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978-0-521-19495-2 - The Cambridge History of the English Novel

Edited by Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes

Excerpt

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## Introduction

ROBERT L. CASERIO AND CLEMENT HAWES

### I

Some important English novels have been popular; some have not; but our volume is not a history of bestsellers. Granted, the novel is not an entirely autonomous literary form, developing in isolation from the influence of market forces. Nor does it develop in isolation from politics, national or international. Far from it: no one could seriously make such an argument. And yet if the novel sees at all – if it offers unique insights – it does so through the ceaseless making, breaking, and remaking of literary forms. Every decision that a novelist makes is formally mediated, and retracing those decisions provides access to the history of the novel. By attending to this history of formal innovations one begins to understand the range and depth of which the English novel has been capable. We hope, even though the *Cambridge History* concludes by affirming the enduring power of romance, that our way of turning the novel's progress into history is less quixotic than the quest of the Knight of the Woeful Countenance.

The challenging side of the genre never fades from view: it does, after all, create something new under the sun. To be sure, the aesthetic and the political avant-garde do not necessarily coincide. And, in any case, as Mikhail Bakhtin points out, any one asserted perspective in the novel is usually rendered relative to others with which it is in conflict. The novel belongs to a virtual, what-if space in which “messages” themselves are put into play, rendered indeterminate, ambiguous, and relative. A direct communication can be “decoded,” in the argot of our time, but a novel cannot because a novel is not a glorified bumper sticker. The mere act of the novelist's fleshing out incidents and giving substance to character tends to force a certain complexity on the articulated politics of a given novel.

We do not aim merely to reinforce so-called “canonicity” – a misnomer, given that the lists of texts we study in English departments are neither sacred nor carved in stone. Cultural staying power is an index, nevertheless, of

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relative richness. Of all genres, moreover, the novel is the most open to appropriation by relative outsiders. Classical learning – the product of a gentleman's education – was unnecessary to work well in the genre: a factor in the vernacular achievements of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson. Thanks to this vernacular vein, by the later eighteenth century there are more women than men writing novels; and the names Burney, Edgeworth, and Austen foreshadow the stunning achievements of George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, and many more. The rise of women writers goes hand in hand with the unfolding of the novel.

The novel is the first literary form to show sympathetically the experience of people who are not merely “common” but actively oppressed. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* announces in 1722 something very new on the horizon. Moll herself might be the most resilient character in all of literary history. Almost every prevailing social structure seems designed to press her down and yet, like a cork, she always bobs back up – and she eventually prospers. Among the earliest novels, *Moll Flanders* illustrates the articulation in Defoe of economic deprivation with colonizing fantasies. For Defoe, writing at the particular conjuncture of the early eighteenth century, the economic opportunity of settling the New World figures as an escape valve from the bare-bones existence available for many within the confines set by the social order at home. Moll's prosperity is intertwined with colonial settlement and (domestic) slavery. Or, if you prefer to think of *Oroonoko* (1688) as the first novel, one finds there a tragic story revolving around the slave-revolt led by the title character, an enslaved African prince. With politics that are a mirror-image opposite to Defoe's, Aphra Behn weaves together her support for absolute monarchy with a repudiation of the practice of enslaving African royalty. The novel is not anti-slavery as such – after all, the hero, Oroonoko, owns and traffics in slaves – but it does resist slavery that “levels” a captured prince to common servitude. Behn's novel may accurately be said to resist a specifically *racialized* slavery.

Such themes touch on explosive conflicts in national and global history. And so our approaching the English novel specifically through literary form may seem vaguely precious, or even a throwback to some age of ersatz innocence when we turned a blind eye to ideological concerns. And yet even a subtly challenging form can be immensely productive – to invoke a telling pun – of novel thinking. Boring clichés about “breaking all the rules” are crude and unhelpful. One must distinguish between innovations that work, pragmatically, and those that do not. Some innovations are not replicated in subsequent novels – they do not “stick,” so to speak – and these do not belong properly to the history of the English novel. They remain sports, one-offs, dead-ends.

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There are different degrees of innovation.<sup>1</sup> A change merely in *how the strategy of the genre is instantiated* can be significant indeed. Certainly the metafictional experiments of Fielding – above all, the narrative intrusions in *Tom Jones* (1749) – qualify as one such innovation. One might likewise point to Jane Austen’s pivotal use of free indirect discourse: a perspective that is ostensibly third person but dips at will into the coolly self-serving thoughts of a given character. Austen’s wittiest ironies stem from her ability to frame occasional flashes of mind-reading with a third-person perspective. A still more innovative text may *change the strategy of the novel itself*. An example of such a work is *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). Yet despite its radical frustration of narrative progress, *Tristram Shandy* has proven to be an immensely influential text. We hope this volume helps to capture the endless dialectic in the novel between the familiar and the defamiliarized.

What sort of story does the history of the English novel make? Are the novel and capitalism twins – born at the same moments for reasons having to do with, say, individualism, economic and cultural? Or, on the contrary, does the novel maintain conservative loyalties aplenty – say, for starters, to the principle of arranged marriage and so to aristocratic solidarity? Such would be one dimension of the strong case for seeing the novel as perpetually entangled with romance: the older genre that it might mock, as in *Don Quixote*, but never seems finally to displace. And what about all those vast estates that are up for grabs in so many novels? If a major piece of real estate is deeded to hero and heroine, we are more likely to rejoice for the good guys than to agitate against private property. And yet this truth throws into relief the unconventional plot of *Tom Jones* (1749). Though illegitimate – a bastard – Fielding’s hero does indeed inherit the Allworthy estate. Fielding’s challenge in *Tom Jones* to a tenacious literary convention is of course simultaneously a utopian challenge to the social and legal understanding of legitimacy. That Parliament had in 1688 broken the Stuart succession no doubt licensed his imagination. In *Tom Jones*, indeed, it is Squire Western – the countrified, hard-drinking, fox-hunting patriarch – who still believes, even after the debacle of 1745, in the lost cause of Stuart absolutism. More amusing than dangerous, Squire Western, that blustering font of reactionary attitudes, is scarcely less vivid as a comic creation than Falstaff or the Wife of Bath.

“Marriage-plot” novels of the eighteenth century negotiate with a constrictive ideology, sometimes showing a dazzling sophistication, but they seldom challenge the very choice for women to marry as directly as did Mary Astell in *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700). Such novelistic pragmatism offers a fine-grained analysis of the situation of individual women while only occasionally reflecting

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directly on the condition of women as a group. The dilemmas of such a female protagonist as Frances Burney's *ingénue* Evelina show the sense, as John Richetti argues, in which "the individual" is a problem for rather than a *fait accompli* of the early novel. The eighteenth-century novel had other crucial formal agendas as well, of course, other fish to fry, from satire to fantasy to self-reflexivity. It takes both the individual and the factual not as given but as problematic. The nascent form explores the frictions arising from "novel" conceptions of authority, agency, and knowledge. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) thus produces the darker knowledge stemming from an act of rape, stripping away the insulation from psychological consequences that the aristocratic rapist had banked on.

Our topical account of the novel in this volume is not mainly based on statistical patterns and regularities. Important as those are – literature depends on conventions – we are no less interested in the innovations visible in the unfolding of a remarkably sophisticated literary form. Important innovations figure the possibility of living differently. By the same token, romance – usually regarded as conservative – can give voice to very deep wishes, including the political desire for utopias of all sorts. We read best when we read with an alertness to utopian desires.

*Tristram Shandy* made clear in the 1760s that the notion of a "true" history cannot be taken too literally. That is to say, no history can live up to the demand for completeness. Like the perfect map mentioned by Borges – perfectly accurate because it is the same size as the territory it represents – perfect history would be useless. Life requires forgetting, and maps must be miniaturized. And so we generally say someone was born on a certain day instead of going back, as Sterne does, to the wildly complicated, and gruesomely interrupted, moment of Tristram's conception. And yet Sterne hits on an insoluble problem. One's "birthday" is a conventional origin that simplifies a multiply determined and frighteningly random beginning. Put that process under a microscope and further modes of randomness emerge. No wonder that *Tristram Shandy* casts a critical light on such collective "grand narratives" as the origins of a given nation. The resonance may be discomfiting, of course, even for a smaller-scale project such as the history of a literary genre. If there is an afterlife, Sterne is no doubt smiling indulgently at the earnest effort of the brave editors to tell the story of the novel.

We take at least this much from Sterne: a good history, to be effective, must sometimes defamiliarize. We are not willing to lose the plot entirely, however – to dispense with the suggestive contours of a larger story. *The Cambridge History* likewise includes plenty of engaged readings of novels. We cannot see afresh unless we sometimes read closely: the alternative is to take everything

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as “already read.” Aside from the rather snide attitude this promotes, the inevitable result is to repeat clichés. And so even as we recognize that repetitions and inertia are crucial, we largely eschew the “distant reading” proposed by rival theorists of the genre. Just as we can recognize various degrees of invention in the novel, we must also make use of reading that is flexibly calibrated in its ability to zoom in and out.

If there is any model that might help to visualize this developmental complexity perhaps we must think not of a neatly branching family tree but a very tangled bush. We recognize fully, in any case, that all books are open at once to those who will read them. Sometimes the impact of a given text will register much later. *Tristram Shandy* begins to get its full due only in the twentieth century. As this example suggests, moreover, literary evolution sometimes proceeds like its biological counterpart: not by gradual degrees, that is, but by unpredictable leaps in one or another aspect of the form. The perception that Sterne is “postmodern” or “our contemporary” seems awkward if juxtaposed with the equally strong claim that he is “modern” in the narrower sense: a key inspiration for Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The tangled bush of novelistic development, however, always turns back on itself, reflectively, renewing itself through unpredictable and sudden transformations. So the novel perpetually transplants its past and renews itself.

## II

Only a few of the following chapters concentrate on single authors. Satisfying as exclusive acts of attention can be – one thinks of D. A. Miller’s superlative close reading of Austen in *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2003) – our goal has been to interweave novelists and novels in the light of Henry James’s remark that ideally relations stop nowhere.

James admits the necessity of stopping them somewhere, of course. We make an initial arrest of relations in our use of the unreliable term “English,” to which we cling under the prevailing limitations of scholarship. However, in repeatedly turning some chapters towards an engagement with four nations – England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland – we underline our unease with confining nomenclature. Had we overleaped limitations entirely, we would have had to reproduce Franco Moretti’s brilliantly globalizing project on the novel, as well as his desire to replace close reading with what he calls distant reading in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2005). Although our writers read both closely and distantly, for the most part ours is a middle-distance project. The ideal reader of this book will want to cultivate a like distance, by making

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use of the way its chapters move between close scrutiny of particular writers and particular formal or generic variants of prose fiction to more comprehensive views that push beyond the usual author-centered or period-centered boundaries. In so doing, the reader will be able to compare, against the grain of temporal sequence, the “English” novel’s changing or persistent modes of representing phenomena such as the four nations (as well as other places and spaces at home and abroad) in chapters 5, 10, 20, 31, and 44; or representations of eros (8, 27, 49); or the genre’s formal consonance with the way we know the world (9, 26). Chapters 37, 38, and 47 comprise a cluster on formal experiment in the twentieth century; but when has the novel not been experimental? Readers who bring the chapters on the eighteenth century (and before) together with the later chapters on experiment will see continuity no less than change.

Those examples are only some of the trans-temporal groupings suggested by the way this history is arranged. It places readers at a middle distance *vis-à-vis* the novel’s long career in the hope that new syntheses of awareness will result. The chapters about non-fictional discourses (such as law, science, and new media) provide further occasions for synthesis – and for contemplating continuities and differences between novels and their environments. Even despite such chapters, however, our history might seem insufficiently committed to the temporal or historical “situatedness” (as we say now) that professional discipline favors. The discipline here shows itself in competition, as well as collaboration, with the history of the novel. For both are caught up in a dispute about reality. When the heroine of D. H. Lawrence’s *St. Mawr* (1925) wonders “What was real? What under heaven was real?”<sup>2</sup> she voices a question that the novel has been raising since *Don Quixote*. Scholarship, depending on the phase it is passing through, might claim that only social history outside of fiction, or the history of political movements and conflicts, is the touchstone of reality; or it might answer that romance is no less real than history. Whatever the answer, the uncertain, even treacherous relations between history and fiction are the heart of the perplexity. This volume’s critical middle distance intends to keep the perplexity vivid. Doing so entails complicity with Ralph W. Rader’s claim that “The understanding of genres in history is a very different thing from the history of genres, and the connection between them is . . . tenuous and problematical.”<sup>3</sup>

The history of the novel, like fictional narrative (the original time machine), is in time and out of it, retrospective and prospective and immediately present, in a way that complements fiction’s confluence with history, and flight from it. Periodizing and sequential literary histories resist what Mieke Bal calls “pre-posterousness”: a “shared time” of artists

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and audiences that transcends sequence, making distinction between “before” and “after” difficult.<sup>4</sup> Postmodernist fiction often is characterized by its addiction to pastiche sequels or prequels of the lives of famous characters from fictions past. How, then, do we characterize what is happening in 1904 when Walter de la Mare’s eponymous hero Henry Brocken encounters Jane Eyre, Gulliver, and Bunyan’s Pilgrim in their existences before or after their published histories? *Henry Brocken* is preposterously postmodern, just as are Flann O’Brien’s fictions from the 1930s. In a similar way, “modernism,” at odds with what is Victorian, turns up already in Hardy’s *A Laodicean* (1881). Hardy’s heroine and her private telegraph represent “modernism”;<sup>5</sup> her house, exemplifying “mushroom modernism” (40), is also on the verge of postmodernism, because its ironic owner prefers “an eclectic” architecture. Preposterously, she wants to be “romantic and historical” and simultaneously “of today” (100). When we consider periodization preposterously, we can use it to unsettle the assumptions of a later moment, including our own. Such assumptions might include contentions that in the eighteenth century there was a self, before we learned that the self is illusory; or that there was a non-problematic idea of nationhood, before we learned otherwise.<sup>6</sup> We hope it will not be easy to maintain such assumptions in the face of our chapters on the rise of the novel. Even as their writers respect historical rigor, they justifiably intermingle concerns shared by past and present.

“Situating” literary history must continually seek to solve the mysteries of transhistorical fellow-feeling. Ford Madox Ford’s *The March of Literature* (1938) estimates Trollope’s *Framley Parsonage* (1860) “higher than any other English novel,” and names Trollope, “except perhaps for Jane Austen, the greatest of all specifically English novelists.”<sup>7</sup> The collaborator with Conrad, the canonizer of James and Conrad, the *echt*-modernist writer of *The Good Soldier* (1914), makes this judgment! What this incident of literary history is about might be, on the one hand, Ford’s penchant for the colloquial directness of Trollope’s realism (Ford’s impressionism is an outgrowth of realism); and, on the other hand, Ford’s interest in the difficulties of controlling impulsiveness (which Trollope’s narrative dramatizes). *The Good Soldier* evokes uncontrollable impulse; *Parade’s End* (1924–1928) insists that even the most justifiable vehement impulses can be, and ought to be, controllable. If this is the way to understand Ford’s evaluation, one might see Trollope’s Lord Lufton and Lucy Robarts as prefigurations of the desire, and the difficult historical world, that Valentine Wannop and Christopher Tietjens eventually reduce to happiness and order, in decided contrast to the lovers in Ford’s earlier novel.



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Ford can always model the difficulty of “situating” novelists in definitive historical or literary-historical frameworks, even though a magisterial recovery of the modernist Ford by Max Saunders and other scholars in recent decades has been accomplished. *The Good Soldier’s* modernist experiments with narrative disjunction seem not only to complement erotic anarchy, but also to suggest that even the best human lives are “broken, tumultuous, agonized and unromantic”<sup>8</sup> because no principle of intelligibility is discoverable for them. Yet at the same time that Ford’s novel presents eros as a raging ahistorical darkness, it makes partial historical sense of the agony by referring it to the still unresolved conflict between Catholic and Protestant forms of life. In doing so Ford attaches *The Good Soldier’s* modernism to his trilogy of historical novels *The Fifth Queen* (1906–1908), and thereby – of all things for a modernist – to the content and the form of Walter Scott’s fiction. That the influence of Scott remains at work in English modernism (in Conrad too, with Dickens as mediator) means the stubborn influence of romance in unlikely places. Embedded as *Parade’s End* is in contemporary history and in Ford’s modernist *progression d’effet*, its hero and heroine are from the romance world, and attempt to maintain an elevation of impulse and action that realism and history (and modernism, conventionally understood) do not permit. But the modernist Ford, the historical novelist-realist Ford, and the romance-writing Ford are one and the same; and the unity of such a trinity is another example of Rader’s contention that the history of the novel is not reducible to the novel in history.

The novel form has remained a curiously alternative one, resistant to assimilation despite its copy-cat relation to other discourses. At its natal moment the English novel and the law are as close as Fielding and *Tom Jones*. But what Jerome Bruner says about the relation of fictional narrative to law – that, in contrast to legal discourse, the novel “evokes familiar life with the aim of disturbing our expectations about it the better to arouse our sense of what might lie beyond it”; or that the novel, as a component of literature in general, “looks to the possible, the figurative. Law looks to the actual, the literal . . . Literature errs towards the fantastic, law towards the banality of the habitual”<sup>9</sup> – sounds a note of general disjunction between fiction and the real-world protocols that it apes. Joyce’s twins, Shem and Shaun, in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) might constitute an allegory of fiction’s shamming of the real (Shem stands for novels, not just for Joyce). However assiduously the genre’s Shem-like character takes on the appearance of a discursive alter ego or twin, there is always shamming to be reckoned with.

A primary sign of the disjunction and the sham, affecting content and form alike, is romance. The most prominent simultaneous twin and target of



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romance in novelistic tradition is real history. This volume, in repeatedly striking romance as a keynote – romance in many varieties, but above all in Henry James’s senses of “all the things we never can directly know” and of “experience . . . uncontrolled by our general sense of ‘the way things happen’”<sup>10</sup> – unsettles the certainties we assign to history proper, and to investigations in its light. Fictional character might serve this tendency to contravene history. The way novel readers attach themselves to *Clarissa* or *Clarissa Dalloway* as figures who rise clear of their entrapping stories suggests that readers respond to a timeless effect novelists themselves aim at. Dickens’s imagination of Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) moves towards doubling what Carton achieves in history with a ghostly, hermetic intensity that trumps temporal and historical phenomena. Despite the narrative record, Carton’s famous closing words are presented by Dickens as probably not spoken aloud, hence never heard.<sup>11</sup> Their unheard sound suggests that even Dickensian narrative cannot encompass its most crucial utterance. Indeed what requires Carton’s death is a narrative: the secret history Dr. Manette has left behind in the Bastille, and that the Defarges bring forward to condemn Darnay (and his scapegoat Carton). Here historical narrative betrays character, and character’s power depends on being apart from it.

Romance has a similar distancing function, even though its vehicle is storytelling. What Dickens famously cultivates as the romantic side of familiar things weighs in, just as fictional character often does, against the counter-claims of real history. Romance suggests fiction’s autonomy (of the kind that modernist fiction makes into an aesthetic principle, perhaps as a new twist on romance), and fiction’s consequent flouting of worldly accountability. That this flouting betrays responsibility, especially responsibility to social and political analysis and human progress, worries critics. Yet the treachery of fiction can constitute a point of political and historical repair, a place from which writers and readers can see how reality outside of fiction is the more humanly traitorous thing. Graham Greene’s *The Human Factor* (1978) presents a double agent, Castle, who uses volumes of classic fiction in which to encode information for the Soviets. “He put *Clarissa Harlowe* back in the bookcase” is the first clue to his treachery.<sup>12</sup> He subsequently draws on *War and Peace* and *The Way We Live Now* as matrices of secret transmission. The motive for Castle’s treachery is no mere double-cross, however. Castle is white, and his wife is a South African black. Their bond developed in the struggle against apartheid, which brought Castle into loving contact with an anti-racist communist ally. Castle becomes a traitor out of loyalty to that comrade – an act of political decency that is continuous with his decent domestic life. In contrast,

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the powers Castle works for at home are immoral: they murder a friend of Castle's who they think is the source of Castle's leaks. The Russian government is no better. Rescuing him when his treachery is discovered, it provides an asylum that seals him off forever from his beloved wife and child. In search of consolation he turns to *Robinson Crusoe*. If novels are treacherous things, they also provide a secular saving grace. Part of their grace is the toughness of judgment that their distance from ordinary worldly allegiances affords them.

Greene's novel shares with Doris Lessing's work a sobering demonstration of the bankruptcy of extant models of world-historical political order, whether they are reactionary, conservative, or progressive. Iain Sinclair is one of the brilliant contemporary heirs of what Greene and Lessing have woven into the English novel in the way of criticism of historical and political realities. Perhaps no recent English fiction epitomizes the accumulated tradition's wily relation to history more than Sinclair's. Significantly, his writing arrives in the midst of a historiographical turn among novelists that is not unequivocally appealing. Before postmodernism fiction tends to assign an at least equal authority to a novel's historical components and to its autonomous, imaginative, and romance components. In contrast, in historical novels such as J. G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip* (1978), the novel takes on the air of a history classroom, in which the characters, whoever they are and whatever they do, seem to be students digesting textbook lessons. Farrell's narrative *donnée* is Victorian – a quasi-orphan inherits his father's Empire-derived rubber business in Singapore, and must dispose of the world-historical class and ethnic conflicts he also is heir to. The Victorian aspect in itself is laudably preposterous; yet there is more invention, and more unresolved political, even revolutionary, *élan* in Disraeli's *Sybil* or Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* than in Farrell's latter-day offshoot. Both history and fiction in Farrell can seem to be inert inheritances.

Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991) faces a new dilemma: a commodification of history that goes hand in hand with marketplace neo-liberalism. International capital now speculates in real estate, especially where it can find dilapidated urban areas that it can "develop" and hawk in terms of "historic" locations and renewals. The resulting "colonizing the past"<sup>13</sup> and the profits from it mark an intensification of buying and selling that Sinclair's writing satirizes, with a fierceness that reminds one of Wyndham Lewis. "The authentic whiff of heritage" (93) goes hand in hand with "vertiginous increase of property values" (135): so much for earnest interest in history, or for disinterested interest in the present. Global capital produces "a past that is narcotic" (176) as well as submitted to lucrative thematizing. Sinclair's fiction registers a savage dissent from turning history into