INTRODUCTION

Can the novel enlighten?

For the last half-century or so, two theses have dominated eighteenth-century studies: the first having to do with the emergence of the "new novel" and second with the intellectual sway of the European "Enlightenment." Throughout much of this history, though, these have been one and the same. Consider this recent statement from the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*:

> The history of the novel in Britain (like that of the European novel of which it is a part) is precisely the story of the emergence of a new kind of quite distinct fictional narrative, which defines itself, sometimes aggressively and polemically, by a process of rejection, modification, and transformation of previous forms of storytelling, that are seen as insufficiently attentive to a narrow view of what constitutes truth and reality. Eventually, the realistic novel as it develops over the course of the century is a very self-conscious revision and strict reformation of what its authors tend to define as unacceptably loose attitudes toward the referentiality of narrative in relation to the actualities of experience, as the Enlightenment came to define that elusive category. This hunger for actuality and belief that the actual is a separable category are features of Enlightenment thought that are still with us, of course, but which were aggressively articulated in the mid-eighteenth century against what was clearly a lingering older confusion of the realms of the actual and the ideal.[1]

Both the forum for this statement (the opening essay in a student primer) and the testimonial weight of a distinguished group of contributors suggest that it needs to be taken seriously for what it is: a distillation of a particularly influential strain of thinking on the eighteenth-century novel, a summary of where we, as a scholarly community, currently stand. Powerful as it is, it also attests to the enduring influence of the agenda mapped out almost fifty years ago by Ian Watt in "Realism and the Novel

[1] John Richetti, "Introduction" in John Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–8; at 2.

Form," the profound statement that, more than any other, invented the sub-field of "Enlightenment and the Novel" studies.[2]

I intend the following pages to bring into question the compatibility of these two theses – the idea, that is, that Enlightenment thinking and the early realist novel are working toward a shared or unified goal. For I don't believe that the novel, even at its most mimetic, is responding or contributing to a "hunger for actuality." (In fact, as will become obvious, I believe quite the opposite.) Such claims, and the similar claim that the novel narrates a "new world of secular materialism," have, I feel, focused too strongly on character and setting – the verisimilitude of the physical world described by novels – to the exclusion of plot, which will be the primary focus of this study.[3] These are large claims, I admit, and because of their largeness cannot be demonstrated fully by one book, or even several. I will, then, use this opportunity to call for more studies viewing the novel as I do: not so much instantiating an ascendant secular or rational conception of the world but, rather, seeking to heal the rift between the magical and the secular worldviews – not, that is, following in what Max Weber would later call the disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*) but contributing more radically to a re-enchantment of the world.[4]

[2] See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957). Subsequent major statements in this field would include Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), esp. 65–89, "The Evidence of the Senses: Secularization and Epistemological Crisis"; John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. chapter 1, "Prison and the Novel as Cultural Systems"; John Bender, "Enlightenment Fiction and the Scientific Hypothesis," *Representations* 61 (1998), 6–28; Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. chapter 4, "Toward a Novel of Experience"; and Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism, 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), esp. chapter 1, "How the Misfit Became a Moral Protagonist." My response to Kavanagh's thesis comes in Chapter 3. More recently, Clifford Siskin and William Warner have sought to shift the Enlightenment away from the history of ideas and toward the history of mediation – but even this movement would, of course, preserve the novel within this history. See Siskin and Warner (eds.), *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[3] Richetti, "Introduction," 8. On the descriptive capacity of the novel, see especially Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). Though Brooks' criticism is important for this study, I could not disagree more with the opening sentence of this book: "I think we have a thirst for reality."

[4] This book therefore bears some relation to recent theories of re-enchantment described by Latour, Connolly, Bennett, Levine, Roach, and others, but differs substantially, as the reader will see, in insisting that the belief in teleology must remain a crucial facet in this process of re-enchantment. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); William E. Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments,*

I base my argument on one fact: that narrative, by its very nature, is an exceptionally poor medium for enlightening. This principle, which may seem abstract or even impertinent, should become clearer when we begin thinking about the most famous narrative written prior the period that concerns this study. Readers of *Paradise Lost* (1667), students and scholars alike, know that it was written as a means of "justifying the ways of God to men." Whether or not the poem actually accomplishes the author's aim is quite another matter. But one strong argument, so it seems to me, holds that the medium of narrative utterly destroys the author's philosophical project: in attempting to explain the existence of Evil, in granting psychological motivation to its personification, in dwelling so meticulously and so vividly on the reasons for its necessity, the narrative eventually comes, paradoxically and problematically, to glorify and glamorize Evil. Thus, I would amend William Blake's famous assessment of Milton: *narrative itself* is of the Devil's party.

I don't want to press this example too much, since Milton himself obviously plays a significant role in the process of glamorizing Satan. One can perhaps imagine a functional, yet not so interesting narrative that would find more of a role for Virtue – a parable version of the poem. Let us instead turn to an analogous example from the eighteenth century, which should be familiar enough. J. Paul Hunter, succinctly stating what many have expressed in different ways, suggests that novels interrogate their readers with important epistemological questions – those, that is, that will promote rational thinking about problems of evidence. Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, to take Hunter's example, seeks to ask, "What is the evidence of providential intention in the plague? Should the healthy flee to safer climes or remain behind in the city and trust in the divine power to protect?"[5] Even if Defoe's historical fiction is perhaps not the best exemplar of the novel's form, Hunter's inquiry might be extended to any number of subsequent novels. Jane Austen's novels might be said to investigate the compatibility of romantic partners: what initial evidence suggests that Knightley will make a better mate than Churchill, or that Darcy will make a better mate than Wickham? What characteristics should one look for in a compatible mate?

Crossings, and Ethics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Joseph Roach, *it* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2007). See also the fascinating collection, Joshua Landy and Michael Saler (eds.), *The Re-Enchantment of the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[5] J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), 46.

Yet such a confidence in narrative's capacity to address and answer questions about evidence strikes me as particularly Johnsonian and open to significant problems. Recall that Dr. Johnson preferred Richardson to Fielding, among other reasons, because the former crafted plots of unmottled virtue while the latter polluted his plots with vice:

> In narratives, where historical veracity has no place, I cannot discover why there should not be exhibited the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability, for what we cannot credit we shall never imitate, but the highest and purest that humanity can reach, which, exercised in such trials as the various revolutions of things shall bring upon it, may, by conquering some calamities, and enduring others, teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform. Vice, for vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust; nor should the graces of gaiety, or the dignity of courage, be so united with it, as to reconcile it to the mind. Wherever it appears, it should raise hatred by the malignity of its practices, and contempt by the meanness of its stratagems.[6]

Few passages within Johnson's criticism look as alien and unmodern as this one, which seems to draw a linear connection between narrative representation, authorial endorsement, and readerly emulation. Such a theory of reading would appear serviceable enough only when describing less complicated plots like *Pamela*, in which virtue indeed goes (as its subtitle suggests) "rewarded," but would appear to falter and wither away when attempting to describe the century's most complex fictions, like *Clarissa* or *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

Plato banished poets from his Republic probably with good reason: poets, and by extension all practitioners of "mimetic art," tend to make second-rate philosophers, at least by any analytic standard. ("Poetry, and in general the mimetic art," so Socrates lectures Glaucon in *The Republic*, "produces a product that is far removed from truth in the accomplishment of its task, and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence, and is its companion and friend for no sound and true purpose.")[7] *A Journal of the Plague Year*, to take Hunter's own example, exists as a fiction precisely *because* it defies the very questions and answers that it inspires. Despite the central character and narrator, H. F.'s, ultimate conclusion that "*the best Physick against the Plague is to run away*

[6] Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* 4, in *The Rambler*, eds. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 14–15.

[7] Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 828. Plato indeed would permit "only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men" within the Republic (*Dialogues*, 832).

from it,"[8] it only functions as a firsthand plague narrative so long as H. F. ignores his own "prescriptions" and remains within the plague's reach. Despite *Emma*'s ultimate conclusion that a decent, caring person like Knightley is the best marriage prospect, the novel similarly only comes into existence by so consistently ignoring this thesis.

So I will be discarding Johnson's mimetic assertion that "Virtue should instruct, Vice should disgust" in favor of a more Freudian view that finds transgression to be essential for strong narratives. Three studies, in particular, have shaped my understanding of narrative: Tony Tanner's *Adultery in the Novel*, D. A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents*, and Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot*. Of these Tanner's book is perhaps the least theoretical (and perhaps least studied), but its account of the centrality of adultery to the novel, seen in breathtaking readings of Rousseau, Goethe, and Flaubert, offers the most direct rebuttal of the Johnsonian view of fiction. For Tanner demonstrates that adultery assumes a central role within the bourgeois novel precisely when the sacred contract of marriage comes to symbolize everything that modern bourgeois society values. Nothing, therefore, so strongly offers the sense of "something happening" as adultery:

> The fact is that from the start, the novel had a conservative drive, serving to support what were felt to be the best morals and manners and values of the period, and giving a new prominence to that phenomenon only visible so comparatively recently, the family. But in addition to that conservative drive, the novel has also always contained potential feelings for that which breaks up families – departure, disruption, and other various modes of disintegration . . . it is my contention that its real, if secret, interest, has been aroused by the weak points in the family, the possible fissures, the breaches, the breakdowns. Which is why the novel tends to be drawn, all but irresistibly, to the problem of adultery.[9]

Miller's study is less historical in its approach but works on the similar principle that novels find most "narratable" that which in the end they seek to reject: "The narrative of happiness is inevitably frustrated by the fact that only insufficiencies, defaults, deferrals, can be 'told.' Even when a narrative 'prepares for' happiness, it remains in this state of lack, which can only be liquidated along with the narrative itself."[10] Such views of

[8] Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), ed. Paula Backscheider (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 156. All subsequent citations refer to this edition.
[9] Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 369–71.
[10] D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3.

narrative "lack" have been given a magisterial reformulation by Brooks, who argues that Freud's writings essentially offer a model for plot:

> As a dynamic-energetic model of narrative plot, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* gives an image of how the nonnarratable existence is stimulated into the condition of narratability, to enter a state of deviance and detour (ambition, quest, the pose of a mask) in which it is maintained for a certain time, through an at least minimally complex extravagance, before retuning to the quiescence of the nonnarratable.[11]

Thus, plot emerges from these studies as a series of delays, deferrals, and avoidances, with the narrative pleasure of plotting existing only so long as its ultimate desire remains unfulfilled.

If one accepts that having a plot means entering into Brooks' "state of deviance and detour" (and I do), then one must simultaneously acknowledge that the very concept of a Narrative of Enlightenment is oxymoronic, or at the very least unstable to the core. Traditional narrative ultimately has two tasks: to describe events interestingly and to describe events coherently or teleologically, neither of which are especially useful to a rational understanding of causation. Often, in the process of presenting ideas from this study, I've been asked whether or not I think a truly mimetic narrative – one that accurately represents the way that real events happen – can exist. My answer is no: I've never encountered one, and if such a thing existed, it would either be nonsensical and tedious, or legitimately avant-garde. Sure, writers from Gertrude Stein to Alain Robbe-Grillet to Georges Perec have made gestures toward anti-narratives, but the point remains that such an endeavor strikes me as strangely radical and never truly approached during the eighteenth century.[12] (The endings of Defoe's *Roxana* and Fielding's *Amelia* make a few tentative steps toward this territory, as we will see; but this transgression has been central to the often scathing criticisms of these novels.)

If the novel promoted an idea that events occur according to narrative causes – and one of my premises is that it did – then it has mystified as much as it has enlightened. In the words of one narrative theorist, teleological thinking is not so much a facet of superstition but, rather, its very

[11] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 108.

[12] Thus, Lennard J. Davis writes, "novels are not life, their situation of telling their stories is alienated from lived experience, their subject matter is heavily oriented towards the ideological, and their function is to help humans adapt to the fragmentation and isolation of the modern world." I agree with this statement but, as will become more obvious, would disagree with Davis' conclusion that novels "encourage resignation and passivity." See Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 12, 225.

definition: "If I mention to my wife in real life that our daughter is especially trusting and unsuspicious of strangers, my remark has no particular predictive value, except to the superstitious – indeed, superstition can perhaps be defined as the application of literary rules of configuration to reality."[13] The point is that the rationality of any traditional plot, no matter how complex or sophisticated, is little more than an alibi concealing a more strongly developed allegiance to the magic of teleology. In speaking of the magical function of the novel and of narrative, I am here following Jorge Luis Borges' important and understudied essay "Narrative Art and Magic," which demonstrates the similarity between the law of cause and effect governing the novel and the magical "law of sympathy" governing many primitive societies.

> The Indians of Nebraska donned creaking buffalo robes, horns, and manes, and day and night beat out a thunderous dance in order to round up buffalo. Medicine men in central Australia inflict a wound on their forearms to shed blood so that the imitative or consistent sky will shed rain. The Malayans often torment or insult a wax image so that the enemy it resembles will die. Barren women in Sumatra adorn and cuddle a wooden doll in their laps so that their wombs will bear fruit. For the same reasons of semblance, among the ancient Hindus the yellow root of the curcuma plant was used to cure hives. A complete list of these atrocious, or ridiculous, examples is impossible; I think, however, that I have cited enough of them to show that magic is the crown or nightmare of the law of cause and effect, not its contradiction. Miracles are no less strange in this universe than in that of astronomers. It is ruled by all of the laws of nature as well as those of imagination. To the superstitious, there is a necessary link not only between a gunshot and a corpse but between a corpse and a tortured wax image or the prophetic smashing of a mirror or spilled salt or thirteen ominous people around a table.[14]

The causal system of the realist novel, for Borges, shares little in the uncontrollability and uncertainty – the relentless flow of information and energy – of ordinary life. Instead, the urge to lay bare all causes with matching effects subscribes to an older, more prophetic, model. "Every episode," says Borges of the careful narrative, "is a premonition."[15] Thus the paradox: the stronger the narrative – the more carefully conceived, the more closely attentive – the stronger its premonitory or prophetic character.

But let us not simply rely on the testimonials of critics. This point – that narrative thinking is little more than a code word for superstition – has been

[13] Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 118.
[14] Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000), 80.
[15] Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, 81.

demonstrated over and over again in psychological studies. Consider the following survey conducted in 1980 by the decision theorists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, whose so-called "prospect theory" surely represents one of the greatest scholarly achievements of the last century:

> Suppose Bjorn Borg reaches the Wimbledon finals in 1981. Please rank order the following outcomes from most to least likely [average rankings appear in parentheses].
> A. Borg will win the match (1.7)
> B. Borg will lose the first set (2.7)
> C. Borg will lose the first set but win the match (2.2)
> D. Borg will win the first set but lose the match (3.5)[16]

Test subjects, drawn from university undergraduates, overwhelmingly judged C more likely than B (in fact, 72% of respondents ranked C ahead of B). The fallacy here, though, is that C already presumes that B has occurred: indeed C *cannot occur* without B first. In this case the irresistibly believable narrative of Borg – so unstoppable on the grass courts – staging a mild comeback from one set down trumps a configuration of events that is necessarily more likely. What prospect theory reveals over and over again, in other words, is a certain narrative bias – a belief that narratives possess a vividness that makes them more likely to occur than non-narratives and that ordinary life may be best understood through the language of a literary plot. For ultimately it is "plot" that is at stake in Kahneman and Tversky's example. B might be believable enough, but it lacks the sense of mystery, causation, and temporality necessary for plot – all of which are present in C. When asked to make a logical judgment of probability, in other words, the test subjects instead made a literary judgment.

Nowhere can this tension between the logical judgment of probability and the persuasiveness of plot be seen better, so I argue in Chapter 1, "Fortune's Fools: the novel and the lottery fantasy," than in a study of the lottery, surely the century's least enlightened institution. An irony exists, of course: the century that would promote a mathematician, Isaac Newton, to godlike status (reflected in Pope's couplet, "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in Night / God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light!") was simultaneously the century that would elevate the state lottery (established in 1694) to its modern form as an indispensable source of government revenue, financing enormous projects like the building of Westminster

[16] Amos Tversky, and Daniel Kahneman, "Extensional Versus Intuitive Reasoning: The Conjunction Fallacy in Probability Judgment," *Psychological Review* 90 (1983), 293–315; at 302.

Bridge and the British Library. Against the widespread encroachment of mathematical thinking, particularly oddsmanship, as an increasingly valuable conceptual tool, that is, one finds an overwhelming urge to resist its findings, to buck the odds, at all costs. While it would be foolish and ultimately specious to argue for a direct causal relationship between novel reading and lottery addiction, ample evidence exists for several claims: first, that the appeal of the lottery was far more than simply economic; and second, that the lottery fantasy gradually shifted its pivot away from acknowledging Providence and toward acknowledging plot. The lottery, more than any other form of speculation, that is, offered ordinary people fictional capital – the fantasy, however unlikely, of participating in a narrative of significant events, with plotlines frequently borrowed from novels. These observations, though, merely underscore the two main points of this chapter: that realism is, at bottom, a mechanism for the fictionalization of the reader and that fictionality is the principle by which a materialist or secular cosmos re-enchants itself.

Chapter 2, "Two predictions on the fate of gambling and probability theory," expands the theoretical core by reintroducing the central paradox of the book: that the rise of modern risk analysis and theories of motivated behavior has been met by a powerful counter-fiction exempting the individual precisely from such analyses. When, for example, Daniel Defoe predicted that the mathematics of probability would soon spread to the masses and, in doing so, disrupt the appeal of gambling, he was dead right on the first prediction and dead wrong on the second. The first prediction, as we will see, came to occur largely beginning in 1742, when Edmond Hoyle published his massively successful manual on whist play. Initially offering mathematically sound strategies for winning at cards, or "Hoyle's rules," the Hoyle oeuvre quickly expanded its domain, and by the 1750s it was also publishing on advanced questions of statistical inference and on probabilistic applications to annuities. But even Hoyle could not revise the subtle premise that escaped observers like Defoe: the idea that people gamble not in order to minimize risk, but from the desire to *create* risk. In these two opening chapters I theorize the paranoid fantasy for nullifying the odds as an expression of Freud's Ur-fantasy, the family romance, by which the claim to plot offers a pseudo-magical remedy for the discovery of one's own ordinariness.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the epistemology of the novel more closely. Though virtually any novel would bear some relevance to my overall point, I have chosen to focus here on those of Defoe and Henry Fielding, since these two would seem to hold the strongest credentials as Enlightenment

novelists. Defoe, after all, seems on the face of it interested in precisely the types of epistemological questions that fascinated contemporary mathematicians like Jakob Bernoulli – not only the likelihood of perishing in a plague, but also of winning a hand at cards, or of having a rainy February; and Fielding, especially in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, sought to promote an inductive method of reading strongly anticipating modern Bayesian analysis. Yet each, in different but profoundly disturbing ways, would use his final novel to call into question the wisdom and even the feasibility of such endeavors: with Defoe's *Roxana* demonstrating, through the intrusion of Roxana's daughter Susan into the plot, narrative's utter repugnance to the concerns of epistemological realism, and with Fielding's *Amelia* confronting the reader, frustratingly, with the problem of induction. What *Roxana* and *Amelia* both show, that is, is the Humean principle developed more strikingly later in *Tristram Shandy*: that narrative thinking stages a retreat from, rather than an advance toward, rational judgment.

I end my study, in Chapter 6 and in the Coda, with an extended look at the resurgence of coincidence as a narrative mechanism late in the century – resurrected by Gothic novelists from Horace Walpole to Ann Radcliffe not as a means of producing the consoling idea of Providence (its traditional function) but rather the disquieting sensation of the uncanny. Across the English Channel, French consumers were devouring coincidences packaged in a different way, through tarot card readings, which were invented and made popular only during the 1770s by an enterprising Belgian occultist named Etteilla. Working with the thesis that coincidence re-enchants the secular frame by enabling the claim to plot, I turn briefly, in my Coda, to the case of the Marquis de Sade, who, faced with long periods of imprisonment, found a means of fictionalizing himself within the complex numerology of his prison letters. Taken in full, the essays in Part III present a larger lesson of this study: that plotting, the process of finding teleological significance within the merely accidental, is uncanny in and of itself. Just as the animistic and religious frames once ensured the importance of the individual, that is, so the narcissistic idea of possessing a single-character plotline has arisen to ensure the importance of the individual in the modern frame.

By suggesting that the task of valorizing the individual cannot be reconciled with the task of pursuing a rational epistemology, and by suggesting that the realist novel does the former much better than the latter, I am running several risks. My conception of Enlightenment epistemology as an orientation toward the wisdom of the general case will invite a criticism – that such a paradigm is too limited and therefore