
Review: Behind the Early English Novel

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Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (Fall, 1990), pp. 682-689

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27546282>

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ditions of Fielding's fictional creations Wilson, Booth, and Tom at the conclusions of their stories were for him wish fulfillment and not parallels to his own life.

However one measures Fielding's progress toward acquiring prudence, most readers of the Battestins' biography should warmly concur with their belief that Fielding's "truest epitaph" is in his "truest monument," *Tom Jones*: "The finest Composition of human Nature, as well as the finest China, may have a Flaw in it. . . . Nevertheless, the Pattern may remain of the highest Value."

BEHIND THE EARLY ENGLISH NOVEL

MERRITT MOSELEY

In a graduate-school examination one of my professors asked me "What is the first English novel?" I don't remember what I answered, or whether it was the answer he sought; but I remember that to him the question was one with a right answer on which well-informed people agreed, and that it was one of the obvious eighteenth-century choices.

For in those days people seemed to know what was and wasn't a novel. Maybe it was *Robinson Crusoe*, or maybe, others said, it was *Moll Flanders* because *Robinson Crusoe* failed to satisfy one of the requirements; maybe it was *Pamela*; some authorities disqualified Defoe for trying too hard to disguise fictions as fact.

To distinguish these books from other long fictional narratives in prose

Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: Ambition & Innovation*. University Press of Kentucky, 1986. x + 300 pages. \$25; Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories: Studies in the Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding*. University of Chicago Press, 1985. x + 344 pages. \$25; D. D. Devlin, *The Novels and Journals of Fanny Burney*. St. Martin's Press, 1987. 118 pages. \$27.50; Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory*. Cambridge University Press, 1989. xii + 272 pages. \$49.50; Jocelyn Harris, *Samuel Richardson*. Cambridge University Press, 1987. xii + 180 pages. \$39.50, \$11.95 pb; Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. xii + 530 pages. \$29.95; Roy Roussel, *The Conversation of the Sexes: Seduction and Equality in Selected Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Texts*. Oxford University Press, 1986. 178 pages. \$22; Eve Tavor, *Scepticism, Society and the Eighteenth Century Novel*. St. Martin's Press, 1987. 274 pages. \$29.95; Simon Varey, *Henry Fielding*. Cambridge University Press, 1986. x + 154 pages. \$34.50, \$11.95 pb.

which were *not* novels requires some agility, but there are ways in which we can relegate *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and Congreve's *Incognita* (1691) to some other category. In the fifth edition of *A Handbook to Literature*, *Pilgrim's Progress* is called "a narrative of moral significance" and *Oroonoko* a "narrative chronicle." These terms indicate the confusion that governs much discussion of early prose fiction: one might almost infer that novels differ from Bunyan's books by being narratives of no moral significance. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt endorses the proposition that the novel was "begun by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding." His well-known criterion for this judgment is that novels are characterized by "formal realism"—a quality that helps fence off other potential claimants, but at the tremendous cost of making Fielding (one of the three founders) something of an embarrassment.

Classification is evidently a primary urge. One of God's first acts, we are told, was classifying and dividing; and He will be at it again on the last day; and human beings like to do it, too. By such means we think. But why, aside from our need to draw boundaries, combined with our fond belief that literary revolutions conveniently coincide with new centuries, should we be so interested in a narrow view of the novel? A purist selective definition of the early novel is particularly odd compared to today's latitudinarianism. Would *Pale Fire*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, or *Flaubert's Parrot* be considered a novel by these exacting standards?

What we badly need is to know more about those narratives of the seventeenth and earlier centuries and to think of them as something other than evolutionary dead ends or *romans manqués*.

Fortunately we now have Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740*, a magisterial work of history and analysis. As McKeon writes, "the common understanding that the novel 'rose' around 1740 provides a *terminus ad quem* which appears to organize all that follows within the ample boundaries of the great modern form, but which also requires that what precedes this founding act will resemble chaos." McKeon wants to look at that "chaos" in order to interpret it and show its connection with the recognized novels of the 1740s.

He explains the novel resulting from instabilities, rather than, as has been argued before, deriving from new eighteenth-century stabilities like the establishment of the middle class or of philosophical realism. The novel, he believes, results from and mediates crises that are epistemological and social.

To summarize briefly McKeon's rich and complex argument: the crisis in epistemology, in questions of how to tell the truth, involves several attitudes or intellectual forces which engage each other dialectically. The epistemology that governs narratives around 1600 he names "romance idealism," which "involves a dependence on received authorities

and a priori traditions." It is confronted by a rival epistemology which he calls "naive empiricism," which in turn is challenged by "extreme skepticism." These are the main terms in McKeon's discussion of "questions of truth."

His other main concern is "questions of virtue"—questions, that is, of the relationship between social existence and human value, questions to which the answers are provided by, first, "aristocratic ideology," which is then attacked by "progressive ideology," which in turn (in a two-stage process echoing that he finds in epistemology) is then subverted by "conservative ideology."

Those uneasy with a critique which 1) works out this neatly and 2) calls for new terms or old terms applied differently must read the long and persuasive exposition that follows this introductory schematization. Here Mr. McKeon ranges from the Greek enlightenment to the renaissances of both the twelfth and sixteenth centuries; the Reformation, the French nobility of the robe, the scientific revolution, and Marx appear here, always relevantly. The novel is the modern genre, and thus its genealogy sometimes resembles a course in the development of the modern world; needless to say, when you undertake to examine questions of virtue and questions of truth, you tackle a great deal of human experience.

This book's most impressive features are its learnedness, the wide reading on which it is so solidly based, and its detailed argument. Unlike critics who disdain to anchor their generalizations in particulars, perhaps fearing that to do so would be "humanist," McKeon makes cultural and literary claims answerable to texts. He never plods. And he provides reasons for what he says.

Following his long discussion of the ways in which questions of truth and virtue were answered in the prose tradition, the author presents chapters on Cervantes, Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, Richardson, and Fielding. Though these are often well connected with what has gone before—as in the conflict between Mr. B's aristocratic ideology and Pamela's progressive ideology—I could not avoid a feeling of slight anticlimax in these narrower discussions that almost seem to follow the "round up the usual suspects" method of writing about English novel origins. Nevertheless Michael McKeon's book is a major work, a milestone; and it will henceforth be one of the essential books in the study of fiction.

Another important work on the development of the early novel is *God's Plot and Man's Stories* by Leopold Damrosch, Jr. Though we have always known that there was a connection between those early narratives and the seventeenth-century Puritan background, the Puritan contribution has usually been either misunderstood or undervalued—misunderstood because of a misplaced certainty that Puritans disliked fiction; undervalued because, as Damrosch argues, "it was unattractive

to opponents who lived to write the story." Here is a treatment of several major narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including *Paradise Lost* together with prose fictions, in a way that emphasizes their religious dimension. Damrosch argues that Puritanism is central to the novel because of the Puritans' conviction that "human life is a narrative invented by God but interpreted by human beings"—God's plot, man's stories.

Another way of saying this is to say that these works assume the existence and activity of Providence. Providence is part of the realm of myth—that is, the meanings that a culture accepts—myth that paradoxically coexists with the particulars of narrative fiction. "The special vocation of the novel," Mr. Damrosch explains, "is to describe what happened once only, in a specific time and place, to specific people, while the vocation of myth is to describe what always happens." (The clarity and good sense of this book provide a constant temptation for the reviewer to quote it.)

The chapter "Puritan Experience and Art" shows the stresses that underlay the Puritan autobiographical narrative, stresses visible even in the title of Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. The impulse to examine closely one's own life to see there the patterns of divine providence, to see one's own history as an allegory, leads directly to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Clarissa*. *Tom Jones* is just as providential, of course; but there the author is beginning to sever the novel from the Puritan tradition, discarding such Puritan conventions as an inner, mysterious life and presenting the reader with some characters who act well because of "Good Nature"—a concept no Puritan could understand.

This, like Michael McKeon's, is a major book, characterized by good prose, intelligence, and learning. The works that receive separate chapters are *Paradise Lost*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Clarissa*, and *Tom Jones*.

I opened another book on the eighteenth-century novel not exactly *hoping* to find new names but thinking it might be novel to see, say, Sarah Fielding or Elizabeth Inchbald or Mary Wortley Montagu or even Smollett or Goldsmith. *Scepticism, Society and the Eighteenth Century Novel*, though it has a different angle of approach, has the usual names: Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, to whom is added Laurence Sterne.

Eve Tavor treats the novels of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding as variants on, or reactions against, the skepticism of Locke, Mandeville, and Hume. Defoe's work is about the principles of human understanding, or as she specifies to the reader's confusion, *middle-class* understanding; in *Clarissa* Richardson challenges Mandeville's doctrine that all public virtue is really private vice; and *Tom Jones* is based on Hume's skeptical *Treatise on Human Nature*. These assertions may or may not

be true. They are too slenderly argued to convince me; moreover, even to assume that they are delivers too little reward in enlarged understanding of the novels. Moreover the author leaves her central idea, skepticism, too little explained. Skepticism is what Locke, Mandeville, and Hume have in common; but what is that? One definition that looks promising: "The great effort of the skeptic is to prevent the reader from resting in any smug certainty."

Surely then, I fondly thought, it is evident how Sterne is going to fit in. But instead Sterne is seen as the great antiskeptical, the inaugurator of "a new positivism and a new belief," and thus the father of "genteel realism" and ultimately the nineteenth-century novel. Much of the support for this unpromising argument comes from the author's using Sterne's sermons as a guide to *Tristram Shandy*. I remain skeptical.

In *The Conversation of the Sexes: Seduction and Equality in Selected Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Texts*, Roy Roussel has composed an original essay on the subject of seduction. His chosen texts are Donne's "The Flea," *Fanny Hill*, *Pamela*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, and Congreve's plays. They are, as he notes, all written by men but about women; at the heart of each is the intention of seduction. In the seductions Roussel is interested in, men and women argue, and that argument implies equality; these seductions are mutual, a private conversation in which men and women pass beyond the roles conventionally imposed by their gender. This is a new way of looking at *Fanny Hill* or *Pamela*: Roussel's Mr. B, for instance, is a baffled man, in love and confused about how to tell his love. He reminds us that B loses his control in Pamela's presence just as surely as she does in his. In this novel, correspondence implies equality; and the moment when Pamela begins to write *for* Mr. B is a major event, testifying to "the desire for immediacy, which is love."

This little book is admirably entitled, for its subject is conversation, in a broad sense—not only two equals talking, or exchanging correspondence, but (to recall the secondary meaning) sexual intercourse, always part of the seductive transaction; and he is concerned with conversion, too—a seduction always converts somebody—and the idea of men and women as the converse of each other. The equality of men and women in marriage, he argues, "implies the equality of masculine and feminine within the individual."

In addition to these thematic or historical treatments of the early novel there is a clutch of new studies about individual authors. None of these is bad; none of them is great. The most ambitious is Paula Backscheider's *Daniel Defoe: Ambition & Innovation*—ambitious because it undertakes to treat Defoe's work in a comprehensive way. She devotes chapters to Defoe's poetry, to his pamphleteering, to histories and historical novels, as well as to the major novels. There is something

almost noble about this approach, and the book contains much that I did not know, am glad to learn, and could only have learned from somebody else who has read what otherwise is just a title—for instance, *Everybody's Business is Nobody's Business* (1725), a pamphlet. Along with this comprehensiveness goes a claim that Defoe is a major writer in many fields and a much more significant man of letters than we usually acknowledge. This means praising his political sophistication, his knowledge of history, his conscious artistry as a writer; demonstrating that he had a wide knowledge of literature in many languages, including the classics; and pointing out the strengths of neglected works.

It is a worthwhile project to reclaim Defoe for the grown-up table. He wrote fast—some 560 volumes, many of them requiring some research—and certainly some clumsiness is the result. But he is, as Paula Backscheider maintains, one of the major writers (and not just of fiction) of his time.

The weakness of this book is a consequence of its strength: the treatment of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and *A Journal of the Plague Year* suffers. The author elevates the forgotten works, but at the expense of flattening out the better known books. Very likely they are, in the final analysis, his major work for our century. Better to leave them out than to put them on a level with Defoe's books on geography or supernatural apparitions.

Jocelyn Harris's *Samuel Richardson* and Simon Varey's *Henry Fielding* are part of a series from Cambridge called *British and Irish Authors: Introductory Critical Studies*. They both fulfill admirably what I take to be their aim, a concise and noncontroversial introduction for the use of the student or general reader. This is not an easy kind of book to write well, and we should welcome these.

Reading them consecutively is a sharp reminder of the similarities between these two great and often contrasted writers. Each of them is the author of a triptych of books with the best one in the middle. It is customary to think of *Pamela* and *Joseph Andrews* as good books but harbingers of better, and of *Amelia* and *Sir Charles Grandison* as marking the falling off. Jocelyn Harris endorses this judgment of *Grandison* while giving a reasonable explanation for Richardson's failings. Simon Varey, also reasonably, speaks up for *Amelia*. Richardson's triptych is almost all there is, and Harris wastes no time on the familiar letters or the *Correspondence*. Varey has to frame the triptych in Fielding's journalism and drama and the *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*. The proportions of both books, their selection and shaping, are judicious and elegant.

In about a hundred pages D. D. Devlin deals with the novels and journals of Fanny Burney so that he both informs the reader whose reading of Burney is not what it should be and argues strenuously for

two critical points. Both may seem negative: one is that, despite some recent reassessment of Burney, she wasn't really any more modern than she has received credit for. The other is that, despite what must be the temptation to make bigger claims (the kind of temptation to which Paula Backscheider falls an understandable prey sometimes), no, indeed, her later novels weren't very good. People have long thought that *Evelina* and *Cecilia* were better books than *Camilla* and *The Wanderer*. Devlin believes that is correct. He defends the conventional judgment by means of a useful correlation with Burney's life (the first two novels were written before the French revolution), and in this biographical material he shows the relationship between the author and Hannah More, Mary Wollstonecraft, and other thinkers, to reinforce her essential conservatism.

Devlin anchors the fiction in Fanny Burney's journals, which were more than just journals in that they were always written to be shared with other readers. He seems to believe, though, that deriving the novels from the journals proves that they are devoid of symbolism, satire, irony, and other marks of fictional complexity. This book contains an odd reproof of critical analysis, as when we read that it was not for "symbolism and satire, like irony, thematic structure, and the rest . . . that Sir Joshua Reynolds sat up all night to finish" *Evelina*. This is nostalgia, of the sort that is so hard to get these days—not only the rage against analysis but the appeal to a certain titled personage to settle the question. When the bee in Mr. Devlin's bonnet is astir, then, this is a quirky book; but for the most part he does just what he should.

There is a diminishment in scope in these works. The books by Michael McKeon and Leopold Damrosch are important, big studies; they are long, especially McKeon's five hundred pages, rifted with ore; here at the end of the century we find the Devlin volume, a hundred pages and hardly too short, and it reminds us anew of the shape of the century. We feel a diminishment, too, when we move from the great narrative artificers in poetry and prose of the period 1660 to 1740 to those of the period just before Jane Austen.

Another work by Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory*, promises to develop the relationship between Austen and her predecessors. Harris's work on Richardson, a special favorite of Jane Austen, suggests that he may be able to link the centuries or generations of novelists forward from the eighteenth century as Michael McKeon has looked backward. This is in fact his project. But the results are peculiar and unsatisfying. What this book amounts to is an influence study of Jane Austen's six finished novels. His suggested sources deserve credit for novelty in some cases, or at least I have never thought of *Northanger Abbey* as a systematic demonstration of the truths of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The other novels are based, Mr. Harris

believes, on *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, *Sir Charles Grandison* (nothing too mind-boggling here); and on *Paradise Lost* (*Mansfield Park*) and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Emma*).

These parallels are fresh enough. What is tired is the methodology of proving influence—similarity of characters' names, similarities of phrasing, shared commonplaces, and situations in Austen's novels that are either parallels to or "the very opposite" of situations in an earlier book. Either case proves the influence. Finally, as he wonders himself, "What are we to make of all these parallels?" We may be enlightened by the detailed demonstrations, particularly in regard to Richardson; but the author never does draw the kind of important conclusions from them, or make the strong theoretical argument which his title seems to imply, which would help us to see Jane Austen as the natural culmination of two hundred years of English prose fiction.

SWIFT, GAY, POPE, AND SATIRE

JOHN M. ADEN

We have here a collection of essays delivered as papers at, or composed in the wake of, a conference held at the University of Durham (1985) commemorating the tercentenary of Gay's birth—pieces touching on politics, patronage, London a la *Trivia*, pastoral lineage, *The Beggar's Opera*, and Gay's later drama. The Scriblerians figure only as background—context for comparison, influence, assessment, and the like. Though all are interesting, few of the essays aspire beyond the reach of the most quiet need.

Brean Hammond argues that Gay was not so deprived of patronage as claimed by him and his friends, pointing out the various modes of income from patronage that could and did come his way (government sinecure, political appointment, subscription publishing, and the reading and theater-going publics), while at the same time acknowledging the "down side" in the changing nature of private patronage from royal sponsorship to private, with the political disadvantages that could spell for one in Gay's position.

J. A. Downie is less satisfactory on Gay's politics, tending to make a

Peter Lewis and Nigel Wood, editors, *John Gay and the Scriblerians*. St. Martin's Press, 1989. 224 pages. \$35; David Nokes, *Raillery and Rage: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Satire*. St. Martin's, 1987. xii + 212 pages. \$35.