# Introduction: prose fiction and print culture in eighteenth-century Britain

> I do not think altogether the worse for a book for having survived
> the author a generation or two. I have more confidence in the dead
> than the living.
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> (William Hazlitt, "On Reading Old Books," 1821)

This work opens with the simple proposition that eighteenth-century British prose fiction, what Hazlitt largely means by "old books" (xii, 220), focused considerable attention on the material appearance of the printed book and connected that scrutiny to the appearance of a seemingly new type of popular fiction. Such awareness, I contend, assumed a wide variety of forms. It included experimentation with the physical layout of the page and the deployment of different fonts and typographical marks. It similarly involved representations and descriptions of printed or handwritten matter within a text – such as letters, found manuscripts, legal documents, sermons, lists, books, pamphlets, newspapers, and so on. More generally, this fascination with the physical properties of books extended to the public circulation of texts themselves. In *The Appearance of Print* I confront the seeming paradox that a genre supposedly invented to make mundane reality transparent, visibly recorded the self-conscious manipulation of its typographical nature. As a collective effort to reproduce everyday experience, what made a great deal of eighteenth-century fiction culturally effective was its capacity to circulate intimacy and affect without appearing to be a self-conscious or self-consciously public artifice. I stress the word "appearing" because, in fact, popular fiction, customarily about private lives, was inevitably a highly public form of discourse. That is, "the novel" was not so much a record of privacy and individualism as a vehicle by which such elusive concepts could be publicly mediated. As Robinson Crusoe's "Editor" notes, "If ever the story of any private man's adventures in the world were worth making publick, and were acceptable when published, the editor of this account thinks this will be so" (i). Implicit in Defoe's authorial self-effacement as "Editor" of

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*The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is the complementary erasure of "private" experience when made "acceptable" as "published" work.

*The Appearance of Print* argues that a determining cause for that paradoxical state was a coalescence of historical shifts in how authors sought a living, how books were made, and how readers learned to consume texts. It focuses on the period between the lapse of government licensing of printed works in 1695 and the advent of industrialized book production in the early nineteenth century, tracing the establishment of publishing as a specialist commercial undertaking. As I will be claiming in later chapters, many of the noted features of eighteenth-century fiction, such as the evolution of free indirect discourse, anti-romance rhetoric, modern gender assumptions, and pretenses to ordinariness and realism, were intricately related to the particular status of the book in the Hanoverian period. In Britain (as in Europe generally) the advent of print coincided with new conceptions of psychological introspection and national consciousness that became enshrined in popular fiction. Ultimately, I address how Hazlitt's "old books" integrated formal, thematic, and material elements, mapping the connections between the various producers, distributors, and consumers that contributed to prose fiction's effectiveness as a commodified form of literature. The period between 1640 and 1740 provided a hospitable medium for the growth of a literary genre that appeared distinctive enough for subsequent readers, publishers, and writers to ascribe the rediscovered name "novel" to it as a means of converting prose fiction into a marketable genre for a print-dominated culture. Perhaps more than other genres or modes of discourse, "the novel" has been closely allied with print, an observation especially current as a source of study, perhaps because of the belief that conventional books are rapidly headed for obsolescence. The increased popularity of eighteenth-century fiction, I allege, cannot be adequately understood without confronting the direct and indirect ways in which producers, distributors, and consumers materially shaped the spread of fictional texts.

To a large extent, this book approaches the study of printed fiction as a topic belonging largely to literary history and genre studies. At the same time, the dynamic interplay among authors, book producers, and readers in eighteenth-century fiction reflects more general historical conditions in the nature of technological communications. As Roger Chartier has argued, the history of the book necessitates investigation of the reciprocal relations among three basic categories: the creation of the text (how authors shape the book's written content); the nature of the reader (what

skills, access, and modes of reading are brought to the printed text); and the material state of the book (such as its scribal or printed forms, or means of distribution) (*Order*, 18). The interrelation of these categories creates what Robert Darnton calls a "communications circuit" (*Kiss*, 111) and Friedrich Kittler identifies as a "discourse network" or "information networks" (*Discourse*, 2, 370). According to Kittler, discursive technologies become viable forms of media only when a society distinguishes them as interventions in the circuit of material representation. The appearance of new media, he claims, modifies the overall means of communication, or "chain of chains" (*Gramophone*, 4), within a particular culture. This transformation alters not only the niches occupied by prior media, diversifying those modes of reproduction even when they are ostensibly unrelated to the new media, but also the various relations among producers, distributors, and consumers.[1] Adapting these observations about media technology, *The Appearance of Print* couples its focus on genre with historical analysis of print culture, arguing that genre and technology are often mutually constitutive.

After Johann Gutenberg in the mid fifteenth century, and more pointedly William Caxton at the end of it, British familiarity with print grew exponentially and revealed how effectively new communications technology could alter the chains of thought. But scholars differ widely in postulating when the "advent of print" reached critical mass. Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, editors of *The Renaissance Computer*, report that "it has been calculated that 20 million individual books were in circulation in Europe by 1500. Irrespective of whether or not they could actually read the products of the presses, few Europeans at that time could have been unaware of the flood of printed material flowing out of urban centers" (1). While such numbers may rely on liberal assessments of the book trade, and fail to account for variables in the distribution and audience for such output, they indicate a substantial cultural transformation in Western discursive practice. On the surface, such a view appears to contradict the claim by Terry Belanger that "England in the 1790s was a well-developed print society; in the 1690s, especially once we leave London, we find relatively little evidence for one" (6). Regarding the years between 1727 and 1783, Paul Langford similarly declares: "the sheer volume of printed matter produced in the period is striking testimony to the extent of the reading market" (91). Despite the notable presence of books in Renaissance Europe, it would appear that English culture did not embrace bookishness until much later. As H. J. Jackson claims, "At the end of the eighteenth century, to state the obvious, print media monopolized education

and communications and had a dominant share of what we now call the entertainment industry" (9). Appearances can be deceiving: the assessments of early modern print culture become only murkier if we accept the claim by scholars of nineteenth-century Britain that the "advent" of print culture started in the last two to three decades of the eighteenth century, but culminated in the third decade of the nineteenth when, as Clifford Siskin maintains, "the basic printing processes, from papermaking to typesetting to the press itself, are fully mechanized – a point reached by roughly 1830 after decades of largely British innovations that were then followed, with the start of the railroads during that same decade, by the mechanization of the distribution network" (11–12).[2] All these factual claims are essentially accurate, but by isolating quantitative measures from qualitative ones, such accounts hold the fluctuating development of print society to a model of acculturation that discounts the myriad, and occasionally competing, forces that, over time, shape dominant forms of media.

Even the most trenchant modern scholarship on eighteenth-century British book history varies widely about whether, when, and where print culture in any identifiable sense arose. Adrian Johns' *The Nature of the Book*, for example, not only rejects claims such as Elizabeth Eisenstein's that a printing revolution occurred in the sixteenth century, but also challenges the companion argument that typographic fixity then helped generate a relatively uniform and dependable "print culture."[3] According to Johns, "print culture of the eighteenth century could be perceived by contemporaries, not as a realization of the rationalizing effects so often ascribed to the press, but as destabilizing and threatening to civility" (28). Like Johns, Richard Sher emphasizes how individuals in particular locations and cultural contexts affect cultural processes, but his concentration in *The Enlightenment and the Book* on collaborative, and often beneficent, relationships between authors and publishers yields a more sanguine assessment of print culture. Acknowledging the "tense and strained, even hostile" partnerships that could arise between authors and publishers (*Enlightenment*, 7), Sher nonetheless stresses the intricate personal, economic, and national interests that unified eighteenth-century Scottish publishing. His focus allows for the examination of a highly integrated local set of practices as if these were stable and consistent patterns of production and exchange. His work, like Johns', thus prompts a highly polarized view of early modern book culture, that, I would argue, has repeatedly energized but also at times constricted the history of the book.

Examples of this polarization can be elaborated almost without end. William St. Clair's influential *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, for instance, dates the "reading nation" in Britain to the Romantic period. Focusing mainly on readers, St. Clair posits that the modern notion of a mass audience emerged as authors escaped the booksellers' earlier controls and bargained for better terms. Only after effective annulment in 1774 of the 1710 Copyright Act (8, c.19), which had enabled London booksellers to control authorial rights and maintain prices at artificially profitable levels, were there enough cheaper books for readers to become a decisive cultural force. St. Clair calls this "the most decisive event in the history of reading in England since the arrival of printing 300 years before" (109). The result of this change was an "explosion of reading" (355), not only in urban centers but also "at the boundaries of the reading nation" as provincial readers, reprints, and circulating libraries multiplied, thus fostering a surge in Romantic creativity and literacy (347–56). Jan Fergus reveals, however, that the nature of books frequently proves elusive (243–4). Whereas St. Clair's account assumes that reading follows legal and economic influences, Fergus highlights the shaping practices of consumers themselves. Because St. Clair concentrates mostly on the legal context of copyright and publishers' archives to characterize the book trade, he implies that book cost and accessibility drive consumption. Subject to market concerns and juridical constraints, readers themselves seem to have limited agency. Restricting her data to the purchase of fiction, Fergus, in contrast, portrays active readers whose demands may have influenced the publication of works as much as and perhaps more than copyright decisions or insider trading. As she observes, "canonicity is not produced by what the market makes available or advertises or keeps reprinting but by what customers choose to purchase" (76). Sher similarly postulates that the 1774 copyright ruling hardly affected the actions of authors, booksellers, or readers in the English-speaking world. Using private correspondence, memoirs, and account ledgers, he divulges that the book trade had long relied on "honorary copyright," a tacit agreement between authors and publishers (*Enlightenment*, 30).[4] Scrutinizing exactly what actual readers bought allows Fergus to similarly question if not entirely dispel several persistent assertions about eighteenth-century fiction's role in fostering a reading revolution, among them that novels were a particularly influential form of literature. One sign of the volatile history of print is that St. Clair substantiates his claims about the reading explosion that followed *Donaldson* v. *Beckett* by focusing, as he openly admits, on book production (14), even though books were just one prominent element in the eighteenth-century

print landscape. It might, however, be as feasible to argue, pace Michael Harris (Suarez and Turner, 413–23), that the 1695 lapsing of the Licensing Act in conjunction with innovations in distribution prompted the documented flood of periodicals that must also have galvanized a new and larger readership, echoing, in turn, the pamphlet war that accompanied the earlier Revolutionary period, and anticipating later reading explosions. Moreover, given the amalgam of fact and fiction in periodical, and often serial, literature, readers were being acclimated to imaginative prose of a distinctive modern cast well before the late eighteenth-century period favored by such scholars as Leah Price, St. Clair, and Clifford Siskin. Books continued to be expensive items in the eighteenth century; it may therefore be as likely that demotic growth in reading began with more modest forms of both printed and scripted discourse.

Explanations for disparate assessments of the advent of print culture (as distinct from the advent of print) include biases of period scholars, changes in our knowledge over time, contrary notions of evidence, differences between urban and provincial perspectives, and varying definitions of culture, Europeans, and readership. This book is concerned not with adjudicating these disputes, but rather with determining how quantitative changes in publishing induced qualitative changes in how producers and consumers approached texts. Scholars often claim that printed books added significantly to the late sixteenth-century discourse network, but, as Wendy Wall contends, they still largely urged consumers to "read according to manuscript principles – to reassemble printed material within their commonplace books and produce collaborative work" (59). That inclination largely disappears by the eighteenth century, probably because of new habituations to reading printed texts. Re-mediating unity, temporality, and spatiality, new technologies frequently endorse particular embodiments of discursive exchange. These re-mediations, in turn, modify how individuals perceive themselves as social agents. Such developments constitute neither a sudden metamorphosis in subjectivity nor a mere extension of pre-existing norms but what might be called a series of conversions, often unpredictable and uneven in their effects. As David Zaret puts it, "novel developments in print culture can be understood only if we grant equal importance to social and technical aspects of printing" (134). Moreover, while new media provide the framework for re-imagined modes of communication, old technologies often die hard. For instance, just as printed texts still bear the traces of manuscript forms, digital text customarily borrows from print culture, and, in fact, abets the proliferation of conventional books.

Moveable type has long been considered a key media technology that contributed to the rise of modern Western consciousness, in which prose fiction also conventionally played a vital role. As Walter Benjamin observes:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. (87)

Although past critics have noted overt displays of textual features in eighteenth-century fiction, the study of imaginative works as material objects has only recently received concentrated attention. Both Ian Watt and Lennard Davis assert that "the novel" owed its particular existence to print technologies, and George Justice calls it "the first overwhelmingly commodified type of writing" (*Manufacturers*, 153). While these may be overstatements, they underscore the links between forms of fiction and the materiality of books. As Thomas Keymer remarks, eighteenth-century fiction shows "the readiness of novelists to explore the impact of print technology and publishing format on literary meaning and the reading experience" (*Sterne*, 67). Indeed, since the revival of interest in the history of the book in the last two decades, studies of prose fiction have frequently granted "the early novel" a crucial and representative role in the communications revolution of the period. Several of these scholars consider the matter of the page and what lies on it principally in terms of the authorial act or, at the very least, the function of the author in relation to the print industry (Catherine Gallagher and George Justice). Those who focus primarily on the reader, such as Ellen Gardiner or William Warner, prioritize the consumption of texts. Few scholars attend closely to the print industry's production of prose fiction, but those who do often pursue some other issue – character development (Deidre Lynch), modernism (Thomas Keymer), graphic arts (Janine Barchas) – to which print culture is then annexed. Lynch's study of the double significance of character as typographical mark and as personality, for example, links the acceleration of the market in printed literature to developments in the construction of a relatively modern notion of deeply textured subjectivity. All of these studies indicate a salutary tendency in linking the "rise of the novel" to "the history of the book," which can, in many instances, be traced to landmark studies by Eisenstein, Jürgen Habermas, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Watt. It is implicit, as well, in several important theories of the rise

of the novel since Watt, such as those by Davis, Michael McKeon, and Nancy Armstrong.

*The Appearance of Print* amplifies this topic by relating a broad spectrum of changes in eighteenth-century culture, such as advances in paper-making or new modes of literacy, to innovations in how authors, publishers, distributors, and readers manipulated printed literature, and fiction specifically, in order to make typographical expression seem natural and familiar; the book seeks, in other words, to provide an integrative perspective on textual and cultural agency. It thus complements recent work of Keymer, Barchas, Fergus, and Harold Weber but focuses more particularly on the temporal and material intersections of writing, printing, distributing, and reading from the end of the seventeenth century to the opening of the nineteenth. My central claims are: (1) that eighteenth-century fiction assumes particular forms and popularity largely as a result of the distinctive and rapid dispersion of printing technology; and (2) that complex attitudes toward the resources of print are shaped in part by the way in which literary artifacts like "the novel" confront their own textual nature. As David McKitterick suggests, "eighteenth-century authors took an increasingly informed interest in the appearance of their books" (193). In prose fiction, for instance, Jonathan Swift's asterisks and glosses in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) or Samuel Richardson's typographical effects in *Clarissa* (1748), such as fragmented text printed diagonally and upside down, and creative italics, florets, bullets, and indices, reveal distinct responses to the possible uses of print. Similarly, varied lengths of dashes in Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–7) or satiric footnotes in Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) show that eighteenth-century novelists of all sorts exploited the expressive function of print.

It is a scholarly axiom that recognizably modern structures of thought could not have developed without access to the various printed texts that shaped such thinking. Because moveable type increased the circulation of books, which in turn impelled modern methodologies, Gutenberg's "invention" has come to symbolize Western intellectual destiny.[5] Underwriting this assumption is the notion that technological innovation produces particular and defining types of cognitive behavior. That is, seeing print culture as effecting rather than the effect of a revolution in mentalité, such an approach, valuable in the main, nevertheless seeks to provide an organiscist theory of cultural change that, paradoxically, removes print as an organic element from the very culture it ostensibly produces. But, as McKitterick asserts, the eighteenth century "witnessed

changes in attitude which in fundamental ways prefigured the subsequent long-term technological changes" (166). *The Appearance of Print* similarly argues that eighteenth-century prose fiction writers responded to innovations in printing in ways that contributed to a further re-imagining of what print could do. I suggest, in other words, that we temper the argument that typography produced modernity by recalling other historical developments, such as those in reading, the dissemination of goods, and the organization of labor.

To a large extent, nevertheless, the correlation between eighteenth-century fiction and print does reflect transformations in the production and circulation of texts generally. Chartier has recently observed that literary authors in the past frequently "transformed the material realities of writing and publication into an aesthetic resource, which they used to achieve poetic, dramatic, or narrative effects. The processes that bestowed existence on writing in its various forms, public or private, ephemeral or durable, thus became the very ground of literary invention" (*Inscription*, x–xi). According to Carey McIntosh, predominant elements of style, such as "polysyllabic vocabulary, periodic sentences, a nominal style that delights in abstraction, and the studied rhetoricity of parallel structures, series, and self-conscious musicalities" verify that after 1770 eighteenth-century prose "is the prose of a print culture," whereas "what was published in the first quarter of the century was more closely affiliated to the world of speech" (117–18). Certainly, in this period Britain experienced a dramatic consolidation of print technology and dissemination that included passage of modern copyright law; taxation of printed material; advances in domestic paper-making; the emergence of wholesale marketing, copy-owning congers, and trade sales; the establishment of the modern library system; the appearance of large-scale printing firms; dramatically increased production by provincial presses; the institution of serialized publication and advertising lists in books and periodicals; the accelerated growth of newspapers, journals, and magazines; the professionalization of authorship; and the start of a fully mechanized printing industry.[6] These and other innovations unquestionably produced new conceptions of literary expression so that by the eighteenth century the link between enlightenment and print appeared fully established. As the anonymous author of *An Essay on the Original, Use, and Excellency, of the Noble Art and Mystery of Printing* (1752) typically noted, "Erudition and Learning, the Improvement of all the Works of Nature, and the Perfection of all Arts and Sciences, are the genuine Effects of this Noble Mystery, and an evident Demonstration of its Use and Excellency" (9). Here, the hyperbole

matches Swift's or Jane Austen's ardor in defending the unadorned nobility of books or the dignity of the author while acknowledging the new power of the medium. At the same time, throughout the innovations in both the technological and literary spheres ran a desire to create an intimate connection of reader, author, bookmaker, and publisher not only to each other but also to the material production and dissemination of texts as well. It mattered to writers, publishers, and readers that books retain intensely personal and feeling relations to the world. As John Dunlop argued in *The History of Fiction* (1814), whereas "real history disgusts us with a familiar and constant similitude of things, *Fiction* relieves us by unexpected turns and changes, and thus not only delights, but inculcates morality and nobleness of soul. It raises the mind by accommodating the images of things to our desires, and not, like history and reason, subjecting the mind to things" (8). While Dunlop implicitly recognizes that print fosters reason, he emphasizes its power to move.

Eighteenth-century fiction provides particularly strong evidence for the assumption that newness, modernity, intimacy, and print were common bedfellows. As John Paul Hunter observes, "New readers, new modes of literary production, changing tastes, and a growing belief that traditional forms and conventions were too constricted and rigid to represent modern reality or reach modern readers collaborated to mean – in the eyes of both proponents and critics – that much modern writing was taking radical new directions" (11). This desire to reach readers often assumed pronounced modes of personal address. A complicated and highly idiosyncratic example of this appears, for example, in the pseudonymously authored *The End of Lusorium* (1798). As if to simultaneously outperform Sterne, who popularized extensive use of fragments, incomplete sentences, and suggestive spacing, and Richardson, who used inverted blocks of text and a typeface called Grover's Scriptorial to mimic Clarissa's handwriting and signature, Lusus presents his entire book in the form of engraved reproductions purportedly of the original disarrayed manuscript (Figure 1).[7] Other writers such as Henry Fielding, Eliza Haywood, and Henry Mackenzie use more moderate effects, such as comic and self-reflexive chapter headings, overly elaborate tables of contents, and parodic prefatory materials, but they also intimate a writer's awareness that authorship derives as much from the material processes of print culture as from his or her own labor. As James Raven notes, the success of a work of fiction often depended on a "critical reception that included analysis of typography and materials" (Raven *et al.*, *English Novel*, 1, 104). Even the title page evolved significantly, according to James