Personifying Capitalism: Introduction

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Introduction

The opening credits of NBC’s reality television show *The Apprentice* show a stylized montage of famous financial landmarks—the stock exchange, Times Square, and Donald Trump himself, emerging from a limousine. The images are overlaid with text: “It’s not personal,” one shot tells you. The next shot completes the phrase: “It’s business.” That this trite business mantra is largely undercut by the nature of this show—relying as it does on casting, interpersonal drama, and the cult of personality that is Donald Trump—does not seem to make it less convincing. Contestants, ripping into one another to jockey for power, repeat to themselves and their competition that “it’s nothing personal.” When they come together as a team and attempt to rise above the petty in-fighting that the show’s format encourages, contestants remind one another that, after all, “this is business.”

In entertainment, and reality television especially, trite sentiment passes for profound insight, and we almost find Trump convincing when he offers pearls of business wisdom such as “always close the deal,” especially when the camera shows him seated at his desk in a skyscraper office that screams executive authority. But while *The Apprentice*’s cartoonish world makes it easy to laugh off the rhetoric of “it’s nothing personal,” that same rhetoric of impersonality pervades much more serious and scholarly work on economics and business culture. As told in writings from Weber to recent literary criticism, capitalism is a story of increasing bureaucraticization and depersonalization: self-regulating systems such as the market, depersonalized management structures such as the corporation, and, most recently, anonymous financial transactions over the internet. In *Le capitalisme utopique*, a summary of liberal capitalism’s ideal version of itself, Pierre Rosanvallon writes: “Le libéralisme, indissociablement économique et politique, fait de la dépersonnalisation du monde la condition du progrès et de la liberté [Liberalism, indissociably both economic and political, takes depersonalization as the precondition for progress and liberty]” (ix).
But, like any utopia, this capitalism is a highly wrought cultural form, employing sophisticated rhetorical strategies to make itself believable. This dissertation is about one such strategy. Despite all their rhetoric of impersonality, cultural texts written during transitions to capitalism unexpectedly, and insistently, foreground personality, and in particular the personality of entrepreneurs. The rapacious capitalist, the cold-blooded speculator, the shrewd profiteer are all singular and charismatic entrepreneur characters who abound in the culture of capitalism.

Marx was one of many writers to be taken with entrepreneurs’ cult of personality. He devotes the first few pages of *Class Struggles in France* to an impassioned character sketch of the new business aristocracy that emerged during the July Revolution of 1830 in France. Referring to the notorious finance minister Laffitte and the new king Louis-Philippe (the former Duke of Orleans), Marx opens with a telling anecdote: “After the July Revolution, when the Liberal banker, Laffitte, led his godfather, the Duke of Orleans, in triumph to the Hôtel de Ville, he let fall the words: ‘From now on the bankers will rule’” (33). The secret of the July Revolution, we are meant to understand, is that it was intentionally planned and directed by the finance aristocracy; beneath the supposedly disparate set of historical events making up a revolution lay an infrastructure of powerfully intentional masterminds. As Marx puts it, the finance aristocracy directed the new government: it “sat on the throne, it dictated laws in the Chambers, it conferred political posts from cabinet portfolios to the tobacco bureau” (34). “Individual entrepreneurs,” as he emphasizes, take on the functions of governance (35).

Who precisely are the entrepreneurs that dominate the culture of capitalism? They are a familiar cast of characters, canonized in cultural memory as the giants of the industrial age. For July Monarchy France (1830-1848), Marx has already named Laffitte and he will soon mention Rothschild; together with the king Louis-Philippe (whose famous imperative to his citizens, “Enrichissez-vous,” became the motto of the July Monarchy), they are the
most often named and familiar economic protagonists of July Monarchy capitalism. A term was coined for such businessmen: *loup-cerviers*, or lynxes, whose strategic expertise and corrupt eye for profit made them the premier financial agents of the time. Marx completes the picture in the broadest and most evocative terms: “The July Monarchy was nothing other than a joint stock company for the exploitation of French national wealth . . . Louis Philippe was the director of this company—Robert Macaire on the throne” (36). An enormously popular villain on the vaudeville stage at that time, Robert Macaire was indeed the template of the *loup-cervier*: wily, amoral, and profiteering. By using this charismatic folk hero to back up an argument ostensibly about economic history, Marx indicates just how interdisciplinary a figure the entrepreneur really is.

And Balzac’s novels similarly blur the line between history and fiction. Already in *César Birotteau*, one character compares Balzac’s most notorious fictional financier, the banker Nucingen, to John Law, the eighteenth century British financial genius who tried to reform France’s finance system and ended up turning it into a highly corrupt pyramid scheme (221). In *La Maison Nucingen*, meanwhile, we are told that Nucingen talks just like Robert Macaire (274). Critics have found much to link the fictional Nucingen to the Baron Rothschild, while some of Nucingen’s other antics link him to the infamous Emile de Girardin, the publishing tycoon and politician who had been linked to multiple stock market scandals. In 1829, Girardin famously said, “Les affaires, c’est l’argent des autres [business is other people’s money],” and a more perfect line could not have been said by either Nucingen or Robert Macaire himself (Coeuré 22).

Louise-Philippe, Law, Laffitte, Rothschild, Girardin on the one hand; Robert Macaire, du Tillet, Nucingen on the other: historical and fictional characters merge and recombine for political satire and social critique, and form a distilled aggregate, the template of the entrepreneur. While all of these individuals, fictional or real, engaged in different business practices and had different public personalities, certain common features emerge that are
repeated and magnified: cold-hearted expertise, strategic innovation, the power to plan and
direct, and the secrecy of their masterminding work behind the scenes. In both novels and
economic texts, entrepreneurs are characterized in strange and unaccountable ways: they are
given uncanny powers of extreme perspicacity, strategic prophecy, and chameleonic
personality.

The transition to capitalism is first and foremost recognized through the recurring
characters of entrepreneurs as instigators of historical and economic change. My work thus
begins with an apparent paradox: why does the discourse of capitalism, a discourse that
insists on impersonality and anonymity, nonetheless consistently feature singularly
charismatic individual businessmen as protagonists? I explore this question through
rhetorical analysis: why are the movers and shakers of capitalism systematically cast as
expertly controlling, supremely powerful, and inscrutably mysterious?

The entrepreneur is more than a caricature, personality, type, or literary character.
For economics, he offers a rhetorical way to conceptualize the market; for representational
forms more broadly, he is a fully realized narrative mode for figuring systematicity and
organizing knowledge. An interdisciplinary figure, the entrepreneur is a complex conceptual
nexus that mediates between potentially incongruent ideas and discourses. He is an
individual who takes on some of the features of a system; he is a character who takes on the
some of the features of a narrator; he is a figure for economic knowledge who takes on some
of the characteristics of opaque unknowability; and he is a literary figure who grounds the
emerging discipline of sociology. And, as often happens with literary inventions, the
entrepreneur emerges as a volatile figure prone to undercut the very systems whose
authority he is meant to facilitate. Talking about the entrepreneur, in other words, is to talk
about a great many other things at the same time. What story unfolds when we follow this
pervasive and slippery figure between cultural history, economic theory, and literary form?
My argument evolves over several stages, corresponding to the chapters of the dissertation. We first meet the entrepreneur in the theoretical writings of French economist Jean-Baptiste Say, who over the first three decades of the nineteenth century developed the first complete economic theory of the entrepreneur. During the July Monarchy, Say and his contemporaries, Honoré de Balzac among them, witnessed the explosion of the social sciences, including economics, as rigorous and structured endeavors to explain all the variances of human social and economic behavior. Theorizing entrepreneurship was a project that fit right in: how can economics make sense of the contingent and unpredictable behavior of an individual economic agent? As Chapter 1 shows, the entrepreneur is not an economic agent like any other: he is a special sort of economic agent whose daily commercial transactions make up the very fabric of the market. In Say’s terms, an entrepreneur is one who directs market operations, making sure that resources are allocated, that new opportunities are pursued, that companies are created, that manufacturing is optimized, and that currency and credit are directed into the most useful channels. In short, the entrepreneur constitutes the market. Indeed, he personifies it: as the era writes him, the entrepreneur combines all the qualities, skills, and knowledge of economic practice in one mind.

What is the utility of such a characterization? He solves a problem that troubled economic theory and the nascent social sciences, not to mention popular discourse on the emerging business class and French capitalism. If the July Monarchy saw the explosion of systems—mathematical models to predict social behavior, self-regulating systems that function autonomously, scientific catalogs that encyclopedize human multiplicity—it also needed a way to make those systems palatable. Rosanvallon describes the market as “un mode de prise de décision dans lequel aucune intention n’intervient” (vi). However, recent writing in cognitive theory has found evidence for the fact that when it comes to understanding something like the economic
market’s impersonal autonomy, “attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being) is by far the easiest way of understanding it . . . coming up with an explanation of the complex system's behavior and predicting what it will do next” (Simon Baron-Cohen, quoted in Zunshine 272). As economic theorist Friedrich Hayek writes, economics’ passion for systems comes paired with a “rationalistic individualism which wants to see in everything the product of conscious individual reason . . . which wants all social activity to be recognizably part of a single coherent plan” (25). The entrepreneur is thus a personality—a charismatic, highly singular one—who puts a face on systems. By personifying an impersonal structure, the entrepreneur makes it believable. Even more importantly, he makes it controllable and knowable: he is used as an identifiable human consciousness who, for better or worse, promises that market operations are directed, efficient, and well thought out.

If the entrepreneur is, as I term it, the personification of the economic market, Chapter 2 understands him to be the personification of structure more broadly. The foundations of social theory, developed during the July Monarchy, used the entrepreneur as a figure who makes it possible to conceptualize system. With this in mind, it becomes possible to re-read a critic like Lukács, whose work on type is deeply indebted to a similar process of reconciling individual and system. Lukács’s writing presents Marxist totality as a system in which social structures are made visible and knowable; rhetorically, he too uses character as a way to make sense of structure. But a close reading of Lukács allows us to see another facet of the entrepreneur, one that Balzac’s novel César Birotteau performs for us in novelistic form. The entrepreneur personifies structure, yes, but he does it with a narrative twist. He personifies structure by knowing it: he represents a point of view from which underlying structures can be seen, and can be seen as orderly.

Indeed, the problem of structure and totality that faces July Monarchy social scientists no less than Marxist criticism and, as we shall see, theories of the novel, can be
recast as a problem of visibility and point of view. How can we tell that a system exists? By seeing and knowing it, with the masterful eye and convincing expertise of an entrepreneur. When we arrive at a narrative analysis of point of view, and the experimental form of Balzac’s novel of finance *La Maison Nucingen*, we begin to appreciate how rhetorically complex the entrepreneur’s figuration really is. Chapter 3 learns from Balzac’s narrative deployment of entrepreneurship the rhetorical strategies that underlie capitalism.

If the market exists as a system only through the projected *knowledge* of the entrepreneur, the entrepreneur himself is consistently portrayed as mysterious, inscrutable, and opaque. Though he is offered as a highly visible, indeed charismatic, figure for seeing the economy and knowing its order, we can never see what he sees or know what he knows. Because of this narrative break in vision and knowledge, the entrepreneur is able to work in two incompatible manners. Because his own mastery remains convincing, we believe in the economy as an orderly system. However, because his point of view remains inaccessible, we can never verify that orderliness for ourselves. As a result, economic systematicity relies on a technique of displacement and imagined knowledge: a literary strategy rather than a social scientific one.

In the first three chapters, I use literary analysis to teach us about the entrepreneur. The remaining two chapters turn the tables. I ask instead what the entrepreneur has to teach us about literary analysis, and specifically about approaches to novel theory. Having seen that the entrepreneur personifies social scientific notions of system, we can understand how, in Balzacian realism, an entrepreneur character such as Vautrin also personifies novelistic totality and focalizes realist knowledge through his proleptic point of view. Chapter 4 uses Balzac’s 1843 novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* to take a departure from common approaches to Balzac that focus on the authority of his omniscient narrator. *Splendeurs et misères* does not itself perform realism as much as it projects realism through Vautrin’s point of view. Vautrin is delegated many of the functions of omniscience: he plots and directs the
plot as well as any author or narrator, and as well as the entrepreneur directs the marketplace. But, like all entrepreneurs, his knowledge and point of view are inaccessible: realist totality is projected through an inscrutable point of view, and it is only fully actualized outside the realist narrator’s discourse.

Balzac shows us that, to the extent that the entrepreneur works to ground systems and make them conceivable, he does so by projecting the possibility of system beyond what is visible and knowable to anyone but himself. As such, the entrepreneur easily slips into a figure for the impossibility of system and the futility of efforts to truly grasp economic knowledge. When we turn for comparison to the novels of William Faulkner, we see this possibility fully enacted. Chapter 5 considers Faulkner’s Flem Snopes, an entrepreneur who, in addition to being all-knowing, masterful, and inscrutably mysterious, is also silent. While Balzac’s novels help us understand the entrepreneur’s narrative strategies of vision, Faulkner expands the discussion to considerations of speech and dialogism. Faulkner’s narrators try to predict Flem by drawing him into the speech community, but what Faulkner ultimately shows is that it is precisely in the gaps left by dialogue, in the narrative breaks between coherent stories and novelistic systems, that entrepreneurs find their most profitable business. In the end, Faulkner moves the entrepreneur beyond the systems and theories he was initially devised to represent. His novels, in their innovative narrative experiments, instead find a way to register the temporal and perspectival breaks in system, which are also the proper domain of entrepreneurial practice.

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Moving from Balzac to Faulkner tells another story, one that shadows the rhetorical and literary history of the entrepreneur. It is a story that reflects on processes of thought common to economics, literature, and criticism. The entrepreneur figures a way of thinking
about and knowing economics—a way of thinking that is deeply narrative. Our discoveries about the entrepreneur’s role in economic discourse also apply to the entrepreneur’s less explicit but equally interesting role in discourses of realism and the novel. As such, my dissertation launches an inquiry into contemporary criticism, its own multidisciplinary history, and the narrative underpinnings of conceptual practices shared across disciplines.

The July Monarchy in France saw the development of the social sciences into modern disciplines, disciplines that were dedicated to making sense of social behavior as system. The period also saw Balzac develop high novelistic realism, crafting systems of complex plots and multiple characters into a model of social totality. In both contexts, we can ask: what is the role of personality in founding a science, and a novelistic genre, of system? This is the question of the entrepreneur, foregrounded in this dissertation. But another important question must be asked, this time about methodology. To say that the July Monarchy—the writings of Say, Balzac, and the other social scientists we will encounter—saw the nascence of modern social science and novelistic realism, is to say that the July Monarchy saw the nascence of our own contemporary reading practices.

Those reading practices have not changed much: as we explore the rhetoric of the entrepreneur, it becomes increasingly evident that today’s discourses about personality and systems, the role of character in the novel, and social and novelistic totality, have been inherited from the July Monarchy. Marx learned how to theorize economic change by studying class conflict and the advent of capitalism in nineteenth century France. Lukács learned how to theorize literary character from Balzac, who in turn learned his literary techniques of characterization in dialogue with July Monarchy social scientific, economic, and statistical models of personality. All these writers are fundamental to many contemporary theories of novelistic realism, which retain an emphasis on underlying structure and a belief that it can be made visible through literary form and especially through character.
The discourses used today to understand July Monarchy culture and specifically the novels of Balzac, are thus discourses already put into place, indeed shaped and predicted, by those early nineteenth century writers. Recognizing this continuity, or even circularity, allows us to step outside of canonical approaches. It should not be surprising to find in Balzac evidence for a totalizing novelistic structure; after all, we know to look for novelistic totality because we have learned to do so from Balzac. But what happens when we shift the inquiry to ask: what strategies does Balzac employ to craft and convey the notion of a novelistic totality, a notion that has remained so convincingly in the forefront of critical analysis? The answer here is surprising, as it goes against received notions of Balzacian realism. Balzac uses character rather than narrator to establish the possibility of realist totality, and he establishes that possibility through displacement and projection out of the text rather than through an encyclopedic enactment of authorial mastery.

Inquiring into the building blocks of novelistic totality continues to yield surprising results when we come to Faulkner. Connections between Balzac and Faulkner are myriad. Both craft a distilled model of society through novels that overlap characters, plots, and places, and Faulkner references Balzac in numerous plot and character points. Both authors write at times of great economic change: Balzac’s July Monarchy and Faulkner’s post-Reconstruction American South have been characterized as transitions to capitalism when an agrarian economy shifted into an industrial and commercial one; a hierarchical social order transformed into an egalitarian or at least money-based one; and small-scale and community-based local business were displaced by large-scale factory industries and increasingly abstract financial and corporate forms.

If Faulkner, like Balzac, is read against the historical backdrop of the transition to capitalism, he is also, like Balzac, read through the critical lens of novelistic totality. Readers of Faulkner often appeal to Bakhtin’s dialogism to argue that Faulkner’s novels model social and economic structure through voice. As in the case of Balzac, claims about totality may be
accurate descriptions of one level of discourse in the novels—most often, the narrators’.

However, when we take into account the peculiar work of the entrepreneur, we find that both authors’ totalities are neither realist nor modernist, neither panoptic nor dialogic. Instead, they each use entrepreneur characters to open a novelistic register of economic thought that is not systematic but quite fleeting, a register that, though economic, is constructed with techniques of narrative form.

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To fully understand the function of the entrepreneur, this dissertation mobilizes an interdisciplinary reading practice grounded in narrative analysis. The narrative method here focuses on several analytic categories: characterization, point of view, voice, omniscience, novelistic totality, and genre categories such as realism. But my narrative method does not treat these as distinct categories; instead, I look for the ways that they reinforce one another. The entrepreneur’s characterization, for instance, affords him a certain point of view that affects the representation of novelistic totality. The genre of realism is a representational mode linked to certain uses of omniscience, but those uses can be challenged by experiments in voice or point of view. In other words, narrative tools work together, and local strategies of voice or character can affect larger structural modes such as realism or novelistic totality.

But it is also important to note that, in this work, I use readings in narrative form as the building block of interdisciplinary analysis. In so doing, I posit a methodological claim that is twofold. First, I make a formal claim that, because much social science relies on narrative strategies, narrative analysis offers a special insight into social scientific thought. Second, I make a historical claim that literary form actively shapes social science and provides some of the rhetorical frameworks by which social science makes itself coherent. Many critical reading practices apply social scientific methods to literary analysis; however, when historicized, such practices can be traced back to the literary forms that shaped them.
The work of Michel Foucault has done especially much to link literary and social scientific questions. Foucault found deep and not altogether rational underpinnings to much of what post-Enlightenment Europe termed science, and subsequent work in literary studies has explicated how literary forms relate to general cultural discourses. When it comes to studies in realism, for example:

Realism or representation thus belong, not to a constrained ‘literary’ field, but to a cultural field in which its values of neutrality, mobility, and emergent form find expression in cultural practices at large . . . Philosophy, cosmology, physics, technology, politics, art, and education: a common system of value and organization prevails across the culture of representation in Europe (Ermarth 1073).

Foucault’s work lays the foundations for the sort of interdisciplinary reading practice I propose, one where rhetorical strategies incubated in one discipline can also shape another.

The transmission, however, is not unilateral. That social scientific discourses impact literary ones has been amply shown by Foucauldian works such as D.A. Miller’s The Novel and the Police. Here, I am more interested to show how literary discourses impact social scientific ones, especially economics. Literature itself has something to add to the Foucauldian hypotheses, and literary form itself plays a structuring role in the discourses of social science. After all, as the same critic above has noted, “Literary narratives have special prominence among cultural artifacts because they are the most highly achieved of cultural narratives, and thus the most accessible to interpretive use” (Ermarth 1072-73). Fredric Jameson too has argued that narrative form is one privileged mode for representing social relations, balancing as it does complex relations of person and history, inside and outside, subject and object (Marxism and Form, 189-190).

My work expands on these latter claims. In addition to offering a philosophically nuanced way of reading social relations, literary form often incubates rhetorical strategies that other cultural discourses then employ in efforts to authorize themselves. Marxists have used the notion of mediation to understand literary forms that do not directly express pre-
existing historical forms; I would like to propose even further that literary form often helps make sense of and indeed constitutes emerging historical forms—in this case, the transition to capitalism. I emphasize literature and economics’ shared formal and rhetorical strategies in order to elucidate a bilateral encounter, rather than a causal trickle-down from economic reality to literary representation. This is the crux of my departure from most critical work on literature and economics. To clarify this departure, let me briefly introduce some of the main approaches to literature and economics, approaches that are taken up in greater detail throughout the chapters.

Many of the connections to economics drawn by literary analysis rely on mimetic similarities between particular characters and plot turns, and particular events in economic history. Entrepreneur characters are often read in this allegorical manner: as avatars of new economic forms or figureheads for emerging capitalism. Balzac’s salesman Gaudissart “incarne tout le dynamisme et tout le développement d’une société libérée [incarnates all the dynamism and development of a liberated society]” (Barbéris, preface to L’Illustre Gaudissart, 556). A banker featured in César Birotteau is “a remarkable symbol of this extension of commerce into speculation” (Pugh 186-187). Meanwhile, Faulkner’s Flem Snopes represents “the point reached by advanced capitalism, as made manifest by Flem’s machinelike methods” (Banta 311; my emphasis). Allegorical readings that read characters’ behaviors or personalities mimetically seem easy to dismiss in principle. However, they evidence a reading practice very much still alive and very much at the heart of many theoretical approaches to the novel: the idea that underlying historical structures such as the transition to capitalism can be, to quote a passage above, “made manifest” through character. Be it through behavior or, as in the work of Bakhtin, through voice, character offers the promise of mapping social totalities and making them knowable. This is the promise of the entrepreneur, and it is because they belie novel theory’s inheritance from early social science that allegorical reading practices bear closer inquiry.
Much critical analysis of literature and economics has moved away from allegorical readings, to focus on form rather than plot. The work of Marc Shell, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Walter Benn Michaels has set the stage for a semiotic approach to both literature and economics. These writers have found that linguistic systems resemble currency systems: money is coined and circulated much like language, and the economy operates with the same self-referentiality and unanchored signification that semiotics has found in literature. As Goux puts it,

> If writing, in the narrow sense, has slowly detached itself from the original conditions in which words are exchanged by living speakers present to one another, scriptural money has become detached from the concrete conditions of commercial exchange, pursuing the internal logic of the autonomization of the signifier, a logic most visible in banking and brokerage systems (120).

I quote this passage because it conveys some of the methodological issues of interdisciplinary work in literature and economics. A semiotic approach that attends to language may be more nuanced than a characterological one that attends to allegory; however, it shares with the allegorical approach a commitment to mimesis. Linguistic and financial forms reflect one another; they work according to similar cultural rules; they evidence the same economic shifts. Whether one speaks of character or writing, the impetus is the same: to reveal underlying economic structures and to find a model in which economic change makes sense. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Goux also draws on a vocabulary of system to link linguistic and monetary signs. In other words, literature and economics can be conceptualized together by positing a mimetic similarity between their underlying structures.

In contrast, the approach I propose here comes several steps earlier: where does the notion of system come from, in either literature or economics? Literature and economics may share rhetorical strategies, but that is not tantamount to saying that they mimetically reflect or express one another; instead, rhetorical similarities may speak to their intertwined
intellectual histories. Deirdre Lynch’s 1998 *The Economy of Character* offers another interdisciplinary approach, one that does not assume a mimetic relation between literature and economics but rather discusses how the two were shaped in dialectical relation to one another. Writing about eighteenth and nineteenth century British literature, Lynch studies literary character in the context of economic history. She traces how the very notion of “character” came to be defined, from what we now term “flat” characters to the fully interiorized characters of realist novels. Lynch argues that notions of character were transformed by pressures from a rapidly changing commercial society to accommodate new needs of readers. As she puts it, readers found in characters a “coping mechanism” “to renegotiate social relations in their changed, commercialized world . . . to cope with the embarrassment of riches” (4-5). Here, Lynch’s work recalls recent critics on the novel such as Nancy Armstrong and Margaret Cohen, both of whom argue that literature domesticates and makes palatable economics and politics. Literature and economics are not treated mimetically here: they may work in tandem and towards the same goal, but they do so dynamically and often in opposition.

Whereas Lynch focuses on character subjectivity and reader sentiment, and I focus on character as a rhetorical nexus in social science theory, we share a commitment to historicize a seemingly ahistorical narrative term such as character, and to make sense of it as an active cultural strategy. Nevertheless, there remains an important difference between my approach and that of all the critics described above. In the passages above, Lynch refers to a “changed, commercialized world,” which for Goux is characterized by “the autonomization of the signifier.” They both assume something that we all purportedly know: the story of the transition to capitalism, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and all its accompanying rhetoric of depersonalization, abstraction, and financial speculation. Indeed, most literary critics take this set of ideas for granted when they refer to economics. Before Margaret Cohen, for example, launches her analysis of early nineteenth century French popular texts,
she sketches out the received notion of capitalism as economic background: “the conjunction of the capitalist logic of surplus value, industrialization, urbanization, and the increasing atomization and abstraction of the bourgeois-dominated social formation” (1995, 227).

Christopher Prendergast, in order to discuss the relationship between authors and readers in the nineteenth century, reminds us that “the relationship between writer and reader tends to become a basically economic one, mediated by the workings of the market, that is, by something essentially impersonal” (1978, 20).

But the question of the transition to capitalism—is there such a thing? when did it occur? is the economics the same as the culture of capitalism?—is a matter of much debate among economic historians. It is certainly not a settled story that can be gestured at easily, or taken for granted as background. I do not propose to offer a more historically exact rendition of capitalism’s origins and its economic veracity; rather, given capitalism’s historical instability, I propose that we study the rhetorical effects and strategies that nonetheless make critics such as Cohen and Prendergast so certain that there exists a coherent economic system. One key strategy, of course, is the entrepreneur. By sheer force of personality, he convinces us to overlook historical complexity, and to believe in economic orderliness and distinct phases of economic change that we cannot see for ourselves.

Among some economists, not only the content of economic history but the methodology of economic analysis has been called into question. The “rhetoric of economics” movement studies economics as a rhetorical system rather than objective science. The writings of Deirdre McCloskey especially study the uses of metaphor and storytelling in economic theory. Understanding that economics, too, is a rhetorically crafted endeavor and that it draws upon narrative strategies when useful is, of course, essential to my project. However, just as literary studies often assume a simplified version of economic history, economic rhetoricians, even those committed to incorporating techniques of literary analysis, often end up with a simplified version of literary form. McCloskey makes a fundamental
contribution by noting the fact that economics uses narrative, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. “Narrative” involves a highly complex set of tools that goes far beyond what McCloskey reduces to “storytelling”: among those tools are character, point of view, omniscience, and voice, not to mention psychoanalytic categories such as displacement and projection.

In a survey of current approaches to the interdisciplinary relation between literature and economics, the 1999 collection *New Economic Criticism* recommends a meta-theoretical approach that analyzes the “practices, presumptions, and protocols of economic criticism itself” (38). In my view, this is best achieved through a fully complex and layered account of narrative. Equally essential is sensitivity to the fact that literary and economic discourse developed in historical dialogue, and that subsequent similarities between the two should invite attention to their shared rhetorical geneology. It is testament to the rich interdisciplinarity embedded in literary form that the meta-theoretical approach offered in the following chapters emerges from the intricacies of narrative practice.
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