properly cyclical like Zola’s last two cycles (Trois villes and the Quatre Événigles), or not, as in the case of the roman-fleuve. Yet the cycle makes a comeback in the novel after 1945, especially in para-literary genres and the more loosely connected series, in tandem with revitalized forms of enchâssement and at the expense of recurring characters and the plan (290). In Conrad’s view, there existed a connection between epic and history, essential to the “epic moment” of the great nineteenth-century cycles, founded on the correspondence between history and myth, world and text, and the real and language. But it becomes increasingly problematic and is reconceptualized in more purely “novelistic” or utopian forms (future histories) in Giono, Asimov, or in Volodine’s post-exotic worlds. That does not mean, as Conrad is careful to stress, that the epic reference disappears. The cycle continues to strive towards totalization. Moreover, in a discussion premised on Bakhtin, Conrad argues that the cycle remains essentially monologic, just as epic is, even if it can also accommodate plurality and complexity.

Although the heart of the book, especially its typologies, is centered on the two key examples of the Comédie humaine and the Rougon-Macquart, one of its great strengths is the extension of these concepts to other less canonical forms of literature, especially science fiction. The breadth of reference is essential to making the argument that the cycle, far from disappearing, has found its vitality in “paraliterary” genres, and that its geographical center has shifted from France to the United States since the war.

The juxtaposition between the book’s formalist and historical models of analysis might have been articulated more thoroughly. Also, its structure, which involves going over much the same texts and material in the second half, albeit chronologically, leads
to some repetition. Despite such limitations, the book provides a useful taxonomy of the cycle, a nuanced conception of fiction, and a productive framework for close and middle-distance readings of the ways that works within cycles are connected to each other. The clarity and precision of its style is matched by the discipline and transparency of the book’s organization. The core audience of this book, scholars of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French novel, will find a fresh approach to theoretical concerns of genre, as well as illuminating analyses of the ways in which the novels of Balzac and Zola, and to a lesser extent Dumas, are connected to each other and to history. This study should also appeal to other, more heterogenous groups of readers: theoreticians of the novel, especially those interested in the novel as totality, whether in its permutations as myth, epic, encyclopedia, or cycle. Enthusiasts of any of the authors discussed at length, that is Balzac, Dumas, Zola, Potocki, Giono, Asimov, and Volodine, will find much to mull over, as will scholars of twentieth-century science fiction.