



Reading the
**Eighteenth-Century
Novel**

David H. Richter

WILEY Blackwell

Reading the Eighteenth-Century Novel

READING THE NOVEL

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Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
1 The World That Made the Novel	1
2 <i>Oroonoko</i> (1688)	34
3 <i>Moll Flanders</i> (1722)	51
4 <i>Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded</i> (1740)	66
5 <i>The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling</i> (1749)	81
6 <i>The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.</i> (1759–1767)	100
7 <i>Evelina: The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World</i> (1778)	117
8 <i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i> (1794)	131
9 <i>Things As They Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams</i> (1794)	151
10 <i>Waverley, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since</i> (1814)	171
11 <i>Emma</i> (1815)	189
12 The World the Novel Made	213
Selected Further Reading	226
Index	232

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Chapter 1

The World That Made the Novel

This book is about reading the English novel during the “long eighteenth century,” a stretch of time that, in the generally accepted ways of breaking up British literary history into discrete periods for university courses, begins some time after the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660 and ends around 1830, before the reign of Queen Victoria. At the beginning of this period, the novel can hardly be said to exist, and writing prose fiction is a mildly disreputable literary activity. Around 1720, Daniel Defoe’s fictional autobiographies spark continuations and imitations, and in the 1740s, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding’s novels begin what is perceived as “a new kind of writing.” By the end of the period, with Jane Austen and Walter Scott, the novel has not only come into existence, it has developed into a more-or-less respectable genre, and in fact publishers have begun to issue series of novels (edited by Walter Scott and by Anna Barbauld, among others) that establish for that time, if not necessarily for ours, a canon of the English novel. With the decline of the English drama and the almost complete eclipse of the epic,¹ the novel has become by default the serious literary long form, on its way to becoming by the mid-nineteenth century, with Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot, the pre-eminent genre of literature. This chapter will consider how and why the novel came to be when it did.

The Novel before the Novel

But before we get to that story, we need to make sure that it’s the right story to be telling. Margaret Doody argues on the first page of her provocatively titled *The True Story of the Novel* that “the Novel as a form of literature in the West has

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a continuous history of about two thousand years.” She is certainly right that long form prose fiction goes back to the Greek romances of the first through fourth centuries CE: the earliest is probably Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and the best-known Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*. These were tales of lovers, usually nobly born, beautiful and chaste, whose flight from parental opposition leads them into incredible dangers surmounted by unbelievable artifices. For example, in *Leucippe and Clitophon* (second-century romance by Achilles Tatius) the lovers are shipwrecked, then captured by bandits, who proceed to sacrifice Leucippe and, after disemboweling her, to eat her liver; Clitophon, who has observed this from afar, wants to commit suicide until he is informed by his clever servant that Leucippe is alive, thanks to a wandering actor who impersonated the priest and used a retractable dagger – a theatrical prop he happened to have with him—along with some animal’s blood and entrails, to simulate the sacrifice.

.....

By evening we had filled and crossed the trench, and I went to the coffin prepared to stab myself. “Leucippe,” I cried, “thy death is lamentable not only because violent and in a strange land, but because thou hast been sacrificed to purify the most impure; because thou didst look upon thine own anatomy; because thy body and thy bowels have received an accursed sepulchre, the one here, the other in such wise that their burial has become the nourishment of robbers. And this the gods saw unmoved, and accepted such an offering! But now receive from me thy fitting libation.” About to cut my throat, I saw two men running up, and paused, thinking that they were pirates and would kill me. They were Menelaus and Satyrus! Still I could not rejoice in their safety, and I resisted their attempt to take my sword. “If you deprive me of this sword, wherewith I would end my sorrows in death, the inward sword of my grief will inflict deathless sorrows upon me. Let me die: Leucippe dead, I will not live.” “Leucippe lives!” said Menelaus, and, tapping upon the coffin, he summoned her to testify to his veracity. Leucippe actually rose, disembowelled as she was, and rushed to my embrace.

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Doody’s claim that “Romance and the Novel are one” (15) has generally been found unconvincing. Although Doody can point to a group of “tropes” (general plot points and themes, like erotic desire and generational conflict) that one can find in both the Greek romances and the English novel of the eighteenth century, this is a very weak claim, since they can be found without looking very hard pretty much everywhere else in literature. Her stronger claim – that these “tropes” are moments in the worship-service of the Mother Goddess, which continues in the novel into our own day – has generally been met with ridicule.

But the genre of romance was certainly around and being read in the eighteenth century. It was viewed as the competition, though: many of the most important eighteenth-century novelists insisted on defining their work in opposition to, rather than within, the genre of romance.

The other genre of prose fiction current during this late classical period is the Menippean satire, exemplified by Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, and Petronius' *Satyricon* (both first-century CE). These were episodic tales primarily ridiculing the behavior and pretensions of wealthy middle-class citizens of the Roman empire. Here's a sample from the *Satyricon*; the narrator is a guest at an over-the-top dinner in the mansion of a parvenu ex-slave named Trimalchio:

.....

I inquired who that woman could be who was scurrying about hither and yon in such a fashion. "She's called Fortunata," he replied. "She's the wife of Trimalchio, and she measures her money by the peck. And only a little while ago, what was she! May your genius pardon me, but you would not have been willing to take a crust of bread from her hand. Now, without rhyme or reason, she's in the seventh heaven and is Trimalchio's factotum, so much so that he would believe her if she told him it was dark when it was broad daylight! As for him, he don't know how rich he is, but this harlot keeps an eye on everything and where you least expect to find her, you're sure to run into her. She's temperate, sober, full of good advice, and has many good qualities, but she has a scolding tongue, a very magpie on a sofa, those she likes, she likes, but those she dislikes, she dislikes! Trimalchio himself has estates as broad as the flight of a kite is long, and piles of money. There's more silver plate lying in his steward's office than other men have in their whole fortunes! And as for slaves, damn me if I believe a tenth of them knows the master by sight.

.....

Both romance and fictional satire, prose versions of tragedy and comedy, continue into the high middle ages and the Renaissance in different forms. In the Middle Ages the dominant form was the chivalric romance; in English the longest, most detailed, and most artistic of these is Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* published 1485 by Caxton.

.....

So after the quest of the Sangreal was fulfilled, and all knights that were left alive were come again unto the Table Round, as the book of the Sangreal maketh mention, then was there great joy in the court; and in especial King Arthur and Queen Guenever made great joy of the remnant that were come home, and passing glad was the king and the queen of Sir Launcelot and of Sir Bors, for they had been passing long away in the quest of the Sangreal.

Then, as the book saith, Sir Launcelot began to resort unto Queen Guenever again, and forgat the promise and the perfection that he made in the quest. For, as the book saith, had not Sir Launcelot been in his privy thoughts and in his mind so set inwardly to the queen as he was in seeming outward to God, there had no knight passed him in the quest of the Sangreal; but ever his thoughts were privily on the queen, and so they loved together more hotter than they did to-forehand, and had such privy draughts together, that many in the court spake of it, and in especial Sir Agravaine, Sir Gawaine's brother, for he was ever open-mouthed.

So befell that Sir Launcelot had many resorts of ladies and damosels that daily resorted unto him, that besought him to be their champion, and in all such matters of right Sir Launcelot applied him daily to do for the pleasure of Our Lord, Jesu Christ. And ever as much as he might he withdrew him from the company and fellowship of Queen Guenever, for to eschew the slander and noise; wherefore the queen waxed wroth with Sir Launcelot. And upon a day she called Sir Launcelot unto her chamber, and said thus: Sir Launcelot, I see and feel daily that thy love beginneth to slake, for thou hast no joy to be in my presence, but ever thou art out of this court, and quarrels and matters thou hast nowadays for ladies and gentlewomen more than ever thou wert wont to have aforehand.

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Fictional satire also continues, usually in shorter forms, of which the best known are the comic tales in the *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio and the fabliau, which English-speaking readers know best in the bawdy stories in rhyming couplets told by the Miller and the Reeve in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

There is a genuine flowering of Elizabethan prose fiction but it, nevertheless, does not produce anything remotely like the eighteenth-century novel. One strand, that of the long form romance, long form, is the **pastoral**; these are English texts usually mixing prose and poetry, such as Sidney's *Arcadia* (1580; *New Arcadia* 1586) and Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621). Some of the shorter and less elaborate versions of prose romance served as the sources of Shakespeare's comedies, like Thomas Lodge's lyrical *Rosalynde* (1590), which became *As You Like It*, and Robert Greene's acerbic *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* (1588), which became *The Winter's Tale*. Behind the poetic prose of these romances stands John Lyly's *Euphues* (1578), a homiletic conduct book written in a style with elaborately balanced phrases, which has given its name to the genre. This style can be seen in the following soliloquy from *Pandosto*, in which Franion (on whom Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* is based) meditates whether he should follow his sovereign's orders to kill the queen:

.....

Ah Franion, treason is loved of many, but the traitor hated of all. Unjust offences may for a time escape without danger, but never without revenge. Thou art servant

to a king, and must obey at command. Yet, Franion, against law and conscience it is not good to resist a tyrant with arms nor to please an unjust king with obedience. What shalt thou do? Folly refuseth gold, and frenzy preferment; wisdom seeketh after dignity, and counsel looketh for gain. Egistus is a stranger to thee, and Pandosto thy sovereign. Thou hast little cause to respect the one, and oughtest to have great care to obey the other. Think this, Franion, that a pound of gold is worth a tun of lead, great gifts are little gods, and preferment to a mean man is a whetstone to courage. There is nothing sweeter than promotion, nor lighter than report. Care not then though most count thee a traitor, so all call thee rich.

.....

But some of the more interesting prose fiction of the sixteenth century is explicitly antiromantic: **coney-catching pamphlets** like those of Robert Greene, explaining petty criminals' methods. The tradition goes back to the Spanish **picaresque** in *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and *Guzman de Alfaraches* (1598), which inspired works like Deloney's *Thomas of Reading* (1598?) and Thomas Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveler* (1594) – possibly the most readable of the Elizabethan novellas today. Here Jack Wilton convinces a credulous innkeeper that enemies at Henry VIII's court have plotted against him, telling the king that he sells his alcoholic cider to the enemy:

.....

Oh, quoth he, I am bought & solde for doing my Country such good service as I haue done. They are afraid of mee, because my good deedes haue brought me into such estimation with the communalty, I see, I see it is not for the lambe to liue with the wolfe.

The world is well amended, thought I, with your Sidership ... Answere me, quoth he, my wise young *Wilton*, is it true that I am thus vnderhand dead and buried by these bad tongues?

Nay, quoth I, you shall pardon me, for I haue spoken too much alreadie, no definitiue sentence of death shall march out of my wel meaning lips, they haue but lately suckt milke, and shall they so sodainly change theyr food and seeke after bloud?

Oh but, quoth he, a mans friend is his friend, fill the other pint Tapster, what sayd the king, did hee beleue it when hee heard it, I pray thee say, I sweare to thee by my nobility, none in the worlde shall euer be made priuie, that I receiued anie light of this matter from thee.

That firme affiance, quoth I, had I in you before, or else I would neuer haue gone so farre ouer the shoes, to plucke you out of the mire. Not to make many wordes (since you will needs know) the king saies flatly, you are a miser & a snudge, and he neuer hopt better of you. Nay then (quoth he) questionlesse some planet that loues not syder hath conspired against me.

.....

So romance and satiric anti-romance developed in various forms for around 1500 years before a dialectical synthesis of the two genres explicitly took shape in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1607). These episodic tales about the country gentleman Alonso Quijano, whose reading of chivalric tales have created in him the delusion that he is the noble Don Quixote, could be said to initiate the European novel. *Don Quixote* is translated into English by Thomas Shelton as early as 1612, but it is surprising how little Cervantes affects the course of prose fiction in English, until Henry Fielding nearly 150 years later set his quixotic Parson Adams onto the high road in *Joseph Andrews* (1742).

The flowering of the Elizabethan period is followed by a relative desert in the seventeenth century. There are influential works of prose fiction, such as the lengthy pastoral romances translated from the French, for example, Honoré D'Urfé's *Astrée* (translated as the *Romance of Astrea and Celadon*, 5399 pages, published in stages from 1607 to 1627); and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Grand Cyrus* and *Clélie* published in the 1650s). But there is no canonical English text of prose fiction until John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), which puts to use colloquial, racy language in its homiletic allegory. In a more minor vein, the line of romance is carried forward by two Restoration playwrights, Aphra Behn and William Congreve, in *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* (1688) and *Incognita* (1690). *Oroonoko* is discussed in all its complexities in Chapter 2. *Incognita*, unfortunately out of print, reads a bit like a "novelization" of a Restoration comedy with a marriage plot: Congreve has hit upon a way of writing fiction using comic form; what he lacks is a way of making us visualize the characters and the reality of the dramatic situation without the presence of stage actors. In other words he "tells" his story but does not know how to "show" it.

The movement of the picaresque and its combination with other nonfictional genres like the spiritual autobiography and the lives of notorious criminals can be seen in texts like Francis Kirkman's *The Counterfeit Lady Unveiled, or the History of Mary Carleton*, a retelling of the nonfictional story of a notorious imposter, bigamist, and thief of that name who ended her life on the gallows in 1673. These nonfictional genres become important in the lineage of Daniel Defoe, who would use the various lives of Carleton and other criminals in his own fiction (particularly his most accomplished impersonations, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*). Lennard Davis suggested in *Factual Fictions* (1983) that it was nonfictional work of this sort – biography, spiritual confession, and crime news – that contributed most to the development of the novel in the eighteenth century. But it is interesting and true that the seventeenth century, the period when English prose is acquiring its fluidity and rapidity of effect – the sort of change you see when you move from Sidney to Dryden – is also a time when there are no canonical or even semi-canonical fictions. Nothing we

would want to call a novel really gets published until the eighteenth century in England, doubting that gets us nowhere, but accounting for why it happened then and there is the real problem.

The Rise of the Novel

Probably the most influential single book on the eighteenth century novel was Ian Watt's: *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). There had been chronological studies of fiction before – including an encyclopedic ten-volume *History of the English Novel* by Ernest Baker – but Watt's was the first book to pose the question of historical causation.

It is important to understand how Ian Watt posed the question: he accepts the general assumption that the English novel starts with Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, but that there was no common influence among the three, so that understanding why the novel sprung up when it did is a matter of understanding what preparation the general culture had made for the appearance of a new genre and form of text.

.....

There are still no wholly satisfactory answers to many of the general questions which anyone interested in the early eighteenth-century novelists and their works is likely to ask: Is the novel a new literary form? And if we assume, as is commonly done, that it is, and that it was begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, how does it differ from the prose fiction of the past, from that of Greece, for example, or that of the Middle Ages, or of seventeenth-century France? And is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?

Such large questions are never easy to approach, much less to answer, and they are particularly difficult in this case because Defoe, Richardson and Fielding do not in the usual sense constitute a literary school. Indeed their works show so little sign of mutual influence and are so different in nature that at first sight it appears that our curiosity about the rise of the novel is unlikely to find any satisfaction other than the meager one afforded by the terms 'genius' and 'accident,' the twin faces on the Janus of the dead ends of literary history. We cannot, of course, do without them: on the other hand there is not much we can do with them. The present inquiry therefore takes another direction: assuming that the appearance of our first three novelists within a single generation was probably not sheer accident, and that their geniuses could not have created the new form unless the conditions of the time had also been favorable, it attempts to discover what these favorable conditions in the literary and social situation were, and in what ways Defoe, Richardson and Fielding were its beneficiaries. (9)

.....

Formal Realism

Watt identifies the novel proper with the literary technique he calls “formal realism,” which is defined in terms of the text’s explicit notation of the circumstantiality of the dramatic events. In terms of the history of thought, “formal realism” is the literary equivalent of what he calls the “realist” philosophy of Descartes and Locke, with their emphasis on *particulars* as the basis of knowledge, and the source of all abstract or general ideas, and on knowledge as growing from our *individual experience* of specific times and places, rather than by authorities or by abstract principles derived a priori. Watt doesn’t exactly say that Defoe couldn’t have written without Locke, but the implication of the dependence of literary on philosophical realism is that we don’t need to look earlier than the 1680s for the philosophical roots of the literary phenomenon.

Individualism

Watt saw formal realism, especially that of Defoe, as going hand in hand with a belief in individualism, in the sense that the individual is viewed as able to define and master his or her own fate, rather than having to find a role relative to a group or a hieratic system of authority. This belief Watt identifies with the social movements favoring Protestantism and capitalism.

.....

The novel’s serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people seems to depend upon ... that vast complex of interdependent factors denoted by the term ‘individualism’ ... The concept of individualism ... posits a whole society mainly governed by the idea of every individual’s intrinsic independence, both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past modes of thought and action denoted by the term ‘tradition’ – a force that is always social, not individual ... It is generally agreed that modern society is uniquely individualist ... and that of the many historical causes for its emergence two are of supreme importance – the rise of modern industrial capitalism and the spread of Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist or Puritan forms. (60)

.....

The Reading Public

In addition to these ideological factors, Watt proposed that the rise of the novel depended on the emergence of a different and larger middle-class reading public. The problem is that literacy beyond the ability to sign one’s name was rare at the beginning of the eighteenth century. There is no evidence for a mass

reading public at the time of Defoe, or even at the end of the eighteenth century – and Watt is well aware of this. Still, he feels that the slow, continual expansion of the reading public into the middle class (and among the household servants of the urban aristocracy and middle class as well) might have “tipped the balance” so that the money to be made would be made by appealing to the middle class interests.

.....
Evidence on the availability and use of leisure confirms the previous picture given of the composition of the reading public in the early eighteenth century. Despite a considerable expansion it still did not normally extend much further down the social scale than to tradesmen and shopkeepers, with the important exception of the more favored apprentices and indoor servants. Still, there had been additions, and they had been mainly recruited from among the increasingly prosperous and numerous social groups concerned with commerce and manufacture. This is important, for it is probable that this particular change alone, even if it was of comparatively minor proportions, may have altered the centre of gravity of the reading public sufficiently to place the middle class as a whole in a dominating position for the first time.

In looking for the effects of this change upon literature, no very direct or dramatic manifestations of middle-class tastes and capacities are to be expected, for the dominance of the middle class in the reading public had in any case been long preparing. One general effect of some interest for the rise of the novel, however, seems to follow from the change in the centre of gravity of the reading public. The fact that literature in the eighteenth century was addressed to an ever-widening audience must have weakened the relative importance of those readers with enough interest in classical and modern letters; and in return it may have increased the relative importance of those who desired an easier form of literary entertainment, even if it had little prestige among the literati It is certain that this change of emphasis was an essential permissive factor for the achievements of Defoe and Richardson. (47–9)

.....

Watt is particularly interested in the fact that women become an important element of the reading public in the eighteenth century, and that their interests were better served by those of the novel as it developed than by the traditional genres. (Women also become important as writers, a fact Watt is less interested in.) Another key issue is that the booksellers of the time – we would call them publishers – are replacing aristocratic patrons as the chief middlemen for the production of literature, which would have favored market forces (and therefore the interests of the middle classes) at the expense of traditional values and forms.

The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740

Watt's theory dominated the critical landscape for thirty years, until scholar Michael McKeon did an elaborate revision of Watt's vision of history. McKeon was in essential agreement with the way Watt set up the question – that the origins of the English novel are to be explained by explaining the social and intellectual preconditions that made possible writers like Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding.

One thing that is quite obviously wrong with Watt is that, while positing that the English novel begins with Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, the model he created did not really apply particularly well to Fielding. As Watt himself noted, the elements of "formal realism" are not as important in Fielding as they are in Richardson and Defoe: Unlike Defoe and Richardson, Fielding uses type names for his characters (like Allworthy and Thwackum), doesn't minutely describe furniture, clothing, and landscapes, frequently summarizes the content of people's utterances instead of minutely detailing what they say, and so on. And you can't possibly write Fielding out of the history of the novel, since he is so important for the later development of Smollett and Austen, and still later for Dickens and Thackeray.

In a more important sense, though, what is wrong with Watt, from McKeon's point of view, is that he simply doesn't go back far enough to find the roots of what happened to English society, and he doesn't dig deep enough. McKeon is a Marxist, so he would find Watt's three factors, individualism, Protestantism, and capitalism, all in the wrong order. First there must come the economic transformation of a society, then its social transformation, and finally the revolution in ideology that mediates, explains, and justifies the new relationships.

Mercantile capitalism had been displacing feudal agrarianism since the late fifteenth century as the source of English wealth, and the process is continuing throughout the period of the rise of the novel. But the catastrophe for the ideology of the feudal period is for McKeon the crucial period of the rise of the novel. McKeon sees the seventeenth century as the great watershed, the point at which the old ideologies collapse to be replaced by those of the modern world.

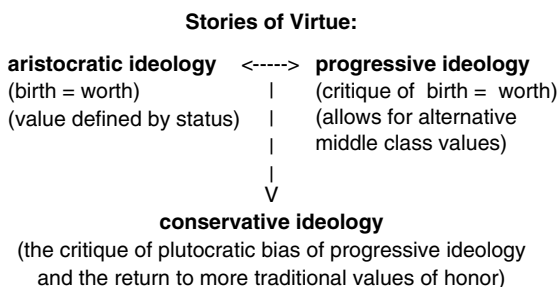
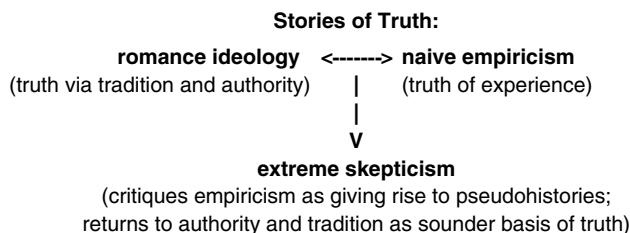
Like any good Marxist, McKeon sees these ideological shifts as happening in what we might call the plot form of transcendental dialectic, in which old ways of understanding the notions of truth and virtue call into being their opposites, and then the conflict between these hypostatized opposites calls into existence a third term, which partly recurs to the first, partly opposes it. These dialectics operate in what McKeon calls "Stories of Truth" and "Stories of Virtue":

.....

The novel ... attains its modern "institutional" stability and coherence at this time because of its unrivaled power both to formulate and to explain a set of

problems that are central to early modern experience. These may be understood as problems of categorial instability, which the novel, originating to resolve, also inevitably reflects. The first sort of instability with which the novel is concerned has to do with generic categories; the second, with social categories. The instability of generic categories registers an epistemological crisis, a major cultural transition to attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative The instability of social categories registers a cultural crisis in attitudes toward how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members Both pose problems of signification. What kind of authority or evidence is required of narrative to permit it to signify truth to its readers? What kind of social existence or behavior signifies the individual's virtue to others? (20)

We could diagram McKeon's dialectical oppositions thus:



McKeon's argument is not that his oppositional elements lead to a clear resolution, but rather that the novel as it develops is shaped from within by the tensions of the struggle. His epistemological dialectic describes a shift from an opposition between: (1) idealized romance plots, and (2) literally true stories narrated by individuals giving their subjective impressions, toward (3) a new sort of "truth" – an ideal of verisimilitude, in which fictional characters behave in the way real people would in their situations – which is precisely the kind of truth today's readers expect from the novel.

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* does not reproduce the literal experience of the title character's real-life counterpart, Alexander Selkirk; rather, the castaway plot, with all the minutely detailed events by which Robinson survives, is made to serve Robinson's fictional journey from the heedless adventurer to the Christian who accepts his worldly fate as part of God's providence. Similarly in terms of virtue, the conservative ideology critiques the excesses of both aristocratic and bourgeois values; Richardson's *Clarissa* positions his Christian heroine as threatened, and ultimately destroyed, both by the aristocratic Lovelace's pursuit of power and pleasure and by the emergent bourgeois Harlowe family's urgent need to pursue ever-greater wealth and status. And unlike Watt, McKeon clearly includes Fielding in his purview, although with Fielding it is primarily the authorial voice rather than the character-narrators of Defoe and Richardson that is the repository of the clearest vision of truth and virtue.

Causality and the Rise of the Novel

McKeon's explanation of the economic and social factors leading to the development of the English novel is so much more powerful than Watt's that one might think that was the end of the matter. In one sense, it may be too powerful, because the general factors McKeon is interested in – his stories of truth and stories of virtue – are not peculiar to narrative literature at all: we find them behind the drama and poetry of the eighteenth century, and indeed behind a good deal of the philosophical and historical writing as well.

And here again, as with Margaret Doody's theory, the issue is how we frame the vexed question of what we mean by "the novel." For McKeon, the "novel" whose origin he wants to explain takes a multiplicity of forms: Cervantes's satire on knightly romance, Bunyan's religious allegories, Defoe's pseudo-autobiographies, Swift's Menippean satire, Richardson's serious and tragic novels in letters, Fielding's comic and serious narratives and Sterne's strange mixture of sentimentality and satiric wit. Some of these forms have "legs": they continue and develop further in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while others are texts that have early modern or even medieval forebears but don't extend their tradition into later periods. That is the basis of Ralph Rader's strong critique of McKeon's explanation of the rise of the novel:² precisely what is it whose cause we want to understand?

Causality is a word that has many meanings. Generally it means agency, sometimes teleology; but we also distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions, between predisposing and precipitating causes. We flexibly use the term "cause" or "origin" for each of these things, and in our general conversation we don't usually get confused since we know which we really want to talk about in

particular cases. In remoter matters, however, like the writing of literary history, it is possible to have a marked preference for one form of causality over another.

The controversy between Michael McKeon and Ralph Rader on the origins of the English novel is illustrative of this. It isn't just that McKeon and Rader disagree over what caused the English novel, it's that they don't even agree on what should *count* as an explanation. For Michael McKeon the true explanation of the origin of the novel has to be found in the predisposing factors: his explanation ends when he has elucidated what made society change in such a way as to make collectively meaningful narratives in which the domestic struggles of individuals were made significant, narratives that at the same time were "realistic," like the truth about the real world but not historically veracious. The peculiar concerns and intents of the authors of these novels are unimportant. As far as McKeon is concerned, if Richardson had not written the first English novel, someone else would have, and the course of literary history would have developed almost precisely as it did.

But for Rader, it doesn't count as an explanation of the novel to be able to say how society got to the state where it could support realistic fictional narrative as a literary genre. For Rader the predisposing causes are less interesting, and he is willing to take McKeon's explanations of them for granted. Instead the novel begins when a particular individual – Samuel Richardson – tells a story about a virtuous servant who marries a well-born landowner, and tells that story in a way that was unique at the time. What was original about *Pamela* for Rader is the way we are made to read it. The events recounted have to be understood in two different ways at once, on a narrative plane and on an authorial plane. That is, the reader is forced to take the story as autonomously "real," on the one hand, in the sense that we understand Pamela's world as operating by the laws that obtain in our own world and therefore independent of our desires about her (the narrative plane). But the reader is also required to read the text as "constructed," in the sense that we understand the novel in terms of Richardson's creative intention, forming expectations and desires respecting the protagonist that shape our sense of the whole (the authorial plane). We could diagram this double mode of reading thus:

.....
 Author [Narrator → [Lifeworld with Characters] → Narrative Audience] Authorial Audience

For Rader the crucial moment is the construction of a form that operates on both levels at once – as autonomous narrative and as authorial construct. Once that had been done, others could, and did, imitate the achievement, bringing to the form new sorts of meaning and structure.

These preferences as to what counts as an acceptable explanation of the origin of a genre have further consequences. Rader is not deeply concerned with the predecessors to Richardson's formal achievement, because for him Bunyan, Defoe, and Swift belong to strands of literary history that did not initiate world-historical change.³ And in a similar way in the opposite direction, Michael McKeon loses most of his interest in the history of the novel once the genre has gotten fully started, as though it were the *embryology* of the novel rather than its history that is of primary concern.⁴

Well, which of them is right? Is the origin of the English novel to be found in its predisposing or its precipitating causes? Clearly both – and neither. Surely each answer is only one element of what would be a totally satisfying solution, and rationally, we ought to reject the either/or quality of the question. But while we can reject the disjunction as undesirable, it is harder to come up with a method of historical research that does not enforce it. As Johnson's Imlac cautioned Rasselas, one cannot simultaneously fill one's cup from the mouth and the source of the Nile. And the systematic study that provides us with a sense of all that was crucially necessary to produce an artifact will never tell us about the moment of invention that went beyond the necessary to the sufficient. When the focus is upon the individual genius engaged in constructing something new out of materials that are available to hand, we see the foreground with clarity, but the background – including how those materials came to be available to hand – recedes into a blur. Conversely, when it is the ground that occupies our attention, we must take the figure for granted. Indeed, those who investigate the background may even assume that the foregrounded individual's contribution is ultimately not very important.

With technological invention parallel discoveries are common. If Edison had not invented the lightbulb in October 1879, someone else would have done so a few months or years later, and we would be lighting our homes and offices in similar ways, though without paying our bills to Consolidated Edison. Those who follow in the path of artistic innovators, similarly, often pay them the homage of picking up their topics and techniques, which is why aspects of the specific architecture of *Pamela* run throughout the history of the novel into our own time, via *Jane Eyre*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Rebecca*, and on to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Historical Presentism and the History of the Rise of the Novel

At the risk of becoming hopelessly relativistic, we need to point out that the answer to the question of when the English novel starts may depends not only on who is asking the question, but on when they are asking it. John Richetti's

article on the history of the English novel in the eighteenth century, in the massive *Encyclopedia of the Novel*, credits the sociological origins of the novel to an “emerging and enlarging urban professional and middle class acquired more leisure and a greater appetite and disposable income for consumer goods,” resulting in the creation of a “growing audience” for entertaining and improving literature, including “prose narratives frequently called ‘novels’ but sometimes ‘histories’ or ‘true histories.’” Richetti begins his story much earlier than Ian Watt does, and covers the seventeenth-century narratives out of which the novel grew, including French romances, *chroniques scandaleuses*, Newgate biographies, travel books, amatory tales, and spiritual pilgrimages. But unlike Watt, who considered Defoe one of the founders of the novel, Richetti considers even his greatest creations, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and even *Roxana*, merely “proto-novelistic” (359). For Richetti as for Ralph Rader, the truly “pathbreaking” text is Richardson’s *Pamela*, which conveys “an illusion of immediacy and personal authenticity.” The attempt to parody *Pamela* then draws Henry Fielding into the orbit of the novel, where his contribution, in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, is “an authoritative narrative voice that manipulates and arranges characters and incidents and engages in an implicit conversation with his reader about the meanings of his fiction” (360). Between them Richardson and Fielding create “the new novel of the 1740s” whose “social-historical and moral ambitions” can be reshaped, by other hands, to the representation of subtle, sometimes aberrant, psychological states (361).

And looking into that same encyclopedia to other articles delineating the history of narrative in the various European languages – Dutch, French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Russian, Spanish – they all seem to agree in one respect: whatever individual nations were doing with narrative before the middle of the eighteenth century – and they were all doing very different things – each of them was enormously influenced either directly by Richardson or indirectly by him via Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. *Pamela* was an internationally pathbreaking text that displaced proto-novelistic genres, not only in England but everywhere Richardson was translated. A new sort of narrative, often epistolary in form, sentimental and romantic, yet vivid with psychological realism, seems to become the dominant practically everywhere.

On the other hand, many other recent studies of the origin of the English novel, the grand narratives by Nancy Armstrong, Ros Ballaster, John Bender, Homer Obed Brown, Lennard Davis, Margaret Doody, Catherine Gallagher, J. Paul Hunter, and William Beatty Warner take very different positions. Many of these histories have been pushing the historical horizon of the “novel” back from Richardson, back further than Defoe, into the romances and amatory fictions and *chroniques scandaleuses* of the late seventeenth century. Obviously,