

# Anna Barbauld on Fictional Form in *The British Novelists* (1810)

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Anna Barbauld has been recognized as advancing the critical study of the novel in her edition of *The British Novelists*. This article considers closely the attention Barbauld pays to novelistic form in the preface and critical essays in that work. She prioritizes carefully-conceived plot above aspirations to realism and to moral didacticism, and places considerable emphasis on narrative closure. This attention to closure is examined in light of both contemporary and later critical debate on the importance and value of novelistic ending. There is some irony in Barbauld's disparagement of disrupted narrative forms considering her reputation as the author of the Gothic fragment "Sir Bertrand." While this was firmly attributed to her brother John in the 1820s, there is some correlation between the expository essay to "Sir Bertrand" and Barbauld's later writing on Gothic works in *The British Novelists*. In both "Objects of Terror" and in *The British Novelists* more generally there is an interest in the construction of readerly curiosity and the power exerted over the reader by a work's end.

*abstract*

ANNA LETITIA Barbauld's fifty-volume collection, *The British Novelists*, published in 1810, has been recognized as formative in establishing the novelistic canon. It also contains innovative piece of writing on novelistic form, as Barbauld argued in her collection for the merit and respectability of the novel by attending to its value in aesthetic terms. When advertised in the *Athenaeum* in 1807, *The British Novelists* was presented explicitly as a guide to the choosing of novels, instead of the evaluative void of the library catalogue.<sup>1</sup> Barbauld provided an early nineteenth-century retrospect of, mainly, the eighteenth-century novel, with an eye alert to what she calls the "ordonnance" of a novelist's plan, its architectural arrangement and design.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William McCarthy, *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 423.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Letitia Barbauld, *The British Novelists; with an Essay, and Prefaces Biographical and Critical, by Mrs. Barbauld* (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, et al., 1810). References are to this edition. Only two of the novels in the

Barbauld's was not the first gathering together of representative works of prose fiction. *Novelist's Magazine*, published 1780–89, included sixty novels in twenty-three volumes and was Barbauld's major precedent.<sup>3</sup> The 1810 *The British Novelists* was the first collection to come with such extensive analytical commentary in an introductory essay to volume 1 entitled "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," as well as a preface, biographical and critical, to the work of each novelist. Barbauld chose twenty-eight novels by twenty-one novelists, and at the end of "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing" she describes her selection criteria. Her governing aim was to choose "the most approved novels," attending to the taste of the purchasing public and providing variety in her selection (1:61). While some novels were easily picked out for their merit, all are successful in terms of providing entertainment which, Barbauld stresses, is the novel's most important attribute, a rather disarming assertion in a work aiming to promote the novel's rank among the more elite literary genres. Barbauld's comments on individual novels are not always characterized by unequivocal praise; rather, her British novelists are subjected to rigorous critical assessment.

Barbauld's edition of *The British Novelists* proved to be influential. Rival novel collections followed, supplementing and also implicitly contesting her choices. William Mudford's cheaper collection of *British Novelists; Comprising Every Work of Acknowledged Merit Which Is Usually Classed under the Denomination of Novels* (1810–17) followed, in a hastily put-together format, shortly after.<sup>4</sup> Less well-known than Barbauld's collection and Walter Scott's *Ballantyne's Novelist's Library* (1821–24), Mudford's consisted of only five volumes and fourteen novels by five authors (Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, and Henry Fielding). Mudford alludes to Mrs Barbauld in his essay on *Joseph Andrews* as "a modern female

collection were published after 1800: Barbauld comments that her choices were to a degree governed by copyright.

<sup>3</sup> For other eighteenth-century collections of prose fiction, see William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 375.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Sadleir, *XIX Century Fiction: A Bibliographical Record Based on His Own Collection*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), cited in Homer Obed Brown, *Institutions of the English Novel: From Defoe to Scott* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 181.

critic" with whose indignation occasioned by Fielding's treatment of learned women Mudford entirely concurs.<sup>5</sup> Like Mudford, Scott preferred to represent more works from fewer novelists; his collection comprised ten volumes, fifteen authors, and thirty-six novels. Claudia L. Johnson, in an article on Barbauld's role in constructing the novelistic canon, has pointed out Scott's conservatism in rejecting some of Barbauld's choices, reducing the selection of women novelists (Barbauld included eight, Scott only two), as well as novelists from the later decades of the eighteenth century, and novels of politically dissenting interests.<sup>6</sup>

Barbauld's prefatory essay "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing" was written in the wake of, among other works, Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Treatise of Romances and Their Original* (1668) (of which Barbauld's brother, John Aikin, published a translation in 1810), Clara Reeve's *Progress of Romance* (1785), and John Moore's "A View of the Commencement and Progress of Romance" (1797), but in describing recent fiction, her allusions to these writers to a large degree drop away, with narrative construction coming into focus. Barbauld also recycled some of her own earlier work: parts of "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing" and her preface to Samuel Richardson's works in *The British Novelists* originated in the earlier introduction to her 1804 edition of the *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*. And it is her discussion there of narrative points of view—"modes of carrying on a story"—that has contributed most to her reputation as incipient narratologist, as she categorizes and assesses prose fictions, seemingly for the first time, according to their manner of narration.<sup>7</sup> Most common is the narrative or epic mode of

<sup>5</sup> William Mudford, *British Novelists; Comprising Every Work of Acknowledged Merit Which Is Usually Classed under the Denomination of Novels* (London, 1810–17), 5:iii.

<sup>6</sup> Claudia L. Johnson, "Let me make the novels of a country': Barbauld's *The British Novelists* (1810/1820)," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 84 (Spring 2001): 163–79.

<sup>7</sup> Barbauld, introduction to *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson ... to Which are Prefixed, A Biographical Account of That Author, and Observations on His Writings by Anna Laetitia Barbauld*, 6 vols. (London, 1804), 1:xxiii. References are to this edition. Claudia L. Johnson describes Barbauld as writing for "alert proto-narratologists" (171). Similar claims have been made by Catherine E. Moore, who has described Barbauld as "historian and theoretician of the novel," in "Ladies ... Taking the Pen in Hand': Mrs. Barbauld's Criticism of Eighteenth-Century Women Novelists," in *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski

story-telling, where the author “is supposed to know everything” (*Correspondence*, 1:xxiii); by contrast, memoirs are the least satisfactory of the three modes of narration, because there is much that the hero cannot say, while the author has two characters to sustain (the experiencing and the narrating character); the third mode of narration is epistolary correspondence, which is “the most natural and the least probable way of telling a story,” for to maintain a connected story by such means “requires much art” (*Correspondence*, 1:xxvii).

This extensive section on narrative modality in the *Correspondence* does not survive intact in *The British Novelists*, although a trace remains in the preface to Fielding. One formal aspect of this section of the 1804 introduction that is repeated in 1810 is Barbauld’s preference for dramatic style. While finding the epistolary novel satisfying in that the entire work is dramatic, with characters speaking in their own persons, the author of the narrative mode will fail in liveliness “except he frequently drops himself, and runs into dialogue: all good writers therefore have thrown as much as possible of the dramatic into their narrative” (*Correspondence*, 1:xxiii). Frances Burney is exemplary in this respect, as Barbauld will return to in 1810, in that her characters are identifiable not only by their sentiments but also by the manner and expression of those sentiments that seem to be extracted from “the scenes in a play” (*Correspondence*, 1:xxiv). Likewise, among the 1810 essays, Elizabeth Inchbald and John Moore are both praised with the same idiom of “throwing” much into the dramatic form, as if such an imagined carelessness of narrative presentation captured best the energy of dialogue that Barbauld so admired. In her essay on Fielding, Barbauld states that “the more of dialogue there is in the novel, the more spirit it possesses” (18:iv).

In the essay on Richardson in *The British Novelists*, Barbauld makes clear her dislike of episodic and digressive plots, criticizing (by means of the same phrase she uses in *Correspondence*, 1:cxxvi) “detached episodes, *thrown in* like make-weights” (1:xxxvii–xxxviii; emphasis added), so common in contemporary writing. “Detached,” as we shall see, stands in contrast to one of her most

(Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 384; and Anne K. Mellor refers to Barbauld as initiating “the study of what we now call narratology,” in *Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780–1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 94. See also McCarthy, 425.

preferred evaluative words: “connected” and its variants. Instead, she stresses “unity of design” (18:xx) and the functionality of plots that take form according to their purpose. It is this interest of Barbauld’s in the containing shapes of narration, whatever the chosen narrative mode, that is the subject of what follows. In particular, I focus on the attention she gives to “ends” in her writing, where end as purpose (her thrice repeated “end and object” of the novel) is seen as determining ending. Barbauld gives considerable attention in her critical writing to novelistic closure: the well-crafted end that she deems, in spite of her awareness of the novel’s evolutionary disposition towards the “natural” and the “real,” is necessarily contrary to real life. She intervenes crisply in contemporary novelistic debate about what makes a successful ending, a debate continuing in much more recent critical discussions about novelistic form.



In his essay, “Serious Reflections on Farther Adventures: Resistances to Closure in Eighteenth-Century English Novels,” J. Paul Hunter, one of the foremost proponents of formalist interest in the novel, dismissed the twentieth-century preoccupation with the principle of “closure,” which is so routinely identified as both the primary structuring premise for authors, as well as the motivation for readers.<sup>8</sup> In his essay, while continuing to advocate formalist principles of criticism, Hunter argues for an anti-formalism inherent in the eighteenth-century novel. Far from seeing the notorious deferrals of ending in *Tristram Shandy* as idiosyncratic, he describes Sterne’s narrative procrastination as one manifestation of an “insistent hanging on” that was characteristic of novels of the day.<sup>9</sup>

Interest in “the ordinary, the particular, and the uncertain,” according to Hunter, encouraged a tolerance for unpredictable endings, and such endings were biographically mimetic rather than formally significant: “closure itself is not to be found in texts or in life unless the text or life just stops.”<sup>10</sup> Resistance to closure

<sup>8</sup> J. Paul Hunter, “Serious Reflections on Farther Adventures: Resistances to Closure in Eighteenth-Century English Novels,” in *Augustan Subjects: Essays in Honor of Martin C. Battestin*, ed. by Albert J. Rivero (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1997), 276–94.

<sup>9</sup> Hunter, 289.

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, 291.

is outlined by Hunter as existing in six typical forms: sequels (by the same or by a different author); adaptations (the transportation of characters from one work to another); a seeming reluctance to end (*Tristram Shandy* or “the long rampdown of *Clarissa*”); or, conversely, an accelerated ending that suggests, as in *Tom Jones*, “resistance to a meaningful and persuasive sense of narrative closure”;<sup>11</sup> publication in parts; and, finally, false or multiple endings in which a novelist revises, within the same work, what is its ostensible conclusion (for example, the successive marriages of *Betsy Thoughtless*).

Missing from Hunter’s list of “resistances to closure” is the fragment, a form that was becoming increasingly popular, used to suggest, for instance, by Frances Sheridan in her *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), not only the abrupt curtailment of Sidney’s story (“. . . . . Here the lady’s narrative breaks off”),<sup>12</sup> but also its implied continuation; and Sidney’s story does eventually get picked up again six years later in the posthumously published *Conclusion of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*. The fragment becomes so prevalent in literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries<sup>13</sup> that it was perhaps worth sidelining for other more covert resistances to ending. For, writes Hunter, novels “fight closure even while pretending to honor it”;<sup>14</sup> thus, while privileging resistance, he acknowledges its opposite. This, in turn, mirrors the alertness of other critics—those against whom Hunter reacts—to the latency of narrative continuation, but who nevertheless choose to emphasize closure. Frank Kermode, in perhaps the seminal work of closure criticism, *The Sense of an Ending*, describes how literary texts seek to accommodate both the “need to mime contingency” and the desire for the consolations of form: “a fake fullstop.”<sup>15</sup> Here the miming of contingency stands in an inverse relationship to Hunter’s sense of the pretence of closure.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter, 283, 285.

<sup>12</sup> Frances Sheridan, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, 3 vols. (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), 3:341.

<sup>13</sup> See Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Hunter, 279.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 151, 145.

For Hunter, in the late 1990s, the imperative was to redress the balance, as “the recent attention to closure as a literary phenomenon is almost impossible to exaggerate”; however, it is, as he acknowledges, difficult to say “exactly when closure became such a critical preoccupation.”<sup>16</sup> It was certainly prevalent within the eighteenth century itself, and the prioritizing of a governing and articulable end was common: “To improve or to please readers of any taste, the story should be formed on some consistent plan, having in view a certain *end*,” writes one reviewer (1796).<sup>17</sup> One especially striking feature of Hunter’s analysis is his view of *Tom Jones* as closure-resistant, in spite of Fielding’s own acknowledged classical precedents and facing down the eighteenth century’s own sense of *Tom Jones* as a superlatively constructed plot. Fielding and Smollett were, early on, positioned at opposing extremes in terms of the narrative construction of finality. James Beattie in 1783 makes the comparison, with the episodic Smollett seeming not to know “how to contrive a regular fable, by making his events mutually dependent, and all co-operating to one and the same final purpose,” while Fielding’s “incidents proceed in an uninterrupted series to the final event.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, both practitioners and theorists were voicing a consciousness of the novel’s “contesting energies” of closure and anti-closure.<sup>19</sup> Samuel Johnson used the final number of the *Idler* (no. 103, 5 April 1760) to urge moral reflection on mortal ends when contemplating the “last” of anything; but in evoking the resonant symbolism of ending, embodied in the smallest variation or interruption, he describes it (as would Kermode) in tension with lives that are made up of ordinary succession. Maria Edgeworth has her characters discuss, at the end of *Belinda* (1801), how best a novel should end: “hurrying things toward the conclusion” or “draw out the story to five volumes more?”<sup>20</sup> As the novel began to take shape as a recognizable genre in its own right, readers became curious about the construction of narrative

<sup>16</sup> Hunter, 279.

<sup>17</sup> *Critical Review* 2nd series, 17 (July 1796): 351, cited in Joseph F. Bartolomeo, *A New Species of Criticism: Eighteenth-Century Discourse on the Novel* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994), 150.

<sup>18</sup> James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical ... On Fable and Romance* (London, 1783), 571, 573.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase is Balachandra Rajan’s, in *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 3 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1801), 355, 356.

curiosity and interested in formal construction, not necessarily as a vehicle for moral instruction, but for its own sake.

Closure and its inevitable other, continuation, become subject to a sustained formalist scrutiny in Barbauld's writing on the novel. In March of the same year that she published *The British Novelists*, Barbauld wrote a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* defending Edgeworth's tale "The Dun," which had received a hostile review in the *Quarterly*. In "The Dun," a licentious Colonel meets in a brothel the daughter of a tradesman whom he has ruined financially, and, moved by the daughter's plight, the Colonel releases her, pays his debts, and is reformed. According to the *Quarterly*, this ending was perfunctory, focusing entirely on economic recompense.<sup>21</sup> Barbauld in defence of her friend Edgeworth rejects drawn out didacticism in favour of the stylistic economy of the tale. The sort of reformation that the *Quarterly* seemed to require—the transformation of "this gay Colonel into a character totally opposite to the one he had so long borne"<sup>22</sup>—was beyond the bounds of probability, not least for a tale of this length. Barbauld recognizes the formal constraints of the work above any absolute moral agenda. This is not to say that she denies a moral aim to Edgeworth's work—far from it—but she sees it as subject to the sceptical restriction of probable human behaviour, as well as a pragmatic restriction of textual length. Echoing Edgeworth's reflections on endings in the closing pages of *Belinda*, Barbauld writes that the colonel "had served her purpose, and she had done with him ... she does not seem to have had sufficient regard for this gentleman, to draw out a slight story into half a volume more."<sup>23</sup>

In 1804, in the *Correspondence* of Richardson, Barbauld had used the same expression of character expendability to lament Richardson's inability to know when to stop. While Edgeworth's Colonel "had served her purpose, and she had done with him,"<sup>24</sup> Richardson "never knew when to have done with a character" (*Correspondence*, 1:cxxi). Barbauld was the great champion of Richardson's work, making claims for his originating role in

<sup>21</sup> *Quarterly Review* 2 (August 1809).

<sup>22</sup> Anna Barbauld, letter to *Gentleman's Magazine* 80 (March 1810): 210–12, cited in McCarthy and Kraft, 459.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Barbauld, letter to *Gentleman's Magazine*, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Barbauld, letter to *Gentleman's Magazine*, 211.

the modern novel (*Correspondence*, 1:xi), a view made manifest by placing him first in *The British Novelists*, despite Defoe's acknowledged chronological precedence and technical innovation. Barbauld repeats her complaints, however, that much of Richardson's work was technically flawed by, to use Hunter's phrase, an "insistent hanging on." This opinion fuses with a frustration with regard to the very nature of sequels; not simply is the sequel typically inferior to the original work, but continuation travesties originating purpose and shape. On Richardson's two volumes written in continuation of *Pamela*, Barbauld comments in the *Correspondence*: "They are superfluous, for the plan was already completed" (1:lxvii). In *The British Novelists* she adds: "they are indeed superfluous to the story, which is properly terminated with the marriage of Pamela" (1:xii). She appeals to the same sense of "proper termination" when she comes to write of *Sir Charles Grandison* in *The British Novelists*: Richardson "continued ... a whole volume beyond the proper termination—the marriage of his hero; and having done so, he might, without more impropriety, have gone on to the next point of view, and the next, till he had given the history of two or three generations" (1:xli). *Sir Charles Grandison* would have been a better novel if Richardson had deleted the last volume "and, indeed, a good part of the sixth, where descriptions of dress, and parade, and furniture, after the interest is completely over, like the gaudy colouring of a western sky, give symptoms of a setting sun" (1:xliv). The reality effect is irrelevant once the "story" is over; one can only look at the horizon for so long.

Such an assessment of Richardson clearly validates Hunter's thesis that eighteenth-century writers were reluctant to let go of their creations (the prolix Richardson, notoriously so), but it equally demonstrates a readerly perception of ends, which, in both *Pamela* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, are understood as having been quite precisely articulated. Ends are perceivable in spite of elongation, which makes, in turn, the elongation perceivable as redundant. Barbauld sees the necessity of discrete termination so as to counteract the very capacity for endlessness that the novel offers ("the next point of view, and the next" [1:xliv]). Thus, the novel is kept in check in its impulse to imitate succession, and closure must be deployed against the novel's own propensities. Barbauld's emphasis on ending is accompanied by an awareness, but also a clear rejection, of the potential for infinite deferral.

Barbauld appreciates, by contrast, Elizabeth Inchbald's handling of passing time by a narrative break in *A Simple Story* that dispenses with temporal succession and continued telling: "The break between the first and second parts of the story has a singularly fine effect. We pass over in a moment a large space of years, and find every thing changed ... This sudden shifting of the scene has an effect which no continued narrative could produce; an effect which even the scenes of real life could not produce; for the curtain of futurity is lifted up only by degrees, and we must wait the slow succession of months and years to bring about events which are here presented close together" (28:ii). Samuel Johnson in his last *Idler* points to something similar when he describes how "an even and unvaried tenour of life always hides from our apprehension the approach of its end. Succession is not perceived but by variation."<sup>25</sup> Johnson too is grateful to interruptive measures that cast our minds precipitately towards "futurity," mainly because this allows for religious reflection on the future state of eternity. Barbauld, by contrast, admires Inchbald's interruption of continued narrative for its technical compression. The narrative disjunction is explicitly a rejection of "real life," and this, as she establishes in her introductory essay to *The British Novelists* (and to Richardson's *Correspondence*), is not a betrayal of the novel's governing purpose, but its essence.

Barbauld divides "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing" into two parts, deploying for herself an argumentative shift that complicates the conventional narrative of progress leading towards an equivalence between written fiction and the living world. While the first part of the essay tells of an historical movement from romance forms towards the representation of the natural and the real, the second part leads us away from an emphasis on "familiar life" (1:18) to an account of the novel as being in a state of tension (even antithesis) with life as lived. In the former, then, Barbauld moves from ancient tales of the Eastern nations through the romances of Greece and Rome to those of Calprenède and Mme de Scudéry, describing an incremental approach towards the real: "Rude times are fruitful of striking adventures; polished times must render them pleasing.— The ponderous volumes of the romance writers being laid upon the shelf, a closer imitation of nature began to be called for; not

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Idler* no. 103 (5 April 1760).

but that, from the earliest times, there had been stories taken from, or imitating, real life" (1:17). Barbauld then turns to the purpose of the novel, but she constructs her argument here along principles of ostensible contradiction and ambivalence regarding the goals of reading. In this second section, an initial structural chiasmus displays an enactment of the interrelationship of moral didacticism and entertainment, as well as a critically identifiable separation between the two. In the first instance, Barbauld presents the orthodoxy (as orthodoxy) that the novel's objective is to provide palatable doses of reason and moral goodness in the guise of fiction (A). However, she immediately undoes this proposition by stating firmly (and again chiasmatically, making the reader's position mirror her own) that "for my own part, I scruple not to confess that, when I take up a novel, *my end and object is entertainment*; and as I suspect that to be the case with most readers, I hesitate not to say that *entertainment is their legitimate end and object*" (B) (1:46; emphasis added). The next stage in the argument is to dilute, while reiterating, the forcefulness of this proposition, as novelistic merit need not rest on amusement alone (B), but instead can be seen in its infusion of "principles and moral feelings" (A) (1:48), following which a substantial account of the moral benefits of reading occurs. Furthermore, when this portrayal of the moral advantages of reading turns to the knowledge of the world that novels provide, this is again quickly complicated by means of an evident scepticism regarding the novel's efficacy in this regard, sounding the cautionary note that "perhaps the danger lies more in fixing the standard of virtue and delicacy too high for real use, than in debasing it" (1:52). The novel is so unlike the real world in its moral ideals that the reader can, paradoxically, be led into danger.

Reeve, in *The Progress of Romance*, suggested a clear definition of the novel as "a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written," continuing: "The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves."<sup>26</sup> Barbauld is much more circumspect in defining the novel, outlining a complex combination of elements that together "measure the dignity of a writer" (1:2).<sup>27</sup> Not only that, but "the every-day" is something

<sup>26</sup> Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (Dublin, 1785), 111.

<sup>27</sup> In both 1804 (ix-x) and 1810 (2-3), we read of the following constitutive parts: "the invention of a story, the choice of proper incidents, the ordonnance

from which the novel provides an escape: "It is pleasant ... to find relief from the sameness of every-day occurrences by expatiating amidst brighter skies and fairer fields" (1:47). The high value Barbauld gives to novelistic entertainment brings it into conflict with the real: for a novel to be dull is an "unpardonable sin" (1:48), while women, by contrast, had best resign themselves to the successive "monotony," the "neglect and tedium," of their lives. Reeve, though far from a naive reader of the novel's relation to the world—she, like Barbauld disapproves of the false expectations raised by novels—deemed the depiction of "real life" one adequate summary of the aims of the novel. By contrast, at the end of the prefatory essay "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," Barbauld is emphasizing the depiction of "real life" as illusory: even the novel that gives "much attention to real life and manners" will "give false ideas"; that is the "very nature of fictitious writing" (1:55).<sup>28</sup> In Richardson's *Correspondence* she had put it starkly: "Novels will always be different from real life" (1:cxxiii).

Barbauld writes that novels cannot continue indefinitely to hold their readers' attention; therefore the successful novel is one that lasts only as long as its reader's interest, and that interest is controlled by the shaping and resolving of specific narrative questions. Here Barbauld turns particularly to the subject of novelistic conclusions as sites of necessary and satisfying departure from the real:

Every such work is a *whole*, in which the fates and fortunes of the personages are brought to a conclusion, agreeably to the author's own preconceived idea. Every incident in a well written composition is introduced for a certain purpose, and made to forward a certain plan. A sagacious reader is never disappointed in his forebodings ... Even from the elegance of a name he may give a guess at the amenity of the character. But real life is a kind of chance-medley, consisting of many unconnected scenes. The great author of the drama of life has not finished his piece; but the author must finish his. (1:55)

Such a purposefulness given to every textual detail suggests something that might be designated a structuralist reading of

of the plan, ... occasional beauties of description, and, above all, the power exercised over the reader's heart, by filling it with the successive emotions of love, pity, joy, anguish, transport, or indignation, together with the grave impressive moral resulting from the whole."

<sup>28</sup> In Kermode's words: the novel "has to lie" (140).

the novel;<sup>29</sup> even names serve the functional impetus of the form. In addition, Barbauld in this passage anticipates the premise of closure-theorists who have privileged the need (aesthetic, psychological or historical) for clearly defined ends to literary works, because these shore up defences against a world of flux and uncertainty: as Kermode puts it, “novels, then, have beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world has not”;<sup>30</sup> or, as Barbara Herrnstein-Smith writes, “it would seem that in the common land of ordinary events—where many experiences are fragmentary, interrupted, fortuitously connected, and determined by causes beyond our agency or comprehension—we create or seek out ‘enclosures’”;<sup>31</sup> or, in the words of Henry James, “really, universally, relations stop nowhere and it is the exquisite problem of the artist eternally but to draw the circle in which they shall happily appear to do so.”<sup>32</sup> The sentiment is perennial. John Mullan concludes his book *How Novels Work* (2006) with the line: “The novelist makes a shapely tale, but in life there are no proper endings.”<sup>33</sup>

While Hunter sees the accretions of the novel as part of its modernity, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Barbauld, in this major critical overview of the novel as a genre, was identifying narrative circumscription as a sign of value, as the author’s obligation to bring about narrative finality overrides imitative endeavour. Unlike so many earlier readers of Fielding (including Reeve), Barbauld does not comment at all on the familiarity from life of his characters:

It was very probable, at some periods of his history, that *Gil Blas*, if a real character, would come to be hanged; but the practised novel-reader knows well that no such event can await the hero of the tale. Let us suppose a person speculating on the character of *Tom Jones* as the production of an author, whose business it is pleasingly to interest his readers. He has no doubt but that, in spite of his irregularities

<sup>29</sup> Barthes asserts that “a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies,” in “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” (first pub. 1966), trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1977), 89.

<sup>30</sup> Kermode, 138.

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Henry James, preface to *Roderick Hudson* (New York: Scribner, 1907).

<sup>33</sup> John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 320.

and distresses, his history will come to an agreeable termination ... But what would have been the probability in real life? Why, that the parents would either never have been found, or have proved to be persons of no consequence—that *Jones* would pass from one vicious indulgence to another, till his natural good disposition was quite smothered under his irregularities—that *Sophia* would either have married her lover clandestinely, and have been poor and unhappy, or she would have conquered her passion and married some country gentleman with whom she would have lived in moderate happiness, according to the usual routine of married life. But the author would have done very ill so to have constructed his story. (1:56–57)

The novel cultivates readerly expectation of something recognizably other to representational accuracy and to human successiveness: a living Jones, displeasingly, “would pass from one vicious indulgence to another” and Sophia spend her time “according to the usual routine of married life.” Nor does Barbauld comment (again unusually) on the ethical inflections of Fielding’s decision regarding his ending. Compositional attention to the actual, governed by probability, is explicitly rejected as the main business of *Tom Jones*, while compositional attention to the ideal, governed by morality, is critically bypassed, in order to privilege an aesthetic drive: the pleasurable interest of the reader.

Patricia Meyer Spacks, seeking to understand the closing ellipsis of Sheridan’s *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, has commented that the failure of the novel to end suggests “the endlessly replicating structure of female wretchedness.”<sup>34</sup> Katherine Rogers views Barbauld’s critical writing as especially attuned to real-life concerns of women, exemplified by her comments on Sheridan: “Why is it that women when they write are apt to give a melancholy tinge to their compositions? ... Is it that women nurse those feelings in secrecy and silence, and diversify the expression of them with endless shades of sentiment, which are more transiently felt, and with fewer modifications of delicacy, by the other sex?”<sup>35</sup> There can be no doubt that one must sympathize with such a hypothesized fate (though Barbauld introduces a disclaimer: “The remark, if true, has no doubt many exceptions”), but with regard to this novel, Barbauld again does not encourage us to approve aesthetically of

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 139.

<sup>35</sup> Katharine M. Rogers, “Anna Barbauld’s Criticism of Fiction – Johnsonian Mode, Female Vision,” in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 21 (1992): 41. See Barbauld, *British Novelists*, 1:44.

endless shifts in sentiment: “the sentiments of this work are pure and virtuous, but the author seems to have taken pleasure in heaping distress upon virtue and innocence, merely to prove, what no one will deny, that the best dispositions are not always sufficient to ward off the evils of life” (1:44). Once more, Barbauld’s structural analysis undermines potential aspirations towards realism (the events are “what no one will deny” and therefore their claims to representation are diminished) and moral emphasis (events are contrived “merely” to prove), owing to a formal depreciation of succession and repetition.

The construction of plot and conclusion are returned to repeatedly in the prefaces to her novelists. Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* “is rather spun out too much, and not very well wound up” (24:iii); Frances Brooke’s story in *Emily Montague* is deficient as it “serves but as a thread to connect a great deal of beautiful description” (27:i); similarly, Smollett’s *Roderick Random* “like *Gil Blas*, has little or nothing of regular plot, and no interest is excited for the hero, whose name serves to string together a number of adventures,” and “there is very little of plot in *Humphrey* [*sic*] *Clinker*. It is carried on in letters, and is rather a frame for remarks on Bath, London, &c. than a regular story” (30:v, xvi). By contrast, Barbauld approves of the carefully connected plot: “a chain of events concurring, in one plan, to the production of the catastrophe” (*Correspondence*, 1:xvi–xvii). Reeve’s *Old English Baron*, despite its faults (most grievously, allowing the reader to foresee too soon its conclusion), is “well connected” (22:i), and Brooke’s *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* is described approvingly as “a simple, well connected story” (27:i). Henry MacKenzie’s *Julia de Roubigné* too “has the advantage of a connected story” (29:iii). Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, like *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*, fails to be included in *The British Novelists*, even though both are discussed in the introductory essay as works of interest and, in the case of *Tristram Shandy*, of considerable influence. Was it the case that *Tristram Shandy* was excluded from Barbauld’s edition for reasons of decorum?<sup>36</sup> Well, perhaps, though Barbauld also implies that its absence is due to its structural impropriety: it is “very singular” and is only

<sup>36</sup> Sadleir writes that “Mrs. Barbauld, a stickler for feminine decorum and an editor with an eye to family reading, might well have hesitated to include them [the novels of Laurence Sterne and some by Tobias Smollett],” cited in Brown, 182.

“somewhat in the guise of a novel” (1:40). While praising the originality and pathos of Sterne’s work, she disapproves of it in by now familiar terms: its “total want of plan or adventure, being made up of conversations and detached incidents” (1:40).

“Winding up a story,” writes Barbauld, in another prospective truism of novel criticism, is particularly difficult for the writer (1:20).<sup>37</sup> *Tom Jones*, in this respect, receives high praise, as Fielding gives “an animation to the concluding part, which is apt to become flat in the works of common authors” (18:xxvii). Far from resisting closure, Fielding achieves an exemplary timeliness to his ending; unlike the reader of Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, the reader of *Tom Jones* “can never doubt, as in some novels he may, whether the work should have ended a volume before, or have been carried on a volume after, the author’s conclusion” (18:xx). While Barbauld approves of the conclusion of *Evelina*, in *Cecilia* the closeness of plot to life makes for an unstable ending: “the reader is scarcely able to say whether the story ends happily or unhappily ... in human life things are generally so balanced; but in fictitious writings it is more agreeable, if they are not meant to end tragically, to leave on the mind the rainbow colours of delight in their full glow and beauty (38:v–vi), and “at the conclusion of *Clarissa*, we are dismissed in calm and not unpleasing sorrow; but on the winding up of *Cecilia* and *Camilla* we are somewhat tantalized with imperfect happiness” (38:x). To be “tantalized” is to prompt thoughts beyond the novel’s end; to create an anxiety and disequilibrium by the suggestion of something beyond the boundaries of the book. *Amelia*, *The Female Quixote*, and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* are all deemed to have disappointing conclusions, *Udolpho* because of the ending’s detachment from what has gone before. *Rasselas*, on the other hand, in spite of its provocative concluding chapter in which “nothing is concluded” (26:iii), incurs nothing of the disapprobation that Samuel Johnson’s work met with elsewhere. Barbauld sees in *Rasselas* a “proper moral to be drawn” (26:iv) and as such its termination has likewise a propriety. Rather than reaching for the “obvious” justification for Johnson’s unconventional conclusion, that “no unmixed happiness is to be found in life,” Barbauld delivers a more subtle view: “nor yet that a reasoning man can make no choice,—but rather that a

<sup>37</sup> Scott repeats this phrase in his essay on Radcliffe.

merely reasoning man will be likely to make no choice" (26:iv). Compositional success occurs in the articulation of design: "Such is the plan of this philosophical romance" (26:v).

While *Pamela* and *Sir Charles Grandison* are criticized for their ongoingness, Barbauld describes *Clarissa* as having a perfectly crafted shape:

The plot, as we have seen, is simple, and no under-plots interfere with the main design. No digressions, no episodes. It is wonderful that without these helps of common writers, he could support a work of such length. With *Clarissa* it begins—with *Clarissa* it ends. We do not come upon unexpected adventures and wonderful recognitions, by quick turns and surprises: we see her fate from afar, as it were through a long avenue, the gradual approach to which, without ever losing sight of the object, has more of simplicity and grandeur than the most cunning labyrinth that can be contrived by art. In the approach to the modern country-seat, we are made to catch transiently a side-view of it through an opening of the trees, or to burst upon it from a sudden turning in the road; but the old mansion stood full in the eye of the traveller, as he drew near it, contemplating its turrets, which grew larger and more distinct every step that he advanced, and leisurely filling his eye and his imagination with still increasing ideas of its magnificence. (1:xiv–xv)

It is the coherence of design, the "wholeness" of vision, that allows *Clarissa* to be translated so vividly into spatial and architectural terms. Barbauld gives a material dimension here Catherine Gallagher's description—in her essay "Formalism and Time"—of form as structure that "comes into view only from a distance," and similarly serves to exemplify the view that "formalist analyses seem bent on showing that, although a novel represents temporal sequence by means of temporal sequence, it nevertheless has, or should have, a *form* that can be made apprehensible all at once, in a picture or a fractal."<sup>38</sup> Gallagher's interest in this essay is an increasing value given to brevity (and hence poetry) within the history of literary formalism, due to this aspiration towards the fractal. Form's spatial bias brings it into conflict with time, because of which, formal precision becomes increasingly identifiable in crystalline moments and transient bursts; Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) describes how "a single sentence may be considered as a whole, though it may be found

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "Formalism and Time," in *Reading for Form*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 307, 306.

in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions.”<sup>39</sup> Barbauld certainly does not ignore temporal sequence as she constructs her simile of the novelistic vista; rather, formal apprehension deepens, solidifies by means of progress through reading time. The greatest successes in fiction are vast edifices, each a whole, maintaining, in extension, a singularly assimilated shape.

We see in Barbauld’s spatial analogy a disparagement of fleeting formal recognition within contemporary fiction, as the architecture of more modern novels does indeed tend to overtly transient and “sudden” views. Such a sequence of potentially isolable, abbreviated moments suggests those other forms of novelistic successiveness of which she disapproves (“the next point of view and the next”). There is an incongruity in the comparison of *Clarissa* to a perfectly constructed “old mansion” when the actual house dominating the novel is so ostentatiously new, but by 1810 Richardson’s work has taken on the demeanour of the old, the novelistic past. The easily disrupted fabric of the sentimental novel seriously displeased Barbauld as it failed to display the cohesiveness of a *Clarissa* or *Tom Jones*, but, interestingly, neither did it articulate (it seems) the formal intelligence of Inchbald’s narrative interruption; instead, it is characterized by superficiality and lack of accomplishment. *Tristram Shandy* gave “rise to the vapid effusions of a crowd of sentimentalists, many of whom thought they had seized the spirit of Sterne, because they could copy him in breaks and asterisks” (1:42). To fix on typographic lacunae as especially worthy of imitation is to see an easy merit in formlessness. Although Mackenzie, who wrote ostentatiously in the fragment manner, was one of the “more respectable imitators of Sterne,” his *Man of Feeling* is dismissed for its rudimentary, discontinuous plot: “there is no connected story in this work, except that of Edwards. The thread of the history is supposed to be broken by the imperfection of the manuscript. A convenient supposition” (29:iii).



There is an extraordinary irony in Barbauld’s emphasis on the importance of fictional finality and her disparagement of the “fragment manner” when she had been so long deemed the author of “Sir Bertrand,” the “fine fragment” (as Walter

<sup>39</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), cited in Gallagher, 312.



The implication is an imperfect manuscript (such as that which conveniently breaks *The Man of Feeling*) in which we have previously encountered an obscurely connected sequence of actions and atmospheres.

“Sir Bertrand” was originally published in a volume of *Miscellaneous Pieces* by Anna Aikin and her brother John. By the late 1790s, Barbauld’s authorship of the story began to be openly disputed,<sup>45</sup> and in the early 1820s Lucy Aikin, John Aikin’s daughter, put the record straight in her biographies of her father (1823) and her aunt (1825), deeming the misattribution a consequence of the authors failing to “distinguish their respective contributions.”<sup>46</sup> There is nevertheless some puzzle about the persistent misattribution of the piece, for more than twenty-five years, especially when anecdotal evidence suggests that John Aikin at least was personally forthright about their respective contributions to the volume.<sup>47</sup> One explanation for the confusion was certainly Barbauld’s general literary fame. William McCarthy also suggests a deliberate and playful obfuscation on the Aikins’ parts, fitting for the material.<sup>48</sup> But to what extent did the attribution of “Sir Bertrand” to John Aikin necessarily incorporate its companion piece, “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror”? Whether Anna Aikin collaborated in the writing of this expository essay or not,<sup>49</sup> parts of it were certainly remembered by her more than thirty years later when she came to compose *The British Novelists*.

In the earlier essay (henceforth “Objects of Terror” [1773]), we read, for instance, that tragedy “has supt full with horrors,” a quotation from *Macbeth* we encounter again in the 1810 essay on Walpole: “Since this author’s time ... we may be said to have ‘supt full with horrors’” (22:i). The essay of 1773 describes

<sup>45</sup> In a 1798 review of Drake’s *Literary Hours*, the author suggests an erroneous attribution of “Sir Bertrand” “to the pen of Mrs Barbauld,” in *Analytical Review* (December 1798): 604–5.

<sup>46</sup> Lucy Aikin, “A Memoir [of Anna Laetitia Barbauld],” in *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld* (London: Longman, et al., 1825), xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Rogers, *Table Talk*, cited in Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), 61.

<sup>48</sup> McCarthy, 112.

<sup>49</sup> Rictor Norton separates out the authorship of the two pieces, John Aikin writing the tale, Anna Laetitia the criticism. See Norton, *Gothic Readings: The First Wave, 1764–1840* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).

the new trend initiated by *The Castle of Otranto*: “A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of ‘forms unseen, and mightier far than we,’ our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view” (125). In the essay on Ann Radcliffe in *The British Novelists*, we encounter the same, though corrected, quotation from Alexander Pope: “Solitude, darkness, low-whispered sounds, obscure glimpses of objects, fitting forms, tend to raise in the mind that thrilling, mysterious terror, which has for its object the ‘powers unseen and mightier far than we’” (43:ii).<sup>50</sup> A consonance of phrasing with respect to imaginative reaching also unites the two: in the former, “a strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch” (125), and, in the latter, “the curiosity of the reader is kept upon the stretch by mystery and wonder” (43:vi). In both resides a strong interest in the generation of readerly curiosity, and there is a further echo of the 1773 essay when Barbauld in 1810 speaks of the pain and disappointments of some suspenseful novels, some of which “awaken more curiosity than they fully gratify”: “In novels of this kind, where the strong charm of suspense and mystery is employed, we hurry through with suspended breath, and in a kind of agony of expectation; but when we are come to the end of the story, the charm is dissolved, we have no wish to read it again ...; the interest is painfully strong while we read, and when once we have read it, it is nothing” (43:viii). And in 1773:

The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure, though we suffer actual pain during the whole course of it. We rather chuse to suffer the smart pang of a violent emotion than the uneasy craving of an unsatisfied desire ... I have frequently felt it with regard to our modern novels, which, if lying on my table, and taken up in an idle hour, have led me through the most tedious and disgusting pages, while, like Pistol eating his leek, I have swallowed and execrated to the end. (123–24)

This description of reading in 1773 sets up one of the direct connections between the expository essay and the narrative of “Sir Bertrand.” The “uneasy craving of an unsatisfied desire”

<sup>50</sup> This quotation from Alexander Pope was already associable with “Objects of Terror,” having been borrowed by Drake when imitating the Aikins’ essay.

is strikingly replicated in Sir Bertrand's "resistless desire of finishing the adventure" (131): the desire to reach a conclusion is dramatized in a narrative that famously denies end.

Hunter describes how "readers continue even now to read with a different kind of curiosity than that fed by revelation and outcome—that readers of narratives are like readers of other texts in caring about the how more than the what, in finding process more important than outcome, texture than ending, desire than the stilling of desire."<sup>51</sup> "Sir Bertrand" is a tale that is all desire, all how and no what; it dramatizes the process of reading rather than its or any outcome. While denying outcome, the fragment "Sir Bertrand" necessarily emphasizes the desire for outcome as a motivational principle, displaying how exacerbation of suspense through design simultaneously constructs the desire for resolution. In a collection called *Gothic Stories* published in 1797, which includes "Sir Bertrand's Adventures in a Ruinous Castle" (attributed to Mrs Barbauld), it is of little surprise to find that an ending to the tale has been provided, in which the knight marries the lady.<sup>52</sup> *Tom Jones*, as a work that "excites Curiosity,"<sup>53</sup> brought a new visibility to novelistic ending, while the critical interest in the bringing about of narrative resolution was further exacerbated by a new genre of "modern novels" that brought suspense to the fore in order to compel readers more precipitately towards the end. In *The British Novelists*, Barbauld suggests some narrative kinship between Fielding's "obscure hints thrown out" and Radcliffe's "obscure glimpses." The best novels of these writers operate by means of a careful narrative concealment that compels attention to the "last."

<sup>51</sup> Hunter, 291.

<sup>52</sup> *Gothic Stories*, 3rd ed. (1797; London: S. Fisher, 1800). Luke R.J. Maynard investigates the ways in which the completed ending alters "the tone, function, and genre of the story" (143). While preferring to attribute the continuation to a second, anonymous author, Maynard nevertheless speculates on the possibility of Barbauld herself as its creator. Though Lucy Aikin deemed the original fragment as "alien from the character" of her aunt, the fairytale qualities of the continuation and its happy ending constitute a text which, according to Maynard, bring out "at least the possibility of doubt to Lucy Aikin's otherwise convincing claim that Barbauld could have had nothing to do with the tale" (150). Luke R.J. Maynard, "A Forgotten Enchantment: The Silenced Princess, the Andalusian Warlord, and the Rescued Conclusion of 'Sir Bertrand,'" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23, no. 1 (2010): 141–62.

<sup>53</sup> Astraea and Minerva Hill to Samuel Richardson, 27 July 1749, in *Henry Fielding: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Ronald Paulson and Thomas Lockwood (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 173.

Barbauld quite clearly saw how novels were read for their ends, even when (or because) the process of reading could be painful. But her name was also curiously connected to a Gothic tale famous for its resistance to closure, which was celebrated for its emblematic proposal of infinite succession. While *The British Novelists* is a founding work for novel criticism in its prioritization of strongly conceived formal principles, the value she places therein on clearly executed closure is not without the acknowledgement that forms of resistance to ending are pervasive within prose fiction. But, evasion of finality, like that depicted in “Sir Bertrand,” ultimately serves to confirm, emphatically in Barbauld’s later critical writing, the narrative power of the end.



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