The Making of the English Novel

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The search for the origins of the novel now bears comparison to the quest for the Holy Grail. Part of the problem is to do with the very terms in which such investigations are couched. Almost inevitably, the search for origins assumes the evolutionary connotations of Darwin's classic account, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection.* Several unfortunate consequences ensue. First, the search for origins insinuates that the novel is in some obscure sense a *natural* phenomenon, when it quite clearly is not. Second, the evolutionary overtones that accompany the search make it difficult to avoid offering an account of the novel that is not uncompromisingly teleological, the part played by human agency in the novel's development downplayed, if not discounted altogether. Finally, the overall effect is to imply that, whatever it is, "the novel" is not a construct.

Although most recent studies of the origins of the English novel illustrate several if not all of these points, they are equally appropriate to Ian Watt's classic, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). The *OED*'s first signification of "origin" is, after all, "The act or fact of arising or springing from something: derivation, *rise*; beginning of existence in reference to its source or cause" (emphasis added). If John J. Richetti was the first to take exception to Watt's "teleological bias,"[1] critics have subsequently queued up to identify other weaknesses in Watt's approach. For all its initial persuasiveness, Watt's "triple-rise" thesis is built on a number of flawed or at least unverified—perhaps unverifiable—assumptions.

1 John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700–1739* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), "The Rise of the Novel Reconsidered," pp. 1–22.

Briefly stated, the "triple-rise" thesis is as follows: the rise of the reading public, a more or less direct consequence of the rise of the middle class, leads in turn to the rise of the novel. Unfortunately, as scholarship since 1956 has increasingly demonstrated, there are major problems with each plank of the "triple-rise" thesis. Let me outline these difficulties in turn.

1) Where is the evidence for the rise of a "middle class" in England in the early eighteenth century? Despite the consequences of the Revolution of 1688, the structure of English society remained stubbornly hierarchical, not to say aristocratic during this period. Indeed, the Glorious Revolution itself has been convincingly interpreted as a conservative attempt to defend the rights and privileges of the propertied élite against the threat posed by the absolutist policies of James II. Not only liberal and conservative historians express such a point of view. E.P. Thompson insisted that the "class" that "gained the day in 1688" was not a "middle" class, but the gentry. Although "a purposive, cohesive, growing middle class of professional men and of the manufacturing middle class" may have existed in the early to mid-eighteenth century, it "fell far short of a class with its own institutions and objectives." "Such a class did not begin to discover itself (except, perhaps, in London) *until the last three decades of the [eighteenth] century*" (emphasis added).[2]

How does this affect Watt's thesis? Difficulties arise because he virtually restricts his account of the rise of the novel to three influential figures—Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding—writing almost exclusively in the *first half* of the eighteenth century. If the rise of the novel is linked to the rise of the middle class, then one might reasonably expect the relevant social developments at least to have coincided with, if not actually to have preceded, the literary. Instead, they seem to have taken place some years later.

2) Watt's account of the growth of the reading public presents problems similar to those in his account of the rise of the middle class, *because the most significant growth does not appear to coincide with the publication of those key works by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding either.*

In order to assess whether there was a growth in the reading public in the early eighteenth century, we need to take a number of issues into account. Hard facts, unfortunately, are difficult to establish. Watt settles

2 E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), pp. 31–32. This reworks material from Thompson's seminal essays, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?," *Social History* 3 (1978), 133–65 and "Patrician Struggle, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 8 (1974), 382–405. The period identified by Thompson—"the last three decades of the century"—is important, and I shall return to it.

in the main for anecdotal evidence, especially of a literary nature. If we begin by looking at the book trade itself, however, we immediately come up against the uncomfortable proposition that many more *titles* were published in 1660—over two thousand—than in any single year until the late 1740s, and that more titles were published in certain years of Queen Anne's reign than in any year between 1719, the year of the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, and 1748–49, the years in which *Clarissa*, *Tom Jones*, and *Roderick Random* appeared. Perhaps of more significance, the number of titles published in a single year first exceeds three thousand in the 1770s, and then climbs steadily through the last three decades of the eighteenth century.[3]

The mere counting of titles is not necessarily a reliable guide, of course—a significant proportion of those published in 1660 were broadsides—but once again these data do not readily support Watt's thesis that the most significant growth of the reading public took place during the years that Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding were writing their novels. As far as I am aware, of those who have offered accounts of the early English novel, none is also an expert on the early English book trade. This can easily lead to problems of interpretation. Watt, for instance, signally fails to mention either the end in 1695 of pre-publication censorship in England, or the Copyright Act of 1709, or the introduction of a stamp duty on newspapers in 1712. Nor does anyone writing on the early novel emphasize that, right through to the second half of the eighteenth century, the most profitable part of the book trade lay in the reprinting of proven sellers rather than in speculation in new titles. In other words, eighteenth-century booksellers—the publishers of their day—were not necessarily interested primarily in the novel—the new—much less "the novel." The modern sort of publisher, offering authors a share in the profits of their work, only emerged after 1800.

Other evidence, such as statistics relating to literacy, is equally difficult to establish. I have yet to see convincing evidence presented of a growth in the reading public, in this sense, in the early eighteenth century. As J. Paul Hunter succinctly puts it:

> The question of who was literate in early eighteenth-century Britain is a complex one, muddied by unreliable statistics, uncertain definitions, and considerably different incentives to read among different social and religious groups and from one part of the country to another. That question is tangled with the question of what portion of the reading public became readers of novels ... these two

3 These data are supplied by the Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue.

questions are crucial to any account of the novel's origins and there has been widespread misinformation and misunderstanding on both questions.[4]

We can be confident that literacy grew markedly between 1600 and 1800: what we cannot be confident about is that the period of most sustained growth took place either during the later seventeenth or the early eighteenth centuries. Hunter notes that, although the male literacy rate in England and Wales virtually doubled between 1600 and 1675, "The rate of increase late in the seventeenth century and through most of the eighteenth was, *all scholars agree*, very minimal indeed. There may even have been declines during some decades" (emphasis added).[5] And yet it is precisely in this period that, for the "triple rise" thesis to be tenable, one would expect the most significant growth in literacy to have taken place. As in the case of evidence for the alleged growth of the middle class, evidence for the alleged growth of the reading public in the *early* eighteenth century is simply lacking.

Now I do not wish to be misunderstood: I am not saying that there was no growth in the reading public in this period, only that no one has yet presented convincing evidence for it. Nor am I suggesting that there was no overall growth in the book trade—evidently there was. What has yet to be established is the link between *the novel* and the growth of the book trade, because all the available evidence seems to point to the expansion taking place in other forms, particularly in newspapers and periodicals. There may not have been a significant increase in the number of titles published from year to year in the early eighteenth century, but this does not mean that the book trade itself did not expand. This is evidently not true. The success *in financial terms* of, first, the *Tatler*, and then the *Spectator*, builds on the sort of anecdotal evidence presented by Watt for the growth of the reading public in the early eighteenth century. In the *Spectator*, no. 10, Addison recommended "these my Speculations to all well regulated Families, that set apart an Hour in every Morning for Tea and Bread and Butter; and would earnestly advise them for their Good to order this Paper to be punctually served up, and to be looked upon as a Part of the Tea Equipage."[6]

Hard evidence of the growth of a readership for newspapers and periodicals in the early eighteenth century can be readily adduced. After all, their emergence largely took place *after* the expiry of the Licensing

4 J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 62.

5 Hunter, p. 67.

6 *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1:44–45.

Act in 1695. This coincided with a sustained period of political activity. The result was a proliferation of titles in the first years of the eighteenth century. By no means all of them were long-lived, of course. Yet the expansion was sufficient not only for the government to impose a tax on them in 1712 but, as Michael Harris has observed, "By 1720 a substantial cross-section of full-priced London newspapers were owned by groups of shareholding booksellers."[7] These groups, the so-called "Congers," moved into newspaper publishing *because they reckoned that profits were to be made in this market.* And to a large extent, they were right. As Harris also points out, "under the Walpole administration the London newspapers were established as a consistent element in the political life of the nation."[8]

As far as novels are concerned, statistical evidence, of a sort, has been available for many years, and is borne out by James Raven's more recent *British Fiction, 1750–1770: A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland* (1989), which is based on data supplied by the Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue. The evidence to which I am referring comprises checklists of English prose fiction published between 1700 and 1800. William Harlin McBurney's *Check List of English Prose Fiction 1700–1739*, for instance, appeared in 1960 in the aftermath of Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and, as Richetti points out, McBurney criticized Watt's "radical selectiveness," viewing it as "a symptom of a general tendency to treat the great novelists of the period as if they had somehow developed 'autonomously.'"[9]

Although this is a valid point, other interesting uses might have been made of McBurney's work. McBurney's *Check List* listed every new work of fiction he could find published in English, year by year, including translations. Of the years between 1700 and 1719—the year in which *Robinson Crusoe* first appeared—only in 1708, according to McBurney, were more than ten new works of prose fiction in English published, seven of which were translations. While Raven's figures suggest rather more titles, it is significant that the overall pattern of his graphs corresponds closely to the outline that could have been derived from McBurney's *Check List* in the aftermath of *The Rise of the Novel* thirty-seven years ago.[10]

7 Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), p. 66.

8 Michael Harris, "Print and Politics in the Age of Walpole," *Britain in the Age of Walpole*, ed. Jeremy Black (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 210.

9 John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700–1739* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, paperback edition, 1992), p. xiii.

10 James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750–1770: A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed*

In these years, then, the number of original works of prose fiction in English appearing annually could be counted on one's fingers, more or less. True, if the numbers of works published are any guide, the success of *Robinson Crusoe* seems to have stimulated the market for a time. A significant increase took place during the decade of the 1720s, as authors and booksellers—and it is difficult to tell which of the two was the driving force—attempted, presumably, to cash in on Defoe's initial breakthrough. But we must be careful not to exaggerate. Although this was the decade in which *Moll Flanders*, *Roxana*, and *Gulliver's Travels* were published, as well as numerous "novels" by Penelope Aubin, Jane Barker, Mary Davys and Eliza Haywood, the market peaked at around twenty new titles per annum.

Three other interesting facts should be mentioned. First, the growth in the market for prose fiction in the 1720s was not sustained: the number of new titles published annually declined at the end of the 1720s and, despite minor fluctuations, was much the same at the end of the 1730s as it had been at the end of the previous three decades. Second, in addition to new titles, a considerable number of works of prose fiction were *reprinted* (some in serial form), emphasizing once more that the book trade was more interested in proven sellers than in speculation in the new. Third, the publishing pattern that followed the appearance of *Robinson Crusoe* and Eliza Haywood's similarly successful *Love in Excess* in 1719 was repeated on the publication of *Pamela*. That is to say, there was a sharp increase in the publication of prose fiction in 1740 which, although it marked an overall increase, was not fully sustained.

The spectacular nature of *Pamela*'s reception is well known. What is perhaps not so well known is that the book was recognized by contemporaries as something unusual. I make this point to stress that, as I shall explain in more detail in due course, although works called "novels," either by their authors, or by their publishers, or by both, were appearing—and had been for some time—it is quite clear that *Pamela* was regarded as somehow different from the so-called "novels" of Aubin and Barker, Davys and Haywood. The *Gentleman's Magazine*'s list of books published each month, for instance, did not have a category for "novels" at the time. *Pamela*, therefore, was listed, as one might have expected, under the catch-all, "ENTERTAINMENT and POETRY." What is distinctly unusual is the *way* in which it was listed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for January 1741:

in Britain and Ireland (Newark: Delaware University Press, 1989); William Harlin McBurney, *A Check List of English Prose Fiction 1700–1739* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

** *Several Encomiums on a Series of* Familiar Letters, publish'd but last Month, entitled PAMELA *or* Virtue rewarded, *came too late for this Magazine, and we believe there will be little Occasion for inserting them in our next; because a Second Edition will then come out to supply the Demands in the Country, it being judged in Town as great a Sign of Want of Curiosity not to have read* Pamela, *as not to have seen the* French *and* Italian *Dancers.*

This sort of entry was unprecedented, as far as I am aware, and I want to return to the question of how contemporaries attempted to classify prose fiction in the light of the *Gentleman's Magazine*'s reference to *Pamela* as "*a Series of* Familiar Letters." For the moment, however, I should like to concentrate on *Pamela*'s apparent effect on the output of new prose fiction in English in the 1740s, because suddenly, instead of such works appearing in handfuls each year, as they had before 1719, and as they did once again in the years immediately prior to the year of *Pamela*'s publication, they hit the streets in scores.

Why? The obvious answer is that authors and booksellers were apparently trying to cash in on *Pamela*'s success, as they had tried to cash in on the success of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Love in Excess* in 1719, and *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726. Instead of the increased output of works of prose fiction being a nine days' wonder, however, *Pamela*'s more sustained success seems to have resulted in the market's steady development throughout the rest of the century. If, on average, the new works of prose fiction in English appearing annually between 1700 and 1740 could be counted on one's fingers, it is surely significant that production of such works rose to around twenty per annum after 1740 and the publication of *Pamela*, and then to around forty per annum in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century. Given this fact, it may be that Watt, and those following him, concentrated on the wrong feature of "the rise of the novel": instead of simply looking at the readers, they should have been looking at the publishers. And this is also a point to which I shall return.

3) I have largely avoided using the word "novel" to describe the sort of publications I have been discussing, and have preferred to substitute the more neutral term "prose fiction." As Geoffrey Day perceptively remarks, "so far from being ready to accept the various works as 'novels,' [eighteenth-century readers] do not appear to have arrived at a consensus that works such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Clarissa*, *Tom Jones*, *Peregrine Pickle* and *Tristram Shandy* were even all of the same species."[11] It is for this reason, one assumes, that

11 Geoffrey Day, *From Fiction to the Novel* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 7.

the *Gentleman's Magazine* listed *Joseph Andrews*, *Clarissa*, *Roderick Random*, *Gil Blas*, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, *Betsy Thoughtless*, and *The Female Quixote* not under the heading of "novels" but, if not simply under "History," either under "Biographical and Historical," or under "Entertainment and Poetry," or under the almost inevitable "Miscellaneous."

For these reasons, the third plank of Watt's "triple rise" thesis must come under scrutiny. Watt insists that "the rise of the novel" begins with three writers—Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding—who actually took pains to make it clear that their narratives should be read in contradistinction to "mere novels." Notoriously, Richardson and Fielding held diametrically opposed views on what was legitimate as far as prose fiction was concerned. Indeed, of the so-called five great eighteenth-century English novelists,[12] only Smollett acknowledged that he was writing a novel. By contrast, Sterne, although *A Sentimental Journey* obviously plays off Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy* for satiric effect, never even referred to his alleged novelistic predecessors, Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding. Yet, as Melvyn New points out, "because we teach him after these authors, we are compelled to draw not merely a relationship, but a teleological one—that is, since Sterne comes after them in chronology, and since we are tracing the 'development' of the novel, Sterne *must* be doing something better, more modern, than they ever accomplished."[13]

This seems to me to be a crucially important consideration. What we appear to be faced with is not the straightforward emergence and development of a new literary genre, the novel, which has its origins in the early eighteenth century and which, as a result of the processes of some sort of natural selection—the survival of the fittest—evolves into the form recognized by posterity. Instead, we should be focusing our attention on a rather different process—the process that resulted in the coming into being of "the novel." I prefer to call this process "the making of the novel," rather than "the rise of the novel" or that even more unfortunate figure, "the birth of the novel." Above all, perhaps, investigating "the making of the novel," rather than its "birth," "origins," or "rise," highlights the fact that the novel is a construct, is "something made," "something fashioned,"[14] rather than a natural phenomenon. In

12 Alan Dugald McKillop in his *The Early Masters of English Fiction* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1956) devoted chapters to Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne.

13 Melvyn New, "Swift as Ogre, Richardson as Dolt: Rescuing Sterne from the Eighteenth Century," *Shandean* 3 (1991), 51.

14 Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 15.

consequence, we should be concentrating not on the origins of the novel, but on the process that resulted in the novel "being made," and on those—publishers and critics as well as writers and readers—who did the making.

Take the case of Defoe, an account of whose construction as a novelist has been given by P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens.[15] Until 1775 only *Robinson Crusoe* and *Colonel Jack* of what we now call the "novels" had actually been attributed to Defoe. However, from 1775 on, the publisher Francis Noble reissued the following hitherto anonymous narratives as Defoe's: *Roxana*; *Memoirs of a Cavalier*; *Moll Flanders*; *Captain Singleton*; *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and *A New Voyage Round the World*. Apparently these had previously been accepted as genuine autobiographical accounts. In other words, they were supposed to be factual. There is, of course, nothing new in pointing out that Defoe tried to pass off his fictions as fact—it is a critical commonplace. What is disturbing, in the light of Noble's entrepreneurial activities, is the way in which modern critics have insisted that Defoe's narratives appeared in "the period when the novel was becoming a recognizable mode of writing."[16]

"Recognizable" as novels to whom? Contemporaries? Or latter-day critics? Works called "novels" were undoubtedly being published during the period in which Defoe published his narratives. In addition to *Love in Excess ... A Novel*, the following appeared in 1719 and 1720: *The Entertaining Novels of Mrs Jane Barker*; *Milesian Tales: or, Instructive Novels* by Sarah Butler; *The Female Deserters: A Novel* by Mary Hearne; *The Prince of Carency: a Novel*, translated from the French; *The Perfidious Brethren, or, the Religious Triumvirate: Display'd in three Ecclesiastical Novels*; *A Select Collection of Novels in Six Volumes. Written by the most Celebrated Authors in several Languages*; and *The Power of Love: In Seven Novels*, by Delarivière Manley. (This list does not pretend to be comprehensive.) Scarcely surprising, then, that the preface to *Moll Flanders* begins by complaining that, because "The World is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances ... it will be hard for a private History to be taken for Genuine." But does this mean that contemporaries were either able or willing to distinguish between "the novel" and other forms of prose fiction, particularly the romance?

Perhaps we should take the trouble to ask what Defoe was hoping to accomplish by beginning the preface to *Moll Flanders* in the way he did. Was he trying to associate his narrative with the current vogue for

15 P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens, "Defoe and Francis Noble," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 4 (1992), 301–13.

16 John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 74.

"Novels and Romances," or was he trying to distance it from such works by insinuating that, whatever readers might choose to think, what they were about to read was actually a genuine "private History"? By linking novels and romances, was Defoe suggesting that contemporaries knew how to distinguish the two, or was he tacitly acknowledging that such distinctions were imprecise and therefore virtually meaningless?

Before we jump to any conclusions, it might be worth reminding ourselves that Defoe himself was perfectly able to distinguish fact from fiction. There is a precedent in his other writings for the statement from the preface to *Moll Flanders* to which I have drawn attention. One of the most popular works of fiction of the late seventeenth century was *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, Who Lived Five and Forty Years at Paris; Giving an Account of the Most Remarkable Transactions of Europe from 1637 to 1682*, which is usually attributed to Giovanni Paolo Marana. The text proper of the first volume is prefaced by a section, "To the Reader," which opens: "I do not doubt but you would know where 'twas written; and perhaps, whether the Author be living; and whether you must expect a *Romance* or a *real History*."[17] Defoe refers to this work in one of his letters in a telling way. Writing about an intelligence network, he explains how "It Reminds [him] of a Book in Eight Volumes Published in London about 7 or 8 yeares Ago Call'd Letters writ by a Turkish Spye." "The books I Take as They Are," he goes on, "a Meer Romance."[18]

To call something a "Romance" was to question its veracity. This was a common contemporary usage. Defoe insisted that, while *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* was "a Meer Romance," *his* fiction was rather different: "this *Story* differs from most of the Modern Performances of this Kind, tho' some of them have met with a very good Reception in the World," he maintained in the preface to *Roxana*. "*I say*, It differs from them in this Great and Essential Article, *Namely*, That the Foundation of This is laid in Truth of *Fact*; and so the Work is not a Story, but a History."[19] Could it be that, in the preface to *Moll Flanders*, Defoe joins "novel" and "romance" together not because contemporary readers knew how to distinguish between the two, but because he is aware that early-eighteenth-century readers were no longer certain how to classify works of prose fiction?

17 *The First Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* (London, 1694), "To the Reader," n.p.

18 *The Letters of Daniel Defoe*, ed. George Harris Healey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 38. One of the works attributed to Defoe is called *A Continuation of Letters Written by a Turkish Spy at Paris* (London, 1718).

19 Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*, ed. Jane Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 1.

This is a crucial consideration. As David Lodge points out: "The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books. If a novel did not bear some resemblance to other novels we should not know how to read it, and if it wasn't different from all other novels we shouldn't *want* to read it."[20] Eighteenth-century authors were acutely aware of this conundrum. Clara Reeve's preface to *The Old English Baron* (1778) explains how: "As this Story is of a species which, tho' not new, is out of the common track, it has been thought necessary to point out some circumstances to the reader, which will eludicate the design, and, it is hoped, will induce him to form a favourable, as well as a right judgment of the work before him."[21] Like Lodge, Reeve is pointing out ways in which her story resembles yet differs from other "species" of prose fiction, with questions of taxonomy very much to the fore.

Writing in the aftermath of the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Love in Excess*, which, as I have explained, appears to have resulted in a significant growth in the output of works of prose fiction, Defoe refers to the way in which the "world is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances." The *OED* draws an important distinction between the novel and the romance, offering an explanatory sentence under signification 2b of "novel:" "In 17–18th c. freq[uently] contrasted with a *romance*, as being shorter than this, and having more relation to real life." Is this valid? Did contemporaries *frequently* contrast "novel" with "romance"? Everyone knows that Congreve distinguished between the two in the preface to *Incognita*, yet it could be argued that the very fact he felt it necessary to do so calls into question not only the *frequency* of such a distinction in the *seventeenth* century, but its familiarity to a late-seventeenth-century readership. And almost one hundred years later, a generation or two *after* Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, Clara Reeve was writing in surprisingly similar terms: "The word *Novel* in all languages signifies something new. It was first used to distinguish these works from Romance, though they have lately been confounded together and are frequently mistaken for each."[22]

Although it has now been demonstrated that Manley did not actually write the celebrated critical preface to *The Secret History of Queen*

20 David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 3–4.

21 Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron*, ed. James Trainer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 3.

22 Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance, through Times, Countries, and Manners* (Colchester, 1785), 1:110–12.

Zarah,[23] her comments in the dedication to *The Power of Love* are of interest:

> THESE Novels, Madam, have Truth for their Foundation; several of the Facts are to be found in Ancient History: To which, adding divers new Incidents, I have attempted, in Modern *English*, to draw them out of Obscurity, with the same Design as Mr. *Dryden* had in his Tales from *Boccace* and *Chaucer*.[24]

These, then, are not novel "novels," but short tales drawn from "Ancient History." Manley's reference to Boccaccio is of great interest. Although the *OED* cites numerous uses of the word "novel" prior to 1700, the earliest, from Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566), refers to short tales such as those in the *Decameron*, while Burton, in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, actually mentions Boccaccio's "Nouells" by name.

My point is this: far from contemporaries being able to distinguish between "the novel" and "the romance," far from Defoe's narratives appearing in "the period when the novel was becoming a recognizable mode of writing," eighteenth-century readers do not appear to have been sufficiently aware of the formal issues involved for the terms to be at all stable; not only did they not know whether or not *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* were fact or fiction—and Defoe's prefaces scarcely helped—they did not even know that they were written by the man who had previously published *Robinson Crusoe* as fact! The word "novel," as used in the 1720s, was an imprecise term that could embrace the seven short stories, derived from earlier traditions and published by Delarivière Manley under the title *The Power of Love*, as well the "amatorious novel[s]" referred to by Milton in 1643 in his divorce pamphlets, as well as prose fiction in the romance tradition, as well as more "realistic" fiction such as *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. If "the novel" was becoming "a recognizable mode of writing" in this period, then it seems reasonable to ask: which form of novel are we talking about?

In addition, to the "triple-rise" thesis, of course, Ian Watt offers another seminal argument to account for the rise of the novel. In searching for the distinguishing characteristic of the novel, Watt describes "formal realism"

23 John L. Sutton, Jr, "The Source of Mrs. Manley's Preface to *Queen Zarah*," *Modern Philology* 81 (1984), 167–72.

24 Delarivière Manley, *The Power of Love: In Seven Novels* (London, 1720), p. xv.

as its "lowest common denominator." The classic formulation of the term is as follows:

> Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel form in general: the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.[25]

Not only do there seem to be clear echoes of Congreve's preface to *Incognita* here but, if formal realism is the "lowest common denominator" of the novel—the characteristic that distinguishes it from other forms of fiction—then Watt is simply wrong to start his account of the rise of the novel with Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding. What about Eliza Haywood and Delarivière Manley, let alone Swift? What about Aphra Behn? What about Thomas Nashe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Delony (if not Sir Philip Sidney)? What about Cervantes and the author of *Lazarillo de Tormes*?[26] If it is formal realism that distinguishes the novel from other forms of fiction, then we need to go back well beyond the eighteenth century, and beyond the shores of England, to account for its making.

More problematic still is this proposition: What if, after all, formal realism is not the feature that distinguishes the novel from other forms of fiction? Hunter has written that "no single word or phrase distinguishes the novel from romance or from anything else, and to settle for 'realism' or 'individualism' or 'character' as the defining characteristic diminishes the very idea of the novel and trivializes the conception of a literary species,"[27] while Mikhail Bakhtin insists that the "utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it is forced to deal with the novel."[28] Bakhtin has some very telling points to make about the

25 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 32.

26 One could of course go back much earlier, and there are contemporary critics who have done so. See James J. Lynch, *Henry Fielding and the Heliodorean Novel: Romance, Epic, and Fielding's New Province of Writing* (Rutherford, N.J. and London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Associated University Presses, 1986); Hubert McDermott, *Novel and Romance: The Odyssey to Tom Jones* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1989). Cf. Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

27 Hunter, pp. 22–23.

28 M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 8.

making of the novel, and of course has been particularly influential in recent years. "Parodic stylizations of canonized genres and styles occupy an essential place in the novel," he writes. "In the era of the novel's creative ascendency—and even more so in the periods of preparation preceding this era—literature was flooded with parodies and travesties of all the high genres (parodies precisely of genres, and not of individual authors)—parodies that are the precursors, 'companions' to the novel, in their own way studies for it."[29]

Perhaps there's more than a touch of *post hoc* reasoning about what Bakhtin calls the process of "novelization," because it is an apt description of what happened in England in the last decades of the seventeenth and the first decades of the eighteenth century. This, after all, is the period that sees the flowering, if not the invention, of the mock heroic. Parody is at the heart of not only the writings of Swift, Pope, and Gay. Defoe's hybrid narratives are not parodies, exactly—his sense of humour leaves a little to be desired—let alone parodies of "high genres," but they certainly play off existing forms such as the travel book, the picaresque, and the spiritual autobiography. Fielding is an even more suitable case for treatment. For whatever reason, he tries to pass off *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* as comic epics in prose, imitations of Homer's lost *Margites*, while acknowledging that the former at least is written in imitation of the manner of Cervantes. And then there is Sterne. Of equal significance, Bakhtin sees this parodic activity taking place in "the era of the novel's creative ascendency—and even more so in the periods of preparation preceding this era." Where, then, does he locate the actual "era of the novel's creative ascendency"? Not in the early, but "beginning in the *second half* of the eighteenth century" (emphasis added).[30]

I pointed out at the beginning that, according to E.P. Thompson, "a purposive, cohesive, growing middle class ... did not begin to discover itself ... until the last three decades of the [eighteenth] century." I explained how the number of titles published in a single year first exceeds three thousand in the 1770s, and then climbs steadily through the last three decades of the eighteenth century. I drew attention to James Raven's graph of

29 Bakhtin, p. 6.

30 Bakhtin, p. 5. Recent studies of the early English novel seem to follow Bakhtin. See Hunter, p. 22; Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 19; William Beatty Warner, "The Elevation of the Novel in England: Hegemony and Literary History," *ELH* 59 (1992), 577–96.

prose fiction titles published year by year to demonstrate that, once again, it is in the last three decades of the eighteenth century that "the novel" finally takes off. And I have just suggested that it was also in this period that the finishing touches were being applied in the process that I have called the making of the English novel.

There is of course a paradox that all this appears to have taken place *after* the five so-called "great" "male" "novelists"—Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne—had finished writing. Clive Probyn points out:

> Most critical studies of the [English] novel in the eighteenth century stop after Sterne. There are clear reasons for this. ... Indeed, there could be no more startling contrast than that between *Tristram Shandy* and *Evelina* (1778). ... Between these two novels there were hundreds of others published, so many in fact that for the first time in the history of the genre of prose fiction it is possible to speak with confidence of a middle-class readership as an instrumental force in determining literary production. Whether the enormous numerical increase in novels and readers itself led to a qualitative decline, or whether the demise of the "Great Four or Five" exposed a novelistic vacuum filled with minor talents, the history of the novel between Sterne and Jane Austen is a matter of undercurrents, not high tides.[31]

This may be a critical truism, but it does not invalidate the proposition that it was in *these* years, after the contributions of the "Great Four or Five," that "the novel" finally came into being, *because the process took place not so much in the production of new works, but in the construction of a canon*, and in this respect, as I have remarked, we should be concentrating not on the alleged "middle-class readership," but on those who supplied these readers with their reading matter.

What I am suggesting, in short, is that, as far as the forces determining literary production are concerned, we should be looking at the publishers rather than the readers. Such a concept is not, after all, unfamiliar to teachers of literature in the late twentieth century. Even today publishers exercise a considerable amount of control over the texts of the past that are studied in the academies. Now of course one can buy paperback editions of Haywood's "novellas." Yet it was the introduction of series of cheap, paperback editions of eighteenth-century "novels" that first made readily available key works of eighteenth-century fiction. A similar process of canonization was crucial in the making of the English novel, and this is only just beginning to be studied. Francis Noble's invention

31 Clive T. Probyn, *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century 1700–1789* (London and New York: Longman, 1987), p. 149.

of Defoe-the-novelist is only one, commercially driven, late-eighteenth-century manifestation of this. James Harrison's *The Novelist's Magazine*, which published twenty-three volumes of *previously published* works of prose fiction from 1779 on, is obviously another. Clearly copyright was not an issue as far as either Noble or Harrison was concerned, even though *Novelist's Magazine* included all the "canonical" writers studied today: Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Johnson, Sterne, Goldsmith, as well as Cervantes, Fenélon, Lesage, Marivaux, and Voltaire. More interestingly, Harrison also included female novelists such as Eliza Haywood (though not *Love in Excess*), Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, and Frances Sheridan.

As I have remarked, much as been made of the distinction between the new "novel" and the old "romance." "The word *Novel* in all Languages signifies something new," Clara Reeve insisted. "It was first used to distinguish *these works* from Romance, though they have lately been confounded together and are frequently mistaken for each other."[32] Too often, perhaps, Reeve's account is taken as representative of contemporary opinion. The 1992 CD-ROM version of the *OED* indicates that, as I have suggested, far from being oppositional, the terms were often used in conjunction. Thus Steele, in the *Spectator*, refers to brains "disordered with Romances and Novels," while Chesterfield writes disparagingly about "Poets, romance or novel writers, and such sentiment-mongers." Chesterfield even offers a definition of novel which, if unhelpful, is greatly significant: "A Novel is a kind of *abbreviation* of a Romance"—which might suggest the distinction is more to do with length than with "formal realism," or any other formalistic distinction. The *Novelist's Magazine*'s selection would appear to bear this out. As Richard C. Taylor puts it, "the discrete generic distinctions that marginalized the 'romance' and other 'sub-categories' in the 'history of the novel' was a retrospective judgment, although it was certainly rooted in late eighteenth-century social attitudes."[33]

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, in other words, the novel was still in the process of being made. Critics from Watt onwards have sought to distinguish between the new novel and the old romance. John Bender even speaks about the process of "novelization" allegedly taking place in the 1720s. Yet there is precious little evidence of it in James Harrison's *Novelist's Magazine*, which implicitly anticipates E.M. Forster's

32 *The Progress of Romance*, 1:110–12.

33 Richard C. Taylor, "James Harrison, *The Novelists's Magazine*, and the Early Canonizing of the English Novel," *Studies in English Literature* 33 (1993), 638.

(non)definition of the novel: "Any fictitious prose narrative over 50,000 words in length." Taylor suggests that Harrison "helped make plausible the idea of a 'great' novel, of 'first-rank' fiction that ought to be preserved," and notes two interesting features of the contents of the *Novelist's Magazine*. First, "women writers were prominent"; second, "a distinctively British tradition, one that excluded 'foreign' works, was another retrospective development."[34] While the last two points are significant and cannot be gainsaid, one wonders if Harrison actually was more interested in establishing a "great tradition" on aesthetic grounds than in filling pages and selling copies of his *Magazine*. Seen in this light, works written either by women or by foreigners were simply grist to his mill.

Where the making of the novel is concerned, in this case publisher and critic appear to have been in unholy alliance. The same is true for the more famous *Ballantyne's Novelist's Magazine* over forty years later. Walter Scott's "canon" was rather different from James Harrison's. First, two of the five "great" "canonical" "novelists" of the eighteenth century are missing, Defoe and Sterne. Second, no women writers are included other than Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe—out, in other words, go Eliza Haywood, Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, and Frances Sheridan. Third, whereas Harrison included most of those who would today be considered the significant continental writers of prose fiction, Scott included only Lesage. Indeed, *Ballantyne's Novelist's Library* (as it came to be called) bears a striking resemblance to what, until very recently, were the eighteenth-century novels and novelists studied on English literature courses.

What I suspect we are witnessing is not a market driven by readers so much as a market driven by publishers such as Noble and Ballantyne and critics such as Scott. Taste is being influenced by those who have a vested interest in privileging one work of prose fiction—one "novel"—over another. What we should be investigating are the *reasons* for this. What, in other words, is behind the process that resulted in the making of the English novel? What, as well as books, were those responsible for the construction of the canon trying to sell? Those interested in evolutionary theories of the origins of the novel insinuate that the principle of the survival of the fittest is operating in the development of prose fiction. In forgetting that the analogy does not—cannot—hold, that the novel is not a natural phenomenon, such critics also forget that, with respect to the novel, *human beings* decide what is fittest to survive: writers, readers,

34 Taylor, pp. 629–43.

publishers, and critics. Perhaps we have spent too much time looking at readers and writers without giving due weight to the contribution of critics and, above all, of publishers to the making of the English novel.[35]

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35 A version of this essay was given as the Roy M. Wiles Memorial Lecture at McMaster University on 28 March 1995.