For the past few decades the teaching of fiction in England and the United States has been radically affected by the appearance of two books: Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) and Dorothy Van Ghent’s *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953). While Booth may be more widely discussed in professional forums, Van Ghent is the more influential in terms of her effects upon the teaching of fiction in America and England. Van Ghent’s essays have provided models for teachers of fiction on how to approach a novel in terms of its organizing aesthetic principles. Prior to Van Ghent, high school courses discussed plot in terms of the students’ own lives, while undergraduate novel courses wavered uneasily between plot synopsis, biography, history, and sociology. Yet although Booth’s importance has been recognized by both Anglo-American critics and European theorists who appreciate his methodological clarity, Van Ghent’s significance has been neglected. I think that there are two reasons for this neglect. Because her theory is gradually presented in a series of essays about specific novels, the implications of her conceptual framework have not been acknowledged even by those who appreciate the subtlety and power of her readings of English novels that span a spectrum from *Moll Flanders* to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But the more important reason is that the book’s deliberate
effort to emphasize method rather than theory has made her less interesting to the present generation of theorists. She wrote in a tradition which used method to illuminate theory. Van Ghent’s remarkable book is worth renewed attention for several reasons: (a) It is the best history of the form of the English novel; (b) virtually every one of its brilliant and provocative readings has fathered a plethora of derivative articles and books; (c) implicit in its individual readings is a formal theory of the novel which is not only applicable to any text, but, along with Booth, forms the intellectual base of much current Anglo-American novel criticism and probably the majority of undergraduate and graduate surveys of the English novel. With Booth, Van Ghent is responsible for the non-contextualist approach that often distinguishes courses in the English novel from courses in American fiction. While Booth focuses on what a novel does, specifically how it persuades the reader, Van Ghent treats a novel as a representation of human experience. Each novel is a discrete ontology with its own physical and moral geography. But Van Ghent’s concept of the novel includes an awareness that the imagined world was created at a specific time and place and necessarily reflects them. She attempts to show how major novels mime both the external world of the time they were written and the world inhabited by the contemporary reader. Generally she uses internal rather than contextual evidence to establish the world in which the novel was written.

At a time when the aesthetic formalism of the New Criticism was struggling with fiction, Van Ghent realized that fiction’s length and variety require different critical assumptions. She found the model she needed in Gestalt psychology which seeks to apprehend phenomena as functions with organized configurations rather than as distinct, isolated, discrete perceptions. ‘A novel itself is one complex pattern, or Gestalt, made up of component ones. In it inhere such a vast number of traits, all organized in subordinate systems that function under the governance of a single meaningful structure, that the nearest similitude for a novel is a ‘world’. This is a useful similitude because it reflects the rich multiplicity of the novel’s elements and, at the same time, the unity of the novel as a self-defining body’ (p. 6).\(^1\) Gestalt psychology sees human events as dynamic patterns that constantly move and shift into new fields of perception, fields that are only static until modified by the next perception. It seeks to locate the fundamental principles which tie disparate data together and to propose self-regulating principles which will account for new data.