

Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957)
Chapter 1: Realism and the Novel Form

“[the] novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it” (11).

“realism” as a term?

-“low” subjects

-antonym to “idealism”

but, merely an “inverted romance”

conventional parlance, derived from 19th century French authors (Zola, Flaubert)

-“project of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life” (11)

-“correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates”; essentially an “epistemological problem

Basics:

Watt’s “triple rise” thesis: *rise of middle class, rise of literacy, rise of the novel*—all three are bound up together so strongly as to be inseparable and mutually inclusive. You cannot have one without the others.

Triple rise thesis centers on “formal realism,” the collection of *techniques* by which authors began to represent a more particular and circumstantial view of life. This “particular and circumstantial” view of life is itself a partial product and producer of the empiricist thrust of philosophical realism, emerging during the late 17th and 18th centuries.

Formal realism: “the narrative method whereby the novel embodies [a] circumstantial view of life”; its realism is *formal* because it does not “refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself” (32)

-NEW: “the novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation” (13)

-Locke’s “principle of individuation” (21)

-particularity reflects new philosophical direction of the 18th century

-rejection of traditional plots

-rejection of typed characters, turn toward more individualized characters

-particularization of time; turn toward historical specificity

-particularization of space; specific and concrete settings

-“*air of complete authenticity*” (27) achieved through a more “*descriptive and denotative use of language*” (29)—*reportage, journalism*

Changes in the Reading public:

- addition of a growing middle class to the existing aristocratic readership tipped the balance, forging a new audience for “novels” that represented a reality in both form and content recognizable to this new and increasingly powerful group—powerful both economically and morally
- largest increase in readers: women
- booksellers; literature becomes a commodity tending toward prolixity, to accommodate the educational “shortcomings” of the middling classes, the new additions to the reading public

Love and the Novel:

- PATRIARCHAL VS. INDIVIDUALIST ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE, WOMEN, THE FAMILY (142)
- transition from courtly codes of love (institutional, stylized, aristocratic) to romantic codes of love (individual, particularized, bourgeois)
- marriage becomes, with the 1753 Marriage Bill, a *civil contract between individuals* (150), rather than a traditional “paterfamilias”, a top-down legal, religious, and economic unit led and signified by the patriarch
- traditional concept of the family thus “stood in the way of individualism” (140)
- legal air of *pondered contractual protocol* (150)
- a FREE CHOICE (individualism)
- marriage became the single most important thing in a woman’s life—unmarried women increasingly declined in status
- Women’s futures “depended much more completely than before on their being able to marry and on the kind of marriage they made, while at the same time it was more and more difficult for them to find a husband” (148)
- “rise of the novel...would seem to be connected with the much greater freedom of women in modern society” (138)
- women’s taste for “domestic detail” (153) (mocked by many men, including Fielding)
- marriage problems provided rich literary resources (154)
- Pamela* represents a struggle between two opposed conceptions of sex and marriage, held by two different classes; a struggle also between two conceptions of masculine and feminine gender roles

“new sexual ideology” (161) [see Lawrence Stone]

- the Puritan ideal of marriage: sex outside of marriage was sinful, resistance to the desires of the body; chastity the supreme virtue applied to both men and women (“secular morality”)
- particularly suited to an *individualist* society, rather than a *communal* society
- 18th century witnessed “a tremendous narrowing of the ethical scale, a redefinition of virtue in primarily sexual terms” (157)
- “the ethical vocabulary” clearly working from sexual connotations: virtue, propriety, decency, modesty, delicacy, purity, and so on—(157)

[-rise in power of puritan, individualist ethics also brought about the 18th century attack on the double standard, though...--as much as it also brought about the emphasis on feminine chastity]

-individuals must *resist* sexual desire, desires of the flesh

-“sexual prowess and sexual license both tended to be linked with the aristocracy and the gentry in middle-class belief” systems (158)

-the increasing importance of private property; brides must be chaste so that husbands can be sure *his* son will inherit (158)

-NANCY ARMSTRONG will take up these points in a different way in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; there, she sees the modern individual created by and in the novel as primarily a feminine one—modern subjectivity is gendered according to rules for *feminine* conduct...

-the feminine role represented in *Pamela* is an essential feature of our civilization for the past two hundred years (162)

-“the novel is born because Pamela makes her epic resistance to ‘a fate worse than death’, that significantly euphemistic hyperbole which loomed so large in the later history of fiction” (165)

-Richardson adapted language to new feminine code—the *domestic detail*, the “feminine linguistic code” of *propriety* in description; carefully *avoiding* saying the thing itself, in favor of investing details with meaning; the *appearances of things* are increasingly important (dress, for instance—169)

-“the triumph of the middle-class code in sexual ethics brings with it, not only Mr. B’s offer of marriage, but his complete re-education in the proper attitudes to sex and marriage” (166)—B must *become* a Puritan

Private Experience and the Novel

Richardson: his writing was routinely described, during his lifetime and beyond, as “sentimental,” or more accurately, as presenting a “much wider range of feelings than those to which sentimentalists proper [Sterne, Mackenzie] usually restricted themselves” (Watt 174).

“What is distinctive about Richardson’s novels is not the kind or even the amount of emotion, but rather the authenticity of its presentation: many writers of the period talked about [the] ‘sympathetic tears’...he made...flow as no one else and as never before” (174)

The authenticity of the emotion presented, not just the “emotion” as stylized by the sentimentalists proper—like Sterne and Mackenzie. Ties back in to Watt’s emphasis on *detail*... This use of detail, however, is one of the things that caused Fielding to describe Richardson’s work as *vulgar*—too concerned with the minutiae of daily and private experience.

“It is primarily this re-orientation of the narrative perspective which gives Richardson his place in the tradition of the novel. It distinguishes him from Defoe, for example: since although both writers were, as Mrs. Barbauld wrote, ‘accurate describers, minute and

circumstantial... the minuteness of Defoe was more employed about things, and that of Richardson about persons and sentiments” (175-6).

What forces/phenomena/techniques influenced Richardson’s style?

-the letter, expression of the individual’s private experience; representative of “a larger change in outlook: from the objective, social and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist and private orientation of...life and literature” (176)

-the Christian—and especially Puritan—sensibility; emphasis on “inner light”; “produced an essentially man-centered world, and one in which the individual was responsible for his own scale of moral and social values” (177)

-the rise of individualism—“weakening of communal and traditional relationships, [individualism] fostered not only the kind of private and egocentric mental life we find in Defoe’s heroes, but also the later stress on the importance of personal relationships which is so characteristic both of modern society and the novel” (177)

Details:

I.

Realism and its philosophic underpinnings; “the main analogies between realism in philosophy and literature” (31)

“the novel’s imitation of human life follows the procedures adopted by philosophical realism in its attempt to ascertain and report the truth” (31)

- -scholastic realists of middle ages: universals, classes, abstractions are true realities, not the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception (“Scholastic Realism”)
- -modern realists: attempt rejection of universals (12) (“Philosophic Realism”)
- -“begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke, and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century” (12)
 - critical, anti-traditional, innovating
 - study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator who, ideally, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs
 - gives particular importance to semantics, the problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and things

Ia.

Method: pursuit of truth is conceived of as a wholly individual matter

Novel: form that most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation (13); its primary criterion is truth to individual experience that is always unique and therefore new.

-unprecedented value on originality, the new

-rejection of traditional plots (and concomitant view that nature is essentially complete and unchanging, its records constitute a definitive repertoire of human experience)

- individual experience replaces collective tradition as arbiter of reality (14)
- word “original” (traditional: “having existed from the first”; modern: “underived, independent, first hand; novel or fresh in character or style”)

Ib.

Realistic Particularity

- Actors in plot, scene of action needed to be placed in a new perspective
- particular people in particular circumstances
- a change analogous to the rejection of universals and the emphasis on particulars that characterizes philosophic realism (15)
- critical tradition in early 18c still governed by strong classical preference for the general and universal (16)—elevated, vs. “mere” historian, face painter, copyist

Ic.

Particularity of identity (character)

- philosophic problems associated with personal identity
- “Proper names bring to mind one thing only; universals recall any one of many” (hobbes 18)
- trad: proper names very typed, historical, generic expectations
- mod: proper names individualized, within context of everyday life
- suggests “they were to be regarded as particular individuals in the contemporary social environment” (19); they *sound authentic*

Id.

Particularity in/of time (plot)

- Locke: personal identity is an identity of consciousness through duration in time; individual in touch with own continuing identity through memory of past thoughts and actions (21)
- principle of individuation: existence at a particular locus in space and time
- time shapes individual and collective human history
- trad: timeless stories=unchanging moral truths
- mod: causal connection (cause and effect) gives novel cohesive structure
- trad: “celebrated unity of time”
- mod: emphasizes the importance of the temporal dimension in human life
- trad: exempla, abstract continuum of time and space (romance)
- mod: objective study of history, sense of difference between past and present

plot develops causally, probably, plausibly, in accordance with contemporary context

- reality of time (Richardson)

Ie.

Particularity of space (setting)

- solidity of setting; Defoe’s treatment of moveable objects, Richardson’s description of interiors

-pursuit of verisimilitude; “that power of ‘putting man wholly into his physical setting’” (27)

If.

Particularity of representation (Semantics)

The air of authenticity; the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals (27)

-trad stylistic tradition: correspondence between words and things not of intrinsic importance; rather, poets interested in the flowers of rhetoric, the stylized use of language systems to signify affect, association, and so forth. Language a source of interest in its own right, not as ‘purely referential medium’ (28). **Authors skill shown *not in the closeness with which he made his words correspond to their objects, but in the literary sensitivity with which his style reflected the linguistic decorum appropriate to its subject*** (29) elegance, concision;

-mod stylistic tradition: descriptive, denotative; language refers to things; skill shown in ability to use words referentially (often attacked as clumsy and inelegant)

-“the writer’s exclusive aim is to make the words bring his object home to us in all its concrete particularity, whatever the cost in repetition or parenthesis or verbosity” (29)

“No sort of imagery can ever be the language of grief. If a man complains in simile, I either laugh or sleep” (qtd in 29)

-full and complete **report** of what it describes (rather than summary)

-often seen as ‘too authentic to be stylish’ (whereas classical style “too stylish to be authentic” (30))

function of language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms; the genre itself works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration. (30)

II.

Formal realism:

Analogy limited; represents “parallel manifestations of a larger change—that vast transformation of western civilization since the renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the middle ages with another very different one—one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places” (31)

Novel’s mode of imitating reality represents “a circumstantial view of life” (31)

“The narrative method whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may be called its formal realism; formal, because the term realism does not here refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself.” (32)

“Formal realism... is... the premise or primary convention that the novel is a full an authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its

reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms” (32)

total literary structure oriented toward formal realism... (character, plot, setting...
Major criticisms:

- 1.) gender asymmetry, clearly masculinist bias naturalized by argument (see #5)
- 2.) assumes the novel is a coherent genre that can be distinguished from other forms—self-perpetuating, autotelic theory
- 3.) use of analogy as premise for argument
- 4.) ahistoricity—especially relevant in chapter 2, where associates rise of novel with rise of middle class
- 5.) Fielding—repeatedly notes his problematic presence in the pantheon of early formal realists, yet keeps him in there—see #1

Watt, “The Reading Public and the Rise of the Novel”

“The novel’s formal realism...involved a many-sided break with the [then] current literary tradition [emphasizing skillful use of classical styles, types, and codes]. Among the many reasons which made it possible for that break to occur earlier and more thoroughly in England than elsewhere, considerable importance must certainly be attached to changes in the 18th century reading public” (35).

A “new literary balance of power” (49); “shifting center of gravity” (59)

I. Changes in Literacy and Class

18c observers noted a remarkable and increasing popular interest in reading, but although large by previous periods, still very far from a mass reading public like we have today. What Johnson called “a nation of readers” seems to have arisen largely after 1750, when newspaper buying tripled (36) and printing presses in London increased dramatically (37). Yet, still on a limited scale.

Problems: Literacy

Many still illiterate, especially the poor and the laboring—even in the city, though positive developments most visible there. Schooling inaccessible; **“being able to read was a necessary accomplishment only to those destined to middle-class occupations—commerce, administration and the professions” (39)**

Economics/Class

Large portion of 6 million in England in 1700 barely met subsistence levels; had no expendable cash to devote to luxuries like books and newspapers. Most of these families lived on between 6 and 20 pounds a year. But, a new class was emerging—between these poor and the wealthy. An “intermediate” or “middling” class—with family incomes

between 38 and 60 pounds a year: freeholders, farmers with higher incomes; shopkeepers and tradesmen; artisans; and so on. While members of this middling class wouldn't have had a lot of money to spend on books and newspapers, some money would have been available to the wealthier—**“it is probably that changes within this intermediate class account for the main increases in the 18th century reading public” (40). Probably here that “the most substantial additions to the book-buying public were drawn, rather than from the impoverished majority of the population” (41).** Important to note: *additions to book-buying public.*

Less affluent wouldn't have been able to afford French heroic romances usually published in expensive folios; however, novels were more accessible, in the medium price range. **“The novel in the 18th century was closer to the economic capacity of the middle-class additions to the reading public than were many of the established and respectable forms of literature and scholarship, but it was not, strictly speaking, a popular literary form” (42).** I.e. still pricey. On the lower fringes of book buying public—ballads, chapbooks, criminal biographies, newspapers. Telling point: for Watt, this “poorer public” is not very important” (42).

“likely that until 1740 a substantial marginal section of the reading public was held back from a full participation in the literary scene by the high price of books; and further, that this marginal section was largely composed of potential novel readers, many of them women” (43)

Novel: rises in the middle of the 18th century (literacy increased, middling classes more economically capable, epistemological changes of earlier period institutionalized in formal realism)

Novel readers: women, upper levels of the middling classes, more leisured (husbands worked in trade or other areas of “economic specialization” (44).

Came under attack: “feminine pursuit” for the “idle fair”; most prevalent in larger towns and London; poorer sort “aspiring to the leisure pursuits of their betters”; yet, for Watt, these “jeremiads” are to be discounted, b/c class distinctions in England very stable both economically, culturally, and legally (46—sumptuary laws, for instance)

Two other classes of relatively poor people who likely had time and opportunity to read—**apprentices and household servants (47)**. Much of the critique of the lower sort “aping their betters” is directed at these classes. Pamela described as “the culture-heroine of a very powerful sisterhood of literate and leisured waiting-maids” (47).

In general—additions to the reading public came under economic aegis of manufacturing and commerce. MC achieved dominance of the reading public in the middle of the 18th century.

- literature in 18c addressed to a widening audience
 - thus, weakened the relative importance of the more classically educated readers,
 - increased the relative importance of “those who desired an easier form of literary entertainment, even if it had little prestige among the literati” (48)

- “favored ease of entertainment at the expense of obedience to traditional critical standards” (49)
- This change an “essential permissive factor for the achievements of Defoe and Richardson” (49)
- But, more positive features of reading public’s taste: outlook of the trading classes influenced by economic individualism and secularized Puritanism; increasingly important feminine readership found many interests expressed by Richardson (49)

II. What was published?

-overwhelming popularity of religious material; but, undeniably true that tastes were becoming increasingly more secular

-new class of readers often began with religious material and then moved on to secular material—often turning to the journalism and essays of the day, newspapers.

III. Literature as a commodity

“the new prominence in the literary scene of those engaged in the trades of manufacturing and selling the products of the printing press” (52); trade in objects, commerce, necessarily includes this increasingly relevant kind of object—the book, the text.

Defoe: “Writing...is become a very considerable Branch of the English Commerce. The Booksellers are the Master Manufacturers or Employers...” (qtd in 53)

Defoe didn’t condemn this commercialization of literature, but many more traditional in outlook or classically educated did—tended to see novel and its readers as usurping rightful tastes. (“Grub street hack”)

“the novel was widely regarded as a typical example of the debased kind of writing by which the booksellers pandered to the reading public” (54)

While the story of the novel is not as linear and causal as all that, it is true for Watt that booksellers indirectly contributed to the rise of the novel by “removing literature from the control of patronage and bringing it under the control of the laws of the marketplace” (55-6).

- As such, they assisted the development of its formal realism—copious particularity of description and explanation . Booksellers encouraged prolixity
 - Which helps less educated readers understand, and
 - Became the ones who paid writers—valued speed and copiousness as “supreme economic virtues” (56)
 - Favors prose over verse
- Also made possible the break witnessed from classical tradition by Defoe and Richardson (56)
 - Favor prose over verse: “romance writing is the only branch of our business that is worth following” and because “it is certainly the easiest work in the world; you may write it almost as fast as you can put pen to paper” (Fielding—qtd in Watt 56-7)

- “verbal grace, complication of structure, concentration of effect”—take time, revision. Defoe “seems to have taken the economic implications of the writer’s situation to an unexampled extreme,” not revising unless paid to

Economic motives for prolixity visible in Richardson, too, though less pressing for him. Richardson’s lengthy texts impossible, according to critics, had he not been a printer himself (57).

Break with past in:

Prose style (prolixity, formal realism) embodies a new

Vision of life

Novel expresses “the profound changes in the social context of literature which further weakened the prestige of established critical standards” (57-8)