BEFORE NOVELS

The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction

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W•W•NORTON & COMPANY New York London

Printed in the United States of America.

The text of this book is composed in 11/13 Goudy Old Style,

with display type set in Nicolas Cochin.

Composition and

manufacturing by the Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group.

Book design by Margaret M. Wagner.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hunter, J. Paul, 1934–

Before novels: the cultural contexts of eighteenth-century

English fiction / J. Paul Hunter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. English fiction—18th century—History and criticism.

2. Literature and society—England—History—18th century. 3. Books

and reading—England—History—18th century. 4. England—Popular

culture—History—18th century. 5. Literacy—England—History—18th

century. I. Title.

PR858.S615H8 1990

820.9'005—dc20 89–29478

ISBN 0-393-02801-1

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Before Novels

Part of Chapter Two originally appeared in different form as "Novels and 'the Novel': The Poetics of Embarrassment," *Modern Philology*, 85 (May 1988):480–98. © 1988 by The University of Chicago.

A few sentences from Chapters Three and Four originally appeared in " 'The Young, the Ignorant, and the Idle': Some Notes on Readers and the Beginnings of the English Novel," in *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany*, edited by Alan Charles Kors and Paul J. Korshin. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, pp. 259–82.

Part of Chapter Seven originally appeared in different form as " 'News, and new Things': Contemporaneity and the Early English Novel," *Critical Inquiry*, 14 (Spring 1988): 493–515. © 1988 by The University of Chicago.

Part of Chapter Eight originally appeared in different form as "Boyle and the Epistemology of the Novel," in *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 2 (1990): 275–91. © by McMaster University. Reprinted by permission.

Preface

NO BOOK comes into the world altogether naked, new, or alone. Every text has a past and a history of its own, and its friendships with people and other books identify the place it seeks in the world and establish its relationship with potential readers. Some of what clothes a text or comes along as baggage is authorially chosen, but some is not: larger cultural contexts impose more, in fact, than style and accessories, influencing shape and direction and often determining as fully as the author's individual consciousness the text's character, identity, and aim, as well as its situation and force. The independence of an individual text, so much treasured in traditional literary history, is compromised in other ways as well, for unless readers leave a text altogether unread and untouched they too impinge, bringing a context of reception and response that determines not only the social place that the text comes to occupy but what it means and ultimately can do. For all the would-be autonomy of texts, their originality and liberty of spirit, they exist like human beings in a world of assumption, interaction, and implication. Texts without contexts are both meaningless and impossible; the power of texts is in relationship, their ability to reach outward and their nature in reaching backward to their own origins. Just as surely as the people who make them, texts are a part of all they have met, a complex product of a cultural moment in which a past is receding and a future developing.

This cultural claim about reading, particularized for English novels in the eighteenth century, is the burden of this book. I argue that, to under-

stand the origins of the novel as a species and to read individual novels well, we must know several pasts and traditions—even non-fictional and non-narrative traditions, even non-"artistic" and non-written pasts—that at first might seem far removed from the pleasures readers find in modern novels. What writers wish to offer, what readers want, what cultural contexts make available, what reading requires, what texts provide, and what readers actually get—all these intentions, desires, and givens interacting tell us how novels came to "work" in a particular way and (to some extent) suggest how they came to be. All texts—at least all texts that find or create readers—construct a field in which desires and provisions compete, and the history of texts (both literary history and a larger cultural history that involves texts beyond "literary" ones) involves a continuous sorting out of needs, demands, insistences, and outcomes.

Preparing readers to read the text at hand is always the first task of any textual beginning, and in the late seventeenth century in England—at a moment in the history of reading when audiences were broadening and readers were learning to read for new purposes, and when generic categories were loosening and new species were becoming visible—texts constituted themselves self-consciously from other texts for readers newly discovering how their needs and desires interacted. Readers read, as writers write, in a context of the continuity of their own experiences and desires; they bring to their reading human desires to know and to shape and to interpret, and they take from texts things sometimes quite other from what writers believe they are offering. Any text we address takes us at once outward and backward, and to grapple with its power is to confront its location, its readership, its past, and its friendships, as well as its form and its own record of desire. To understand the nature of any text or group of texts that share common properties means sorting among the conditions and events that created the climate of desire and finding the places where readerly and writerly interests merge and create for themselves a cultural moment that leaves a record of itself. Whatever else they may be, texts are cultural events that represent a moment in time and a historical consciousness.

What is true about the eighteenth-century texts I discuss here is also true about the book I have written. The territory that I traverse and the claims I make about it are conditioned by my own procedures in researching and writing the book, by the way others have formulated the problem before me, and by the way readers—varieties of readers well beyond academic ones who specialize in novels and eighteenth-century culture—have already thought about how texts relate to contexts. My intentions, no doubt less decisive than I have assumed them to be but also more determinative than pure formalists or structuralists would admit, have

steered this book from the beginning toward historical and cultural questions. Such aims have always driven my professional interests in literary texts, and, even earlier, they governed the etiological reading habits I formed young. Those aims have, in turn, been influenced by the directions of study of literature in the academy—sometimes formed in opposition to prevailing trends, sometimes riding with them—and then (quite beyond my wish or control) my own interests have had to set themselves alongside what other literary students were willing—or determined—to think about.

I

I HAVE written this book for readers who are interested in the novel, in the history and theory of literary forms and species, and in eighteenth-century literature and culture. But I have not written with only professional critics, historians, and theorists in mind. Although highly "specialized" in the sense that it unearths many texts that time and habit have long buried and tries to map territory in the past that is largely *terra incognita* even for specialists, this book is meant also for readers who read novels for pleasure and who care about the past out of intellectual curiosity rather than for professional reasons. Literary and cultural history is not the business only of academics, and the issues about how different kinds of writing relate to each other and about how writing relates to various forms of cultural desire involve questions of enough general intellectual importance that I have tried to make what I have to say here available, without too much technical jargon or obtrusive documentation, to any intelligent reader of fiction or history. The story of how cultures express their desires and impose their ideals, and of how different kinds of writing interrelate in their expressions and ministrations of cultural value, is not just a story for professional historians or for academics. It is the kind of story that tells us who we are, by telling us what kind of past we come from and how the various parts of a culture work together to forge a newness from continuity.

The academic study of literature has tended to underrate general or "common" readers—that is, readers who read for pleasure rather than because their livelihood depends on it—and academic criticism has paid a high price for its priestly snootiness. Much of that price has involved, rather than an emphasis on specialized knowledge, a kind of professional "know-nothingism" that tried to negate what readers might bring to any text from other texts, insisting instead that all truths were somehow within. Such privileging of the text itself—apart from its past, its author, the

power of its cultural consciousness, its referentiality to some larger world of thing and event, and its interaction with readers who know and care about some of these extratextual matters—marked academic teaching and writing from the New Criticism until quite recently. Attacks on intention, accounts of the death of the author, anxieties about textual stability and its power to represent anything beyond itself, hostility toward any attempt to historicize a text or even admit its own cultural basis, and elevation of the critical over the creative faculty—all these conventions of mid- to late twentieth-century criticism (some formalist, some structuralist, some post-structuralist) have a common tendency. They try to elevate the text itself and to give the critic special proprietary (priestly) power that ordinary readers (the laity) cannot achieve without going through rites of passage that involve dextrous intraverbal acts and monuments determined by those who own the texts and determine how they are to be used. This privatizing strategy for texts now seems, fortunately, to be on the wane, but whatever its present status it has done major damage to any sense of a reading community, making "professional" readers arrogant and amateur ones defensive. Looked at in one way, the new historical consciousness in the academy involves professional readers catching up with the amateurs, for "common" readers remained curious about issues of biography, history, and temporal consciousness during all the years that such interests were unfashionable in universities.

II

ONE relevant context for this book is its past, its own origins and its private record of evolution, something I will trace below. Another context involves the climate of opinion now—what readers are prepared to think about the eighteenth century, about novels as individual phenomena and the novel as a species, about the way texts of all kinds represent a culture. In that context I am especially fortunate, for the winds of change in scholarship have blown my way; the kinds of questions I engage here—about historical definitions of literary species, about origins, about what causes texts to be formulated in particular ways—are now on the minds of many, and the turn of the eighteenth century seems in the process of becoming the most productive venue for thinking about them. And novels in particular have begun to seem the most promising texts for investigating all kinds of cultural issues involving the textual shapes that ideas and issues most readily take in the developing world of modernity.

It was not always thus. Until quite recently, study of the novel suffered

from the kind of inferiority complex that large and baggy forms are apt to experience in times when formalisms prevail, and eighteenth-century studies more generally were a critical and theoretical backwater. During the years when academic literary study made its most dramatic critical strides—the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s—there was, for many theorists, critics, and even literary historians—no "literature" in the eighteenth century, only failed texts and deserts of vast background. For reasons that have never been fully explored, the most influential mid-twentieth-century literary history—usually masquerading as criticism or theory—all but ignored, as some kind of textual eddy, everything written between the "Glorious" Revolution in England and the American and French Revolutions, finding it too trivial, or precious, or narrow, or contentious, or particular, or time-bound. The triumph of rhetoric, ideology, and utility meant, for a whole generation of thinkers about literature, the failure of art. The literary "line"—and there was a line, not just in extremists like F. R. Leavis but in standard anthologies and syllabi—jumped from Milton directly to Blake, and courses made barely a pause—for Pope as wordsmith, Swift as ahistorical wonder, and Johnson or the prose "thinkers" as watchword or fossils—to explain the missing hundred years. Thus, Harold Bloom in his influential and powerful *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, 1973) could develop a sophisticated theory of creativity on the basis of a presumed literary history that omits a full quarter of the English tradition, and in many of the most powerful thinkers about literature—Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode, M. H. Abrams, and Stanley Fish, for example—there is room between 1667 and 1787 only for Renaissance leftovers and anticipations of the High Romantics.

The eighteenth century was then the embarrassment in the English curriculum, the black sheep no one would talk about. Anthologies consistently gave it the least space and the most defensive apologies, and introductory textbooks—those powerful makers of taste aimed at bright and retentive freshmen who, it turns out, grow up to be graduates and academics—regularly excluded eighteenth-century examples completely. Who older than thirty can remember reading as a university freshman even a single Pope poem, Congreve play, Swift or Johnson essay, or any novel at all before Austen? Departments of English divided their graduate wares into "periods," defining those before and after the Restoration and Eighteenth Century into forty- or fifty-year chunks while leaving almost a century and a half to be covered by anyone so benighted as to wish to read the literature of utility and morality. Curricula were designed to underrate—and educations calculated to underappreciate—this long and crucial cultural moment in which the old passed away and almost all became modern and new. Even the Marxists of this generation could find

only an occasional novel to show that anything between the revolutions was not simply a mirage in a history of misguided or mishandled ideas about what literature could be or do.

Those attitudes are well past now (though the curriculum in some places lingers on), and it would be hard to find anyone willing to express what was so oft thought a generation ago. But there is a legacy to such omissions, and present literary study bears the brunt of it. Much of that "brunt" is of course positive; study of the eighteenth century is flourishing in universities, graduate students are flocking to topics and texts long ignored, and everywhere there is sophisticated theoretical and historical curiosity about the lost years and issues long set aside. The eighteenth century is, in fact, becoming the locus for many of the feminist, new historicist, and cultural studies. It has become the logical center for cultural historicism as taste has broadened to include popular and paraliterary texts and as curiosities about ordinary life and deep cultural desire have become primary even to students of literature. The forgotten in literary history has thus begun to be replaced by healthy curiosity about the reasons for forgetting, and a new literary history—less belletristic, less positivist, less elitist, more inclusive, and more determined to read the cultural texts that priestly literary theories were anxious to ignore—is on the horizon. Eighteenth-century studies, finally touched by contemporary theory and then hit broadside by various historical and cultural analyses, are flourishing in interdisciplinarity. The forgotten century turns out to involve, after all, a rich cultural moment, and literary scholars and theorists have joined historians, anthropologists, and philosophers in trying to recover a suggestive sense of what those neglected texts and forgotten groups of people may represent. Not all is sweetness and light here—bees and spiders and mirrors and lamps still battle unceremoniously for turf, and scholars with single interests often seem to write past each other rather than putting their observations together—but what once threatened to become more than a hundred years of blank page in literary history, with a little footnote recording battles of the books fought by harmless drudges in archival anterooms, now promises a full and resonant account of one of the richest moments of change in the history of developing modernism.

Literally hundreds of crucial texts are now being rethought, and (even more fundamentally) questions about generic relationships, the assumptions of authorship and readership, and the interactions between cultural texts and everyday life are now open, no longer dependent on elitist notions of what life was like in the eighteenth century and what "literature" ought to be like. Literary history now seems, as it has not seemed since formalism designed a geography of texts, part of a larger cultural

history that can introduce us, in some basic sense, to ourselves and our own pasts, for rather than seeing modernity springing more or less full blown from some Romantic rebellion and resistance of history, we begin to see continuities in the post-Restoration moment that causally gave us the identity we still bear in our post-modernist state. No longer can "Augustan" literature (or the popular literature it tried to suppress) seem an irrelevance, and no longer can the canonical texts seem the only—in many cases not even the major—ones crucial to knowing the culture from which we developed.

No one can now say where the rethinking will end or what sort of redrawn sense of eighteenth-century culture or of "literature" more generally will result. What is already clear, though, is that many different texts will become the locus of crucial questions, and that even basic "old-fashioned" questions about cause, self-consciousness, and definition will have to be asked in different ways across different categories of inquiry. Novels—never "secure" texts in the eighteenth-century literary canon because they seemed too much at odds with official notions of what "literature" and "art" should be—have quickly become the "literary" texts in which basic issues are being examined, and many of the novelistic texts that seem most deeply implicative are ones dismissed by earlier generations of literary historians. To move toward questions of cultural definition, it is now necessary to think about the texts of Charles Gildon and Delariviere Manley as well as Daniel Defoe and to consider the career directions of Eliza Haywood and Sarah Fielding alongside those of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding.

The "when," "what," and "how" questions of old literary history—when did the novel "really" begin? was Richardson "first," or Defoe or Behn? at what point did the romance break off and the novel start? who taught whom exactly what about how novels were to be written? was "realism" what defined novels or was it "individualism" or "subjectivity" or some essence yet unfound?—have started to become "why" questions. Why novels at all? Why these particular novels, with these particular cultural interests and concerns? Why, when this "new species" lacked even a name or agreed-upon definition, did it develop so intense a readership and so concentrated a set of features? Why so radical a move away from traditional forms and principles even while assertion and allusion sought to make traditional claims?

Ultimately, of course, novels represent only one phase of the historical and cultural investigation now moving into prominence in eighteenth-century studies, but—because they represent a broad social range among writers and readers and because in sheer magnitude they demand to be dealt with—they offer the most readily accessible route to some

basic cultural questions, and they have quickly (just in the past four or five years) become the site for the most provocative thinking. Books by Nancy Armstrong, John Bender, Terry Castle, Cathy Davidson, and Michael McKeon (and studies in progress by Homer Brown, Margaret Doody, and John Richetti) not only challenge received opinion about early novels but offer serious reconstitutions of history based on different ways of thinking about culture and cultural texts.[1] There is more than simple revisionism here. No single "new" eighteenth century seems likely to emerge from the present ferment and no single, easy view of the novel; but there is a powerful sense of commonalty in confronting cultural and historical issues—about politics, gender, economics, class, national and regional identity, and shared ambition and desire—and in insisting that such issues are important rather than peripheral to formal or aesthetic or other "timeless" issues.

III

THIS is not the same river into which I stepped when I began thinking about this book in 1975. Then, formal issues dominated, and the most challenging critical tasks involved mapping the literary terrain; I wanted to sort out the forms and varieties of eighteenth-century fiction, hoping to account historically for why some narratives took confessional and personal directions while others concentrated on wider social interactions, group behavior, and the definition of regional or national character. I wondered why even so new a phenomenon as the novel already found itself tending to break into subkinds—novels of character, panoramas of society, satirical novels, novels of ideas, or politics, or sentiment, or terror. Though decidedly untrendy in its engagement with historical contexts and anxiety to find cultural causes for literary events, the project was somewhat in harmony with then prevailing concerns about formal questions and societal guideposts, for I imagined that my primary task was to develop a typology of the forms of fiction being written in England in the eighteenth century. In a matter of months, however, I had reconceived the study contextually and turned my main attention from definition to matters of origins and cultural desire. More and more of my reading, I found, was not in novels as such or in romances or other early fictions but in the materials that readers read before there were novels to read—materials that were often non-narrative, non-fictional, and non-literary in the accepted modern sense. I decided that novels had to be read against a far broader context of cultural texts and materials in order to have any notion of how they seemed to early read-

ers. Novels, I came to be more and more persuaded as I followed the tracks of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century readers who used books for devotional and utilitarian purposes as well as for pleasure, had their relevant contexts—ultimately even their origins—in a culture that was partly oral and partly written, where functions traditionally performed in communal and family rituals and by oral tradition more and more fell to the impersonal processes of print. In 1977 I published "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Reader," the first of a series of essays that predicted the thesis I argue here and that dealt with various pieces of literary and cultural history I thought needed to be addressed separately before I was ready to present a full and coherent argument.[2] I continued to read heavily in journalistic, didactic, polemical, private, and other "para-literary" materials, and by 1981 I had completed a draft of what became this book. The argument—in its basic shape as a thesis about the satisfaction of fundamental cultural needs, the relationship between high and low culture, written and oral texts, and the quasi-conscious making of a major literary species from generally unidentified subkinds of popular literature—was largely complete, or so I thought at the time.

But if I had published this book then, it would have been a very different book. It might well have seemed more radical or revolutionary in that context, for little was known about "subliterature" or "oral texts," and there was very little curiosity about questions of origins or about historicity more generally. There was, in other words, a more narrow and spare cultural and intellectual world into which such ideas would have been introduced. The readers it might have attracted would have been far less knowledgeable—and less sophisticated both theoretically and historically—than are large numbers of readers now, and less friendly to the kinds of issues—and arguments—I am interested in. The past decade has brought new directions to literary study—interdisciplinarity, curiosity about generic issues, interest in theory for its typological potential and for its ability to sort among the strands of intention and outcome in texts, belief in history as a serious interpretive dimension for texts and in historiography as a means to analyze and recover cultures as wholes, pursuit of the dimensions of desire in both readers and writers and concern with its communal and cultural forms as well as its individual and psychoanalytical ones, distrust of canonical categories and the disinterment of "minor" and "utilitarian" texts, replacement of strictly literary categories by cultural ones. These directions mean not only that wide interest has developed in the kinds of questions behind this study but that much important thinking about historical matters has come forward. The kind of historical and theoretical curiosity that now exists offers this

study a far wider context for discussion and debate than would have seemed possible a decade ago, and, whatever the fate of this book or the thesis behind it, I am grateful for an intellectual context curious about the issues and receptive to the methods of cultural analysis. The river—no longer serene, steady, and calm—now swirls with excitement and disagreement.

And of course I am not the same person who, fifteen years ago, stepped in the river, nor is this, in crucial ways, the book I then planned. The many changes in literary study and in the several disciplines that impinge on it—especially anthropology, philosophy, and social and cultural history—have very much affected the way I have come to understand my project. My way of describing the novel as a cultural phenomenon is different, I have a different sense of definition within variety, and I conceive rather differently the interactions among texts and literary species. Now, too, I write unabashedly as a "literary historian," a term I would once have been ashamed to own even though it was what I in fact was—though it is true that what I now think of as proper literary history comprises a variety of texts and issues that traditional literary historians would have avoided (or worse), and it is also true that the literary history I here produce will not sit comfortably alongside the standard traditional histories and handbooks of literature. My concerns and biases are, however, at home in the present discourse about culture, group consciousness, and causality, and even though my emphases are somewhat different from those in other recent studies of the novel's origins, I celebrate the fact that we are engaged in a common mission of reconceiving literary history along new philosophical and ideological lines.

IV

READERS steeped in the present contexts of criticism, theory, and literary history will readily see how my argument differs, methodologically and in its conclusions, from that of other recent students of novels, origins, and cultural consciousnesses. I have not spelled out those differences in detail here. Those most interested in sorting out such differences will find it easy to do for themselves, and I prefer to tell my version of the story of the early novel and its contexts without pausing often to argue about disputable details. Besides, given the still powerful opposition to historicism of any kind in literary study, it seems to me important to emphasize the common agreement of those of us engaged in developing a new literary and cultural history. I have no taste for minor skirmishes when major issues are at stake in defining the entire nature of literary study.

Still, though I am unwilling to quarrel with allies about particulars, I do want to make as clear as possible just what my own assumptions and aims are. I want, therefore, to be open about the most prominent beliefs that inform this study and explicit about some of the more controversial stands I take. The cultural historicism that I here practice and defend can, I think, be extremely useful in creating a new literary history if its principles and procedures are understood, practiced carefully, and refined to reflect developing knowledge. I am anxious that it not be quickly reduced to some easy ism and shunted into a ghetto so that the world can again be safe for aestheticism, universalism, or some new kind of formalism. Here, then, straightforwardly and without extended comment, are some of the most important things that I have hoped to do:

—provide a working description of the novel, though not a single-term essentialist definition, so that we know what it is whose origins we are looking for;
—offer an inclusive sense of novels that comprehends titles that are untypical, unsuccessful, non-canonical, and admittedly minor, as well as the best known work by the best known writers;
—demonstrate the independence of the novel from previous narrative models because of its popular, non-"literary" status at its beginning, and detach its fortunes especially from the history of the romance, which it has sometimes been said to "displace";
—show the danger of models of literary definition that depend upon the designation of some one particular example as a historical first, rather than belief in the gradual "formation" of new structures that cannot always be dated with precision or shown to exist in a single instance;
—particularize the causal interaction between so-called high and low culture, and show how influence can move "up" as well as "down" between reigning cultural models and competing popular ones;
—suggest that intellectual history can comprehend ideas at all levels of culture, and not necessarily just offer an elitist record of such concepts as meet standard philosophical standards;
—show how readers gain the power to create texts by communicating, though not necessarily consciously or directly, their needs and desires to those in a position to make books;
—provide an account of human "desire" as a cultural and communal phenomenon, not just as an aspect of individual psychology, supporting the kind of insights into cultural directions provided by the so-called *Histoire des Mentalités;*
—suggest the importance of oral culture in setting human expectations of verbal patterns and therefore in creating desires that may eventuate in written structures;
—demonstrate the importance of the "minor" and the "ordinary," not only in assessing the directions of everyday life but in deciding the total shape of culture and its characteristic institutions;
—document the power of a "cultural" consciousness to influence individual

consciousness, with or without the awareness or permission of the individual;
—illustrate the significance of anthropological models for literary study, and support the directional influence of such figures as Clifford Geertz, Robert Darnton, and Roger Chartier;
—argue the historical distinctiveness, in given times and places, of particular patterns that people, behavior, attitudes, and events assume, and show the crippling effects of presentism in coming to grips with historical difference;
—acknowledge the need to read non-verbal texts as significant documents in defining the character of a culture;
—demonstrate the possibility of a significant new literary history that is responsive to theoretical questions, self-conscious in its philosophical assumptions, and based in informed cultural historicism.

Readers of lingering debates on eighteenth-century fiction will recognize that my position owes a lot to the pioneering work of Ian Watt even as it disagrees on some major issues.[3] But I want to record explicitly my high regard for the courageous position Watt took in 1957 about the "sociological" basis of the English novel. Watt's then defiant act of attributing creative power to readers is his most important and, I think, enduring contribution, and the nature of his study has often been misunderstood by admirers and detractors alike. Much of the resistance to Watt seems to me to derive ultimately from a fear of the implications of his fundamental premise about readers, though it is often disguised as disagreements about lesser matters; and although I have a number of reservations about Watt's assumptions and procedures—his teleology, for example, and his reading of individual books and authors—I admire both his academic courage and his prescient cultural insight. He is the proximate cause of my obsession with the issues discussed here. I once would have said that his book provoked this one; now I would say it inspired it, for, deep as my disagreements with Watt are, they derive from what I now understand to be a basic sharing and assumptions about literature and culture. A late colleague used to interview faculty job candidates by asking two questions: What critical or scholarly book would you most like to have written? And, what book would you most like to rewrite? It has taken me a long time to discover that the two questions are one. Everyone in the past thirty years who has written about the beginnings of the English novel has been engaged in rewriting Watt and, in so doing, renewing him.

V

I SHOULD also say frankly what I have done about two classic dilemmas that have particular force at this moment in literary history and admit to