

“A Matter *Discutable*”: *The Rise of the Novel*

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As an undergraduate in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the early 1950s, I think I never read a novel in a course unless one counts *Gulliver's Travels* or *Rasselas*, both of them included in chronological surveys of the eighteenth century, and somewhere along the way I must have read *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, though not in George Sherburn's course on the novel before 1800—because I didn't take it, notwithstanding my inclination to the eighteenth century. I doubt that I was unique in my indifference to the novel, and I know it was not because I had an especially greater aptitude for poetry or drama. Nor was it because I had any special aversion to the novel: I occupied one summer with *The Magic Mountain*. It was merely that at Harvard in the early 1950s the novel did not claim the attention it does now because it did not have the same canonical standing. I read Chaucer and Spenser and Milton and Romantic poetry, I read the triumvirate of Tennyson, Browning, Arnold; and I read twentieth-century American poetry. I took drama from the beginning to the closing of the theatres and modern drama, including Chekhov and Strindberg and O'Neill. I wrote an honours essay on Swift's sermons. But it was graduate school before I took a seminar on the eighteenth-century novel, catching up on Sterne and Smollett and Goldsmith and being taught to dislike Richardson. I took a seminar on James, and I also caught up with Cooper and Melville and Hawthorne and the American naturalists. My undergraduate curriculum would now seem unusual if not perverse.

To be sure, other undergraduate courses besides Sherburn's that were available but that I didn't take included Harry Levin's famous "Proust, Joyce, and Mann" and "Forms of the Modern Novel," taught by Ian Watt's fellow Conradian and future colleague Albert Guerard and, because its formal designation was Comparative Literature 166, known affectionately as "Comp. Lit. One Sixty-Six." I didn't take these courses not only because I didn't need to, but also because I thought of them as outside the mainstream, which indeed they were in the early 1950s. They were also hugely popular. That seemed to me to reflect the status of the novel: popular, certainly, and avant-garde, sometimes, but really serious stuff, maybe not, unless you dealt with it in the rarefied air of a graduate seminar. And when it came time to write a dissertation, I did an (uninspired) essay on the poetic satires of Charles Churchill. The novel was simply not where the main action was, no matter how popular Levin's and Guerard's courses were. Now, going on fifty years after my novel-deprived undergraduate days, things could hardly have changed more than they have. By the mid-1980s the Stanford English Department had introduced a new requirement for undergraduates in "Poetry and Poetics" because students tended to read novels to the exclusion, so far as they could, of everything else. Poetry generally scared them.

Why was the novel, at Harvard, in the early 1950s, so marginal? In the first place, as is familiar by now, even English "literature" was a latecomer to the academy, and the novel, being a latecomer to the territory of "literature," had to shoulder its way gradually into the curriculum. In the second place, Harvard was no hotbed of academic novelty, and the English faculty, with the exception of the young, brilliant, outspoken, and irreverent Guerard, was simply less interested in the novel than more traditional forms, even though Bliss Perry, who taught at Harvard from 1907 to 1930, had lectured on the novel at Princeton in the 1890s, and even though the novel had shown up in the Harvard English curriculum by the turn of the century.¹ But in the early 1950s, if you wanted something different and striking, you might look instead (as I did) to the moral-psychological view of Samuel Johnson offered by Walter Jackson Bate. And in the third place, there was the dominance, though we can see it now as having been nearly

¹ Bliss Perry published *A Study of Prose Fiction* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902) based on his Princeton lectures and intended for classroom teachers. Early teaching of the novel at Harvard was in the hands of the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, Adams Sherman Hill, and the much younger G.H. Maynardier, who became the editor of Defoe, Smollett, and Fielding. Courses by Hill around the turn of the century (when he was in his late sixties) seem to have been honoured mostly in the omission. Hill's "English Novel from Richardson to George Eliot" was omitted in 1898-99, 1899-1900, and 1900-1901.

on the wane, of Eliot's poetics and of the "new criticism," then beginning to concern itself with fiction but most notable for its long-standing, vigilant attention to poetry.² Without the "new criticism," in fact, the novel might have swept its way to official dominance sooner than it did, and hindsight leads one to wonder if "new criticism" in the 1930s was not in fact a rear-guard holding action, a brief and wilful interruption of a process that began in the eighteenth century, gathered force in the second half of the nineteenth, and came to fruition in the second half of the twentieth, namely, the rise of the novel to its position of ascendancy in the academy as well as in the public imagination.

The story of this "rise of the novel" has not been entirely charted, though studies such as William Beatty Warner's *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* and Richard Stang's *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850–1870* help dispel any notion that criticism of the novel sprang full-blown from the ample brow of Henry James.³ There is no room here for even a mini-version of that story, yet the time may well be ripe for someone to take it on; the owl of Minerva flies at sunset, and even though forecasts of the death of the novel have always been grossly wrong, it is at least possible that "the rise of film" or "the rise of the media" or "the rise of cyberspace" will be the story that will be seen to have dominated the next two or three centuries. But we can best appreciate Watt's work as a crucial moment in the larger historical episode that has been the rise of the novel. The rise of the novel to the standing of what James called a matter *discutable* was self-evidently a prerequisite to *The Rise of the Novel*.⁴

Victorian commentary and what I will call post-Victorian commentary on the novel, including everything published on the subject in Britain

2 Symptomatic of the changing times was J. Isaacs's introduction to A.A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952): "For nearly a quarter of a century the 'New Criticism' ... has devoted its energies to the close scrutiny of lyrical poetry. ... In recent years these same masters, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur and others, have turned their attention to the equally close scrutiny of the art of fiction, and since the units involved are larger than the units of lyrical poetry, their conclusions have a wider validity. Fiction cuts across national boundaries in a way which lyrical poetry, by its very nature, cannot do. Modern novelists are increasingly aware of the achievements and methods of their predecessors. ... In view of the dizzying acceleration of fictional techniques during the past hundred years, and particularly the past fifty years, it is surprising that so little has been done by literary scholarship to isolate and chart the essential developments" (p. v).

3 William Beatty Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England: 1850–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

4 *The Rise of the Novel* was first published in Britain (by Chatto and Windus) and in the United States in 1957. References are to the third printing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

and the United States through Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) and E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), came in three main categories, each overlapping the others: one, a defence of the novel's "art"; two, analysis of its taxonomic variety; and three, analysis of its technical underpinnings. In addition, there was the ongoing Victorian need to establish the canon by settling claims of value. Intoxicated by the idea of "great books" and "best books," the Victorians were bound to address the question, and they did, which were the very best novels?

Their answer was not utterly different from ours. In 1886, Sir John Lubbock, one of Victorian Britain's most assiduous doers of good works, proposed a list of the "best hundred books." *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *The Vicar of Wakefield* were included, though Fielding and Richardson were not. In the category of "modern fiction," Austen (either *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice*), Thackeray (*Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*), Dickens (*Pickwick* and *David Copperfield*), George Eliot (*Adam Bede*), Kingsley (*Westward Ho!*), and Bulwer Lytton (*Last Days of Pompeii*) were included, as was all of Scott, thereby increasing the actual count of the hundred best books to a good many more. The Brontës were missing, though Swinburne urged their inclusion in the engagingly foolish debate that ensued, a debate re-enacted in the early summer of 1998 when Random House produced its rank-ordered hundred best novels of the twentieth century, thus emphasizing that as an emblem of "literature," the novel has become pre-eminent. So far as I know, nobody has recently proposed a list of the hundred best poets or the hundred best poems of the last hundred years. The rise of the novel was nicely confirmed, if confirmation were needed, by the Random House extravaganza.⁵

But it is worth wondering whether Lubbock and all those who debated the "hundred best" would have been quite so ready to include fiction if not for the discussion that had erupted two years earlier with the publication of Sir Walter Besant's *The Art of Fiction*, first presented to the public as a lecture at the Royal Institution of Great Britain on 25 April 1884, and published in May. For it was Besant who laid most squarely on the table the question, was fiction really and truly "art"? And it was Henry James, taking his cue from Besant, who answered the question, if not once and for all, at

⁵ Lubbock's list, and the controversy that ensued, are best found in *The Best Hundred Books, by the Best Judges*, a *Pall Mall Gazette* "Extra" no. 24 (London, 1886). On the episode, see W.B. Carnochan, "Where Did Great Books Come From, Anyway?" *Stanford Humanities Review* 6:1 (1998), 51-64; and *The Book Collector* 48 (1999), 352-71. For the Random House hundred best, see "The Living Arts" section of the *New York Times*, 20 July 1998. Within days after Random House made its list public, the *Independent* in London came out with a list of the hundred worst, "Friday Review," 24 July 1998. *Ulysses* came in first in both sets of rankings.

least more decisively than anyone before him. Though Besant asserts that the answer to the question is ultimately beyond a doubt, his proposition is defensive: "I desire," he said, "to consider Fiction as one of the Fine Arts," and in doing so "I have first to advance certain propositions. They are not new, they are not likely to be disputed, and yet they have never been so generally received as to form part, so to speak, of the national mind." The first, most important of these propositions, likely enough to be disputed and, as Besant says, not yet ingrained in the "national mind," is: "That Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts."⁶ It is a nice Jamesian irony, as Mark Spilka comments,⁷ that "an amiable fool" (perhaps too strong but not an impossible characterization of Besant) should have stimulated James to the writing of his own decisive "The Art of Fiction," an essay that addressed the question of the novel not assertively but demonstratively and theoretically: "Only a short time ago," James said, "it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it—of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison." Not that it was "necessarily the worse for that," but James welcomes and helps make the assumption part of the "national mind" that fiction is indeed a fine art, the result of choices and comparisons rather than the merely spontaneous effusion of storytelling. The "comfortable, good-humoured feeling ... that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it"—this once-prevalent feeling is no longer adequate. The novel "must take itself seriously for the public to take it so."⁸ And, after James, the belief that a novel is just a novel as a pudding is a pudding diminished markedly, no matter that some members of the English faculty at Harvard in the 1950s probably clung to it; or that, in the debate about Lubbock's "best hundred," the great (Prussian-born) bookseller Bernard Quaritch reported that "arrived in London, in 1842, I joined a literary institution in Leicester-square, and read all their historical works. To read fiction I had no time. A friend of mine read novels all night long, and was one morning found

6 Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884), p. 3.

7 Mark Spilka, "Henry James and Walter Besant: 'The Art of Fiction' Controversy," *Novel* 6 (1973): 102.

8 Henry James, *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, intro. Morris Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 3–4, 4.

dead in his bed.”⁹ Reading novels, Quaritch thought, was a potentially fatal addiction.

James’s richly textured essay, which established the art of fiction as above all a function of its technique, stands in high relief against what often passed for theory among his contemporaries: on the one hand, an elementary or wildly chaotic taxonomizing, a random mixture of genre criticism and the classification of novels into different types; on the other, what amounted to beginners’ guides to technique. Friedrich Spielhagen’s *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans*, published a year before Besant’s and James’s essays, has chapters on the comic novel, on the “Ich-Roman,” on the novel and the novelle, the novel and the drama. Percy Russell’s *A Guide to British and American Novels* (1894), the result, we’re told, of “thirty-six years continuous study of British, American and Australasian fiction,” has chapters on (*inter alia*) historical novels, military novels, naval and nautical novels, political novels, Scotch and Irish novels, sensational novels, religious novels, novels of business life, temperance novels, novels of school and college life, and fiction for the young. In *The Novel: What It Is* (1896), F. Marion Crawford gives as “perhaps” his best answer to the question “What is a novel?” a theatrical analogy: “It is, or ought to be, a pocket-stage.” And in *Materials and Methods of Fiction* (1908), Clayton Hamilton’s concern with technique intersects with normal taxonomic habits: in a chapter titled “Setting” (a subject on which he cites Zola) he enumerates, on Forster’s precisely malicious count, no less than nine sorts of weather, for example, “decorative,” “utilitarian,” as well as such redundant categories as “to illustrate a character,” “as a controlling influence over character” or even (in “the usual nursery tale”) “non-existent.”¹⁰

Forster has great fun with scholastic taxonomies and especially with *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, whose authorship he claims to conceal though at the same time giving the title, which makes identification easy. *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, Forster reports cattily, is “the most amazing work on the novel that I have met for many years. It came over the Atlantic to me”—as if on magic wings—“nor shall I ever forget it.” Hamilton’s taxonomy of literary weather especially delights him: “I liked

9 *The Best Hundred Books*, p. 21.

10 Friedrich Spielhagen, *Beiträge zur Theorie und Technik des Romans* (Leipzig: Verlag von L. Staackmann, 1883); Percy Russell, *A Guide to British and American Novels*, 2nd ed., “Carefully Revised” (London: Dighy, Long, 1895), p. vii; F. Marion Crawford, *The Novel: What It Is* (London: Macmillan, 1896), p. 49; Clayton Hamilton, *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, intro. Brander Matthews (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1908), pp. 109 (on Zola), 110f. (on weather).

him flinging in non-existence. It made everything so scientific and trim"—in true transatlantic fashion.¹¹ But in fact Forster stands in a relationship to Hamilton as James to Besant: that of the quick and articulate thinker to the middling sort of hack. And both of them deal in conventional categories. Bliss Perry said in 1902: "we are accustomed to say of any work of fiction that it contains three elements of potential interest, namely, the characters, the plot, and the setting or background."¹² Hamilton has a chapter called "Plot"; Forster, chapters on "The Story" and "The Plot," and Forster's distinction between a "story" based on time and "plot" based on causality merely disaggregates, though cleverly, Hamilton's "simplest of all structures for a narrative"—"a straightforward arrangement of events along a single strand of causation." Hamilton has a chapter on "Characters"; Forster, two chapters on "People." And Hamilton on "character"—"we meet two sorts of characters in the pages of the novelists,—characters which may be called static, and characters which may be called dynamic"—is substantively indistinguishable from Forster's later distinction, by now deeply etched in the history of novel criticism, between "flat" characters and "round."¹³ These points of contact between Perry and Hamilton and Forster imply what can be seen with hindsight: that by the time of Forster's Clark Lectures in 1927, which make up *Aspects of the Novel*, analysis of taxonomy and technique in the novel had gone for the time being as far as it could go. That fiction was an art—or at least a high "craft," as in the title of Percy Lubbock's Jamesian study, *The Craft of the Novel* (1921)¹⁴—was not in serious doubt even if its standing was still to be fully confirmed. The second great war and its agonies were not far away, and a remote study of the novel by a little-known Hungarian, motivated in its origins by the outbreak of the first great war,¹⁵ was waiting to be discovered in the Anglo-American world. The war came, Ian Watt spent three years in prison camp on the river Kwai and, not much more than a decade after the war ended,

11 E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), pp. 26, 27.

12 Perry, p. 95.

13 Hamilton, *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, pp. 62, 80; Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 103ff.

14 Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, intro. Mark Schorer (New York: Viking, 1957). In a preface to this edition, Lubbock performs a nice rhetorical move, while discussing his original choice of title, that brings "craft" and "art" together as one.

15 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971). In a preface from 1962, Lukács describes the book's origin: "The immediate motive for writing was supplied by the outbreak of the First World War. ... My own deeply personal attitude was one of vehement, global, and, especially at the beginning, scarcely articulate rejection of the war and especially of enthusiasm for the war" (p. 11).

published *The Rise of the Novel* (1957). With it criticism and history of the novel changed measurably and so far permanently.

What accounts for the remarkable shelf life and influence of *The Rise of the Novel*? When it first appeared in 1957, it was reviewed respectfully—but not quite in terms that would have led one to guess how well it would last. The reviewer for the annual bibliography of eighteenth-century studies, it's true, called the book "wide-ranging, speculative, meaty," but there is a certain academic wishy-washiness about the review that is characteristic of the annual bibliography itself; the reviewer reiterates his praise in calmer tones before going on to dispute some of the book's conclusions: "Mr. Watt has read widely and thoughtfully; his speculations are interesting." This is not the sort of rave that foretells forty years on the academic best-seller list. The *Times Literary Supplement* called the book a "penetrating study" but gave it less than half the space it gave in the same issue to Robert Halsband's "excellent" biography of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Only Irving Howe, in *Partisan Review*, went all out, calling *The Rise of the Novel* a "model of excellence," while Hilary Corke, in *Encounter*, called it somewhat slightly an academic excursus into "pretty well-stamped ground," even though conceding its "masterly" attention to social and economic contexts. Very little at its birth would have led anyone to forecast not just the importance but the enduring importance of Watt's book.¹⁶

That endurance has been multiply determined. First, *The Rise of the Novel* caught the crest of a wave of attention to the novel that coincided with the end of the war. Second, it paid no apparent heed to any lingering, if Mandarin, doubt that the novel was not an artistically worthy form. Third, it gathered up the threads of taxonomic and technical criticism, bringing them together in a new synthesis, while also giving new specificity to the concept of "realism," so common but so elusive a marker in previous discourse about the novel. Fourth, it did not shirk the business of evaluation though (as with James) it made evaluation dependent (at least in the first instance) on matters of technique. Fifth, it brought philosophical and sociological themes to bear on the novel and, not incidentally, brought Lukács into Anglo-American criticism in the process. However much it dealt with formal values, *The Rise of the Novel* also transcended them, treating "character," for example, as in the main a function of its "setting," a setting conceived not as a matter of the ambient weather but

16 *Philological Quarterly* 37 (July, 1958), 304, 305; *TLS*, 15 February 1957, 98; *Partisan Review* 25 (Winter, 1958), 150; *Encounter* 8 (1957), 84.

as a matter of powerful social systems.¹⁷ Thus *The Rise of the Novel* predicted and influenced the future almost uncannily, the “new criticism” being about to yield to social and cultural criticism of literary texts. The novel as an artifact was the perfect herald for the sea-change that was about to come. *The Rise of the Novel* was the right book at the right time. Finally, because Watt worked hard to ensure such an outcome, it was an accessibly straightforward book, though also a book whose straightforwardness half-concealed the deepest strata of feeling that lay beneath the rhetorically placid surface. The rest of this essay will consist of brief commentary on the characteristics that have helped make Watt’s book so long-lived a phenomenon.



Because *The Rise of the Novel* has remained the touchstone, other critics who turned to the novel in the postwar years are (by and large) not much remembered, but there were a good number of them—hence Hilary Corke’s dismissive comment about “well-stamped ground”—and, taken all together, they much intensified the environment of interest and made the novel more conspicuously *discutable*. Ralph Fox’s *The Novel and the People*, first published in 1937 (posthumously, because Fox had died in the Spanish Civil War), was reprinted in the United States in 1945, with an “American Preface” by the radical writer and novelist Howard Fast, who praised the book as “the brilliant record of a Marxist writer who believed that only from the people could a great art spring.”¹⁸ The English critic and novelist Robert Liddell published *A Treatise on the Novel* in 1947, opening with a reply to deprecatory views that “have adversely influenced both novelists and critics, many of whose worst errors can directly be traced to a low view of this form of art,” and by 1960 Liddell’s *Treatise*, a blend of technical and moral criticism flavoured with more than a pinch of Eliot’s humanism, had been reprinted five times.¹⁹ In 1953 Liddell also published *Some Principles of Fiction*, twice reprinted by 1961.

17 On the genesis and motives of *The Rise of the Novel*, see Ian Watt, “Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown: The Realities of Realism,” *Stanford Humanities Review* 8 (2000), and this issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (12:2, January 2000), 125–44.

18 Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (New York: International Publishers, 1945), p. 10. The edition includes not only Fast’s preface, but a “publisher’s note” and a brief memoir of Fox by John Lehmann, originally published in *Ralph Fox: A Writer in Arms*, ed. John Lehmann, T.A. Jackson, and C. Day Lewis (New York: International Publishers, 1937).

19 Robert Liddell, *A Treatise on the Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p. 13.

To the list of postwar interpretations and histories of the novel might be added, without pausing to notice studies of individual authors, Bruce McCullough, *Representative English Novelists: Defoe to Conrad* (1946), a doggedly taxonomic study of different types of fiction represented by twenty individual writers of twenty individual novels: for example, "The Comic Novel" (*Tristram Shandy*), "The Psychological Novel" (*Middlemarch*), and "The Impressionistic Novel" (*Lord Jim*); Alexander Cowie, *The Rise of the American Novel* (1951), a big survey of American fiction through Henry James with a coda called "New Directions (1890-1940)," in which *The Grapes of Wrath* is the last, highly touted exhibit; A.A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (1951), in which the narrative treatment of time becomes the touchstone of technique; Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953), a run-through of individual novels from *Don Quixote* to Joyce's *Portrait*, with a "new critical" bias reflected (for example) in the treatment of *Don Quixote* as exemplifying "parody and paradox";²⁰ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), published the same year as Watt's book; and, in some ways most relevant, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1951), by Watt's friend Arnold Kettle, an author-by-author and novel-by-novel study—but one that aimed in its opening pages "to face—if not to answer satisfactorily—the essential questions: why did the novel arise at all, and why should it have arisen when it did?"²¹ Of these students of the novel some are still familiar names, others not. But remembered or forgotten, more than a few critics were busy thinking about the novel. Watt caught the wave just as it was breaking.

The wave was also to wash away the need to answer any remaining doubters: the novel was artistically worth attending to and that was that. Or almost that. While Robert Liddell still thought he needed to reply to those who took a "low view" of the form, anyone who chose to call his book *The Rise of the Novel* or, in Alexander Cowie's case, *The Rise of the American Novel*, was answering any doubters obliquely. The undeniably Whiggish idea of the rising of the novel is bound up with the significance of the novel, its power and its triumph. Whatever happens to have "risen," whether for good ("the rise of democracy") or for evil ("the rise of fascism"), has a claim on our attention. And if the novel (as in Richard Chase's title) participates in a "tradition," so much the better. Watt has been a believer not only in plain prose but in plain titles: *The Rise of the Novel* owes something of its

20 Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1960), p. viii.

21 Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, 2 vols (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 1:7.

standing to the simplicity, with all its complicated implications, of what Watt decided to name it.²²

Watt's taxonomy is also both simple and memorable. To the clutter of previous taxonomies like Spielhagen's or Bruce McCullough's or Hamilton's nine types of weather, Watt applies Occam's razor. Who could possibly remember the nine types of weather? But who could not remember the distinction between realism of presentation and realism of assessment, grounded as it is in the empirical practice of Defoe and Richardson, on the one hand, and Fielding on the other? Those who are theoretically inclined may complain, and with reason, that the concept of realism, post-Watt, is as vexed as ever, that realism of presentation and realism of assessment ultimately beg the question of what makes realism real, and that Watt's definition of realism as depending on the individuality of characters and particulars as to the times and places of their actions (p. 32) doesn't get us much beyond a starting point.²³ That is true, but even to have workable names for what Defoe and Richardson and Fielding were doing is a step towards empirical clarity and understanding.

Forward-looking as it was, however, *The Rise of the Novel* did not evade traditional evaluation, though blending it with an originality of perception and a tactful absence of dogmatism or bluster. Evaluation is the Achilles' heel of traditional criticism. The more outspoken the critic, the more likely it is that time will have some revenge. Johnson on the metaphysicals or Arnold on Pope come to seem out of date and out of step—as does T.S. Eliot on the metaphysicals, no matter how radically he differed from Johnson in his bottom line evaluation of Donne and his contemporaries. When Watt published *The Rise of the Novel*, critics such as Leavis and Winters were still hard at what they thought was the Lord's work of extirpating root and branch errors of judgment, both popular or critical, that they saw all around them and then substituting their own *dicta*. On the other hand, Northrop Frye, observing the battlefield on which critics like Leavis and Winters exercised their firepower, declared in his "Polemical Introduction" to the *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in the same year as *The Rise of the Novel*, that the ranking and evaluating of authors was trivial, un-

22 As the first director of the Stanford Humanities Center, Watt was in on early discussions about what the Center should be called. While some of us thought another name might be better (I recall—not proudly—having proposed something like "The Institute for Humanistic Research"), Watt had the unerring sense that plainness was what was needed.

23 Warner, *Licensing Entertainment*, pp. 32–39.

scientific game-playing, like moving toy soldiers about on a tabletop.²⁴ The judgmental dogmatism of Leavis and Winters was matched by the non-judgmental absolutism of Frye, and Watt's strategy was equally distant from the extremes of either Leavis and Winters or Frye. With customary diffidence, he explained that while he mainly sought to elucidate "the enduring connections between the distinctive literary qualities of the novel and those of the society in which it began and flourished ... I also wanted to give a general critical assessment of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding" (p. 7). The question that most engaged him implicitly was that old match-up, Richardson versus Fielding.

At the time, assuming my own undergraduate experience was representative (as it may not entirely have been in this case), Fielding was easily top dog, though Richardson's biographer, Alan McKillop, was at least a spokesman for Richardson if not quite his champion.²⁵ In the view of the rather pugnacious (he actually had been a boxer) professor who taught the eighteenth-century novel seminar at Harvard, *Shamela* on *Pamela* provided a fair critical commentary, and *Clarissa* was a combination of too sentimental and too long to be dealt with seriously. These were attitudes I did not question at the time. When I first read *The Rise of the Novel*, it was with a certain surprise, even dismay. I thought surely Watt must be wrong in his estimate of Richardson, whose interiority of style and understanding he seemed so obviously yet quietly to prefer to the thumping "manliness" of Fielding's mock-heroic. I still think Watt misses something of Fielding's achievement, if only because his definition of the novel deflects attention from the virtues of Fielding's masterpiece. *Tom Jones* was in fact a novel he held in affection and esteem, but to say that "Fielding's technique was too eclectic to become a permanent element in the tradition of the novel" or that "*Tom Jones* is only part novel" or that "Fielding's characters do not have a convincing inner life" implies not only a generic formalism but an associated scale of value (pp. 288; 274). In any event critical re-evaluations like Watt on Richardson have not often had such long-standing effects; Eliot's assessment of the metaphysicals, which

24 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). for example, p. 24: "there are critics who enjoy making religious, anti-religious, or political campaigns with toy soldiers labelled 'Milton' or 'Shelley' more than they enjoy studying poetry."

25 Alan Dugald McKillop, *Samuel Richardson: Printer and Novelist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936): "The work of Samuel Richardson needs not so much rehabilitation or ardent defense as candid re-examination. Modern readers and scholars have naturally paid more attention to Fielding, but even if it be argued that Richardson was not for all time but of an age, our growing interest in that age should keep us from taking him too much for granted" (p. vii). One might now imagine a study of Fielding that transposed McKillop's opening gambit: "Modern readers and scholars have naturally paid more attention to Richardson, but ..."

fed into “new critical” strategies, was comparably important for a while, but its doctrinaire quality has worked against it over time. The strategy of *The Rise of the Novel*, relying on a combination of analysis and insinuation rather than the dogmatism of a Leavis or a Winters, has enabled Richardsonians to go about their business productively for four decades now, unhampered by any anxiety that their subject was not worthy of fine-tuned attention. If Watt confirmed the respectability of the novel, he did even more for Richardson, conferring on him the distinction of being *primus inter pares*.

But, overall, it was the importation into literary studies of philosophical and sociological learning that has given Watt’s book most of its staying power. The reviewer for the annual bibliography who called it “wide-ranging, speculative, meaty” and who added that “Mr. Watt has read widely and thoughtfully” need not be greatly faulted for not quite noticing the full extent of the author’s wide-rangingness. Watt was unobtrusive about his learning, and it is only on rereading *The Rise of the Novel*—or reading his (at last available) 1978 lecture, “Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown: The Realities of Realism”—that one realizes just how wide-ranging, how saturated in then-unfamiliar learning, he really was.

In brief, discreet allusions and footnotes in *The Rise of the Novel*, there appear not only Durkheim, Tawney, and Weber, but the economic historian H.J. Habakkuk, the sociologists George Herbert Mead and Talcott Parsons, the anthropologists A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Robert Redfield, whose *Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941) turns up as Watt is discussing the re-ordering of society under industrial capitalism. In a discussion of “the crisis” in marriage as it affected, especially, women, is a summary paragraph about the polygamy question and a footnote to Hume’s obscure “Of Polygamy and Divorces” (p. 147). In fact Watt credits Hume with a view more favourable to polygamy than he actually held, but it is Watt’s sense of what might count in a consideration of “love and the novel” that matters. And here are Auerbach and Lukács, the latter now a household name but then utterly unfamiliar in English studies. Auerbach and Lukács each turn up in Watt’s text only once, but as we learn from “Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown,” together they cost him two months of work, which included “learning German for the third time.”²⁶ These days we would call the results “interdisciplinary,” but “interdisciplinarity,” by now a self-important concept, is not one I ever heard Ian Watt resort to. The habit of interdisciplinarity for him was all in a day’s work and not a reason for ostentatious

26 Watt, “Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown,” p. 149

display. In "Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown," he singles out Adorno as more responsible than any other single person for the intellectual shaping of *The Rise of The Novel*, a debt acknowledged in his preface though Adorno makes no appearance in the text that follows, no doubt because Watt did not need him there. Anyone less averse to display would have shoehorned Adorno into the book without any trouble.

It is the blending, however judicious and inconspicuous, of socio-cultural-philosophical learning into the body of his argument that made Watt's book the right one at the right time. "New criticism" was near the end of its run, cultural studies were somewhere on the horizon, the social consciousness of the 1960s was a phenomenon waiting to happen; all the omens were favourable. Not that Watt would welcome any association of his book with the wilder frontiers of thought and action of the 1960s, but his concern with social history, with the cultural life of the everyday, and with the experience of an underclass, that of servants below stairs, all of them following naturally from the intellectual environment of his undergraduate days at St John's College, Cambridge, turned out to be exactly what was needful. Like *The Rise of the Novel*, the social-historical work of the English Marxists Raymond Williams and Eric Hobsbawm, and the later anthropological studies of Watt's friend and contemporary Jack Goody, have all answered to these needs; and, like Watt, Williams, Hobsbawm, and Goody have not lost their power to attract while the work of Leavis and others has faded into comparative obscurity. Not surprisingly, the third printing of *The Rise of the Novel* in 1962 carries a blurb on the back cover from a review in the *American Journal of Sociology*: "This book is an outstanding contribution to the field of historical sociology and the sociology of knowledge." In one way and another, that is what the times have demanded: flat characters, for example, are for us, like Fielding's in Watt's account, aptly defined as specific combinations "of stable and separate predispositions to action"; round characters, like Richardson's in Watt's account, as the living products of their own, socially conditioned past (p. 276). The paradigm has shifted, the old universe given way to the new.

Finally, there is the sheer readability of the book, stemming from Watt's conviction, which he makes explicit in "Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown," that "criticism should be as common-sense as possible in its attempt to achieve clarity and accessibility of statement."²⁷ The writing in *The Rise of the Novel* is unerringly straightforward, its effect cumulative and solicitous rather than sparkling or "brilliant." It is tempting to try to quote a sentence

27 Watt, "Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown," p. 165.

or two to prove the point—but the point (as in the case of the book’s interdisciplinarity) is that little in Watt’s prose calls attention to itself. Most of his sentences, in their ordinariness, call out *not* to be quoted and go down with an ease inversely proportional to the pains that went into their composition. Or, to put the case more carefully, the pains that I am all but certain went into their composition. I have never seen a manuscript of *The Rise of the Novel* and apparently none still exists, but I have seen other of Watt’s manuscripts, letters that he penned as chair of the English Department or director of the Stanford Humanities Center as well as work on its way to publication. They have left me with indelible respect for their revisionary intensity—and for the skill of those dedicated interpreters who were entrusted over the years with deciphering and typing the manuscripts.²⁸ A typical Watt page in draft has the look of a diagram pointing to buried treasure: a crowded, minuscule script embellishes the page with insertions and transpositions everywhere, as indicated by a profusion of encircled sentences and arrows to show where the revisions should go. Often these revisions seem, if not arbitrary, then governed by a sense of style so fine-grained as to require a succession of the tiniest adjustments. In matters of style Watt attains, by revision after revision, a form that quite conceals the labours required to achieve it. The end result is a prose such as Addison or Steele, masters of a pellucidity accessible to all comers, could have welcomed as matching their own. One reason for Watt’s lasting success in *The Rise of the Novel* is that he wrote a book people can actually read.²⁹

Yet the simplicity, it has to be said, is deceptive as well as hard-earned—or at least protective, a guard against currents of thought and feeling that run counter to the desire for a lucid ease. Every so often there breaks through the surface of *The Rise of the Novel* the sense of human urgency that underlies Watt’s attraction to the novel itself and to its “formal realism,” an oddly antiseptic term for the “full and authentic report of human experience” that the new genre brought into being (p. 32). “Authentic” is the word that matters most here: its overtones call up an association with existential authenticity, and in this context, the “fullness” of any report of human experience needs to incorporate more than happy endings. Watt does not

28. Those I know of deserve to be named here: Carolyn Fetler, Ginny Shrader, Sue Darnbrau, and Dee Marquez.

29. The reproduction overleaf of the first page of Ian Watt’s lecture “Realism and Modern Criticism of the Novel” typifies his painstaking revision. The lecture is published for the first time in the *Stanford Humanities Review* 8 (Spring 2000), a special number entitled “Cultural History: The Case of Ian Watt.” The page is reproduced here courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Realism and Modern Criticism of the Novel

→ MWA

Mark Spilka pinned ~~on me~~ the critical label of "sociological realist" ^{on me in his anthropology} in Towards a Poetics of Fiction ^{A (1973)}. Let me mention in passing that I dislike titles beginning

with "Towards" almost as much as Tom Gunn dislikes poems called "Poem." Why doesn't ~~he~~ Spilka, I ask, wait till he gets there? ^{and even still} ~~Then he'll know if there's anything worth reporting.~~ ^{well, that's} my basic reaction to being called a realist, ~~though~~ whether

qualified ~~as a "sociological" or "realist"~~ or not, is a yawn. ^{basically}

"Realism" is generally regarded as ~~an old-fashioned and pedestrian literary position; and no one likes to be described as flat-footed and addicted to~~ ^{the world of novels} ~~controversies which have been going on for more than a century so that they're rather~~ ^{pedestrian} fly-blown. ~~Still, I have to live with it, and since my friend~~ ^{and also} ~~Tzvetan Todorov has~~

got a chapter devoted to me in his latest book, Critique de la Critique, which is ^{also} entitled "La Critique Réaliste". ^{at} my age suppose I can say ~~with~~ ^{with} Horace Walpole on the success of The Castle of Otranto, "It is charming to totter into vogue."³ ^{But I must} ~~whistle~~

Todorov in fact, though finding my work untheoretical and lacking in consistent critical evaluation, still sees me as using many approaches, from the linguistic to the ideological, which are all directed to a single aim: "to make one understand better the text one is considering" (p. 130). Here Todorov is fairly close to what, in the Conrad book, I describe as my purpose: to see what the "imagination" can discover in a "literal reading" of a literary work (p. 130).

In my letter of reply, which is also part of Todorov's chapter, I mention that I certainly don't regard myself as a "mimetic critic," as Auerbach has been called. On the other hand, if I don't believe in a ~~mimetic theory of art particularly~~ ^{where, let's see}, I'm even further from the opposite view that there is no relation whatever between the ~~literary work and the real world~~ ^{connected with the historical, literary, and the other} (p. 135). I ~~think of critics who mock me as "the~~ ^{entirely empirical Ian Watt"} ~~entirely empirical Ian Watt"~~ as John Gurruck does in his review of Critique de la

¹ Bloomington and London, 1977, p. viii.

² Paris, 1964, pp. 125-141.

³ To Selwyn, 2 December 1965.

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larger version
to the position
of interpretation
in fiction

find the same authenticity in the classic comic plot (which is why *Tom Jones* is not so easy for him to fit into his evolutionary schema) as he does in the gritty economic world of Defoe's depersonalized fiction or the psychological drama of Richardson's *Clarissa*, both of which represent to him truer versions of things as they really are.

It is time to listen to Watt himself, first on Defoe, who long ago "called the great bluff of the novel—its suggestion that personal relations really are the be-all and end-all of life" and who alone ("he, and only he") "among the great writers of the past, has presented the struggle for survival in the bleak perspectives which recent human history has brought back to a commanding position on the human stage" (pp. 133–34). Reading this, we can hardly help remembering Watt's own struggle for survival during his more than three years in the prison camps on the river Kwai, an experience that some of Defoe's characters could have survived—but, in Western fiction as in life itself, not many others.

Watt on *Clarissa* is equally powerful, equally aware of a fearful authenticity—however different Richardson's novel may be from anything in Defoe:

It is this capacity for a continuous enrichment and complication of a simple situation which makes Richardson the great novelist he is; and it shows, too, that the novel had at last attained literary maturity, with formal resources capable not only of supporting the tremendous imaginative expansion which Richardson gave his theme, but also of leading him away from the flat didacticism of his critical preconceptions into so profound a penetration of his characters that their experience partakes of the terrifying ambiguity of human life itself. (p. 238)

How many sophisticated critics these days, critics as learned, say, as Watt himself, would permit themselves to speak unashamedly of "the terrifying ambiguity of human life"? As many, perhaps, as could have survived the camp on the Kwai.

"Formal realism," one might say, is Watt's terminological defence, as well as an almost ironic bow to the "new critical" kind of formalism, against the existential dread that underlies the rise of the novel. "It is ... likely," Watt says in his cool, dispassionate manner, "that a measure of secularisation was an indispensable condition for the rise of the new genre." But then he goes on to translate a famous and far from dispassionate moment in Lukács, the one time in the book when Lukács puts in an explicit appearance: "The novel, Georg Lukács has written, is the epic of a world forsaken by God." (Though accurate, the translation cannot quite catch the God-forsakenness of the world according to Lukács: "Der Roman ist die Epopöe

der gottverlassenen Welt.”)³⁰ Then, as if to recover equilibrium, Watt cites a very ordinary observation by Sade—or an observation at least that would be quite ordinary if it were by anybody but Sade: the novel presents, “in de Sade’s phrase, ‘le tableau des mœurs séculaires’” (p. 84). Scratch the cool veneer and Watt’s understanding of the novel turns out to be, however hedged with his protective ordinariness of style, much like that of Lukács: the novel is an image of transcendental homelessness in a forsaken world. The power of *The Rise of the Novel* lies in its refusal to overlook the pain of everyday life and, equally, its refusal to yield to rhetorical consolations of self-pity.



Those of us who till fields other than the novel, and who began doing so years ago, may regard *The Rise of the Novel* not only with appreciation but with a tinge of envy. How did Watt get so lucky? But my point is, like it or not, that Watt was not “lucky.” Or if he was, his was the sort of inspired luck that scholars and critics can have only rarely. In writing *The Rise of the Novel*, Watt expressed the realization that the novel’s long rise has been a defining feature of the modern world. He also knew intuitively that the time of the novel had fully come—whatever may be its destiny in some longer run. In this knowledge he had the future, which has become the present, in his bones.

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30 Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans: Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der grossen Epik* (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1930), p. 84.