

THE RISE OF THE NOVEL

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*Studies in Defoe, Richardson
and Fielding*

by

IAN WATT

1957

CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

**PUBLISHED BY
CHATTO AND WINDUS LTD
42 WILLIAM IV STREET
LONDON WC2**

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**CLARKE, IRWIN AND CO LTD
TORONTO**

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

<i>ELH</i>	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
<i>HLQ</i>	<i>Huntington Library Quarterly</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>J. Comp. Psychology</i>	<i>Journal of Comparative Psychology</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
<i>N & Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>Proc. Amer. Antiquarian Soc.</i>	<i>Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>

PREFACE

IN 1938 I began a study of the relation between the growth of the reading public and the emergence of the novel in eighteenth-century England; and in 1947 it eventually took shape as a Fellowship Dissertation for St. John's College, Cambridge. Two wider problems, however, remained unresolved. Defoe, Richardson and Fielding were no doubt affected by the changes in the reading public of their time; but their works are surely more profoundly conditioned by the new climate of social and moral experience which they and their eighteenth-century readers shared. Nor could one say much about how this was connected with the emergence of the new literary form without deciding what the Novel's distinctive literary features were and are.

These are the problems with which I am here concerned, and they are so large that their treatment is necessarily selective. I have not, for example, made more than incidental reference to the earlier traditions of fiction, nor to the more immediate precursors and contemporaries of my central figures; equally regrettably, my treatment of Fielding is briefer than that of Defoe and Richardson—since most of the new elements of the novel had by then appeared, there seemed no need to go beyond an analysis of how he combined them with the classical literary tradition. Finally, although my main effort has been to elucidate in a fairly systematic fashion the enduring connections between the distinctive literary qualities of the novel and those of the society in which it began and flourished, I have not limited myself to such considerations: partly because I also wanted to give a general critical assessment of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding; and, partly because my studies had confronted me with the monitory example of how that rigorously systematic thinker Walter Shandy would 'twist and torture everything in nature to support his hypothesis'.

I am obliged to William Kimber and Co. for permission to quote an extract from Peter Quennell's *Mayhew's London*; also to the editors and publishers of the *Review of English Studies* and of *Essays in Criticism* for allowing me to use, especially in chapters I, III and VIII, material which originally appeared

in their pages. I gladly acknowledge the skill and devotion which Cecilia Scurfield and Elizabeth Walser exhibited both as typists and cryptographers; and I am deeply grateful for the financial and other assistance which I have received as Scholar, research student and Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, and as holder of Fellowships from the Commonwealth Fund of New York and from the President of the University of California.

Most of my scholarly obligations are, I hope, adequately detailed in footnotes: but I must here acknowledge the great stimulus I received at the outset of my research from Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public*. My other debts are extensive. Mrs. A. D. M. de Navarro, Eric Twist and Hugh Sykes Davies early interested themselves in my work; I am very grateful to them, and to the many scholars in diverse fields of interest who later read and criticised the various drafts which led to this book—Miss M. G. Lloyd Thomas, Miss Hortense Powdermaker, Theodore Adorno, Louis B. Wright, Henry Nash Smith, Leonard Broom, Bertrand H. Bronson, Alan D. McKillop, Ivor Richards, Talcott Parsons, Peter Laslett, Hrothgar Habakkuk and John H. Raleigh. I owe much to them, and also to those who in a more official but equally friendly capacity directed my studies at various times and places: to Louis Cazamian and the late F. T. Blanchard, with both of whom I worked only too briefly; and especially to John Butt, Edward Hooker and George Sherburn, whose judicious encouragement combined with unanswerable criticism have saved me from a variety of ill courses.

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February 1956*

CHAPTER I

Realism and the Novel Form

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

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

For this investigation our first need is a working definition of the characteristics of the novel—a definition sufficiently narrow to exclude previous types of narrative and yet broad enough to apply to whatever is usually put in the novel category. The novelists themselves do not help us very much here. It is true that both Richardson and Fielding saw themselves as founders of a new kind of writing, and that both viewed their work as

involving a break with the old-fashioned romances; but neither they nor their contemporaries provide us with the kind of characterisation of the new genre that we need; indeed they did not even canonise the changed nature of their fiction by a change in nomenclature—our usage of the term ‘novel’ was not fully established until the end of the eighteenth century.

With the help of their larger perspective the historians of the novel have been able to do much more to determine the idiosyncratic features of the new form. Briefly, they have seen ‘realism’ as the defining characteristic which differentiates the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction. With their picture—that of writers otherwise different but alike in this quality of ‘realism’—one’s initial reservation must surely be that the term itself needs further explanation, if only because to use it without qualification as a defining characteristic of the novel might otherwise carry the invidious suggestion that all previous writers and literary forms pursued the unreal.

The main critical associations of the term ‘realism’ are with the French school of Realists. ‘Réalisme’ was apparently first used as an aesthetic description in 1835 to denote the ‘vérité humaine’ of Rembrandt as opposed to the ‘idéalité poétique’ of neo-classical painting; it was later consecrated as a specifically literary term by the foundation in 1856 of *Réalisme*, a journal edited by Duranty.¹

Unfortunately much of the usefulness of the word was soon lost in the bitter controversies over the ‘low’ subjects and allegedly immoral tendencies of Flaubert and his successors. As a result, ‘realism’ came to be used primarily as the antonym of ‘idealism’, and this sense, which is actually a reflection of the position taken by the enemies of the French Realists, has in fact coloured much critical and historical writing about the novel. The prehistory of the form has commonly been envisaged as a matter of tracing the continuity between all earlier fiction which portrayed low life: the story of the Ephesian matron is ‘realistic’ because it shows that sexual appetite is stronger than wifely sorrow; and the fabliau or the picaresque tale are ‘realistic’ because economic or carnal motives are given pride of place in their presentation of human behaviour. By the same implicit

¹ See Bernard Weinberg, *French Realism: the Critical Reaction 1830-1870* (London, 1937), p. 114

premise, the English eighteenth-century novelists, together with Furetière, Scarron and Lesage in France, are regarded as the eventual climax of this tradition: the 'realism' of the novels of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding is closely associated with the fact that Moll Flanders is a thief, Pamela a hypocrite, and Tom Jones a fornicator.

This use of 'realism', however, has the grave defect of obscuring what is probably the most original feature of the novel form. If the novel were realistic merely because it saw life from the seamy side, it would only be an inverted romance; but in fact it surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it.

This, of course, is very close to the position of the French Realists themselves, who asserted that if their novels tended to differ from the more flattering pictures of humanity presented by many established ethical, social, and literary codes, it was merely because they were the product of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before. It is far from clear that this ideal of scientific objectivity is desirable, and it certainly cannot be realised in practice: nevertheless it is very significant that, in the first sustained effort of the new genre to become critically aware of its aims and methods, the French Realists should have drawn attention to an issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form—the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates. This is essentially an epistemological problem, and it therefore seems likely that the nature of the novel's realism, whether in the early eighteenth century or later, can best be clarified by the help of those professionally concerned with the analysis of concepts, the philosophers.

I

By a paradox that will surprise only the neophyte, the term 'realism' in philosophy is most strictly applied to a view of reality diametrically opposed to that of common usage—to the view held by the scholastic Realists of the Middle Ages that it is universals, classes or abstractions, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception, which are the ~~true~~ 'realities'.

This, at first sight, appears unhelpful, since in the novel, more than in any other genre, general truths only exist *post res*; but the very unfamiliarity of the point of view of scholastic Realism at least serves to draw attention to a characteristic of the novel which is analogous to the changed philosophical meaning of 'realism' today: the novel arose in the modern period, a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and mediaeval heritage by its rejection—or at least its attempted rejection—of universals.¹

Modern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke, and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century.² But the view that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it, obviously does not in itself throw much light on literary realism; since almost everyone, in all ages, has in one way or another been forced to some such conclusion about the external world by his own experience, literature has always been to some extent exposed to the same epistemological naïveté. Further, the distinctive tenets of realist epistemology, and the controversies associated with them, are for the most part much too specialised in nature to have much bearing on literature. What is important to the novel in philosophical realism is much less specific; it is rather the general temper of realist thought, the methods of investigation it has used, and the kinds of problems it has raised.

The general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator, who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs; and it has given a peculiar importance to semantics, to the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality. All of these features of philosophical realism have analogies to distinctive features of the novel form, analogies which draw attention to the characteristic kind of correspondence between life and literature which has obtained in prose fiction since the novels of Defoe and Richardson.

¹ See R. I. Aaron, *The Theory of Universals* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 18-41.

² See S. Z. Hasan, *Realism* (Cambridge, 1928), chs. 1 and 2.

(a)

The greatness of Descartes was primarily one of method, of the thoroughness of his determination to accept nothing on trust; and his *Discourse on Method* (1637) and his *Meditations* did much to bring about the modern assumption whereby the pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought, and indeed as more likely to be arrived at by a departure from it.

The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation. Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendency of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author's treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience—individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named.

This emphasis on the new accounts for some of the critical difficulties which the novel is widely agreed to present. When we judge a work in another genre, a recognition of its literary models is often important and sometimes essential; our evaluation depends to a large extent on our analysis of the author's skill in handling the appropriate formal conventions. On the other hand, it is surely very damaging for a novel to be in any sense an imitation of another literary work: and the reason for this seems to be that since the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience, attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger his success. What is often felt as the formlessness of the novel, as compared, say, with tragedy or the ode, probably follows from this: the poverty of the novel's formal conventions would seem to be the price it must pay for its realism.

But the absence of formal conventions in the novel is unimportant compared to its rejection of traditional plots. Plot, of

course, is not a simple matter, and the degree of its originality or otherwise is never easy to determine; nevertheless a broad and necessarily summary comparison between the novel and previous literary forms reveals an important difference: Defoe and Richardson are the first great writers in our literature who did not take their plots from mythology, history, legend or previous literature. In this they differ from Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, for instance, who, like the writers of Greece and Rome, habitually used traditional plots; and who did so, in the last analysis, because they accepted the general premise of their times that, since Nature is essentially complete and unchanging, its records, whether scriptural, legendary or historical, constitute a definitive repertoire of human experience.

This point of view continued to be expressed until the nineteenth century; the opponents of Balzac, for example, used it to deride his preoccupation with contemporary and, in their view, ephemeral reality. But at the same time, from the Renaissance onwards, there was a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality; and this transition would seem to constitute an important part of the general cultural background of the rise of the novel.

It is significant that the trend in favour of originality found its first powerful expression in England, and in the eighteenth century; the very word 'original' took on its modern meaning at this time, by a semantic reversal which is a parallel to the change in the meaning of 'realism'. We have seen that, from the mediaeval belief in the reality of universals, 'realism' had come to denote a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses: similarly the term 'original' which in the Middle Ages had meant 'having existed from the first' came to mean 'underived, independent, first-hand'; and by the time that Edward Young in his epoch-making *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) hailed Richardson as 'a genius as well moral as original',¹ the word could be used as a term of praise meaning 'novel or fresh in character or style'.

The novel's use of non-traditional plots is an early and probably independent manifestation of this emphasis. When Defoe,

¹ *Works* (1773), V, 125; see also Max Scheler, *Versuche zu einer Soziologie des Wissens* (München and Leipzig, 1924), pp. 104 ff.; Elizabeth L. Mann, 'The Problem of Originality in English Literary Criticism, 1750-1800', *PQ*, XVIII (1939), 97-118.

for example, began to write fiction he took little notice of the dominant critical theory of the day, which still inclined towards the use of traditional plots; instead, he merely allowed his narrative order to flow spontaneously from his own sense of what his protagonists might plausibly do next. In so doing Defoe initiated an important new tendency in fiction: his total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* was in philosophy.

After Defoe, Richardson and Fielding in their very different ways continued what was to become the novel's usual practice, the use of non-traditional plots, either wholly invented or based in part on a contemporary incident. It cannot be claimed that either of them completely achieved that interpenetration of plot, character and emergent moral theme which is found in the highest examples of the art of the novel. But it must be remembered that the task was not an easy one, particularly at a time when the established literary outlet for the creative imagination lay in eliciting an individual pattern and a contemporary significance from a plot that was not itself novel.

(b)

Much else besides the plot had to be changed in the tradition of fiction before the novel could embody the individual apprehension of reality as freely as the method of Descartes and Locke allowed their thought to spring from the immediate facts of consciousness. To begin with, the actors in the plot and the scene of their actions had to be placed in a new literary perspective: the plot had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention.

This literary change was analogous to the rejection of universals and the emphasis on particulars which characterises philosophic realism. Aristotle might have agreed with Locke's primary assumption, that it was the senses which 'at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the empty cabinet' of the mind.¹ But he would have gone on to insist that the scrutiny of particular cases was of little value in itself; the proper intellectual task

¹ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Bk. I, ch. 2, sect. xv.

of man was to rally against the meaningless flux of sensation, and achieve a knowledge of the universals which alone constituted the ultimate and immutable reality.¹ It is this generalising emphasis which gives most Western thought until the seventeenth century a strong enough family resemblance to outweigh all its other multifarious differences: similarly when in 1713 Berkeley's Philonous affirmed that 'it is an universally received maxim, that *everything which exists is particular*',² he was stating the opposite modern tendency which in turn gives modern thought since Descartes a certain unity of outlook and method.

Here, again, both the new trends in philosophy and the related formal characteristics of the novel were contrary to the dominant literary outlook. For the critical tradition in the early eighteenth century was still governed by the strong classical preference for the general and universal: the proper object of literature remained *quod semper quod ubique ab omnibus creditum est*. This preference was particularly pronounced in the neo-Platonist tendency, which had always been strong in the romance, and which was becoming of increasing importance in literary criticism and aesthetics generally. Shaftesbury, for instance, in his *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709), expressed the distaste of this school of thought for particularity in literature and art very emphatically: 'The variety of Nature is such, as to distinguish every thing she forms, by a *peculiar* original character; which, if strictly observed, will make the subject appear unlike to anything extant in the world besides. But this effect the good poet and painter seek industriously to prevent. They hate *minuteness*, and are afraid of *singularity*.'³ He continued: 'The mere Face-Painter, indeed, has little in common with the Poet; but, like the mere Historian, copies what he sees, and minutely traces every feature, and odd mark'; and concluded confidently that 'Tis otherwise with men of invention and design'.

Despite Shaftesbury's engaging finality, however, a contrary aesthetic tendency in favour of particularity soon began to assert itself, largely as a result of the application to literary problems of the psychological approach of Hobbes and Locke. Lord Kames was perhaps the most forthright early spokesman of this tendency. In his *Elements of Criticism* (1762) he declared

¹ See *Posterior Analytics*, Bk. I, ch. 24; Bk. II, ch. 19.

² First *Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous*, 1713 (Berkeley, *Works*, ed. Luce and Jessop (London, 1949), II, 192).

³ Pt. IV, sect. 3.