The Rise of "the Novel": Naming (and Disciplining) New Fiction in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Riccardo Capoferro

Abstract
Not only did the eighteenth century see the rise of what we now call "the novel", it also saw the rise of a category to define it. This process was a relatively long one, the term "novel" entering into common usage only towards the end of the century. A variety of other experimental labels, such as "history" and "biography", were used to stress the empirical component of the new species of writing, which was also defined by means of preexisting genre notions such as "epic" and "romance". Moreover, puritanical attacks on fiction that did not distinguish between the novel and romance kept resonating throughout the century. This essay argues that the stable adoption of the word "novel" was due, for the most part, to the need to discipline the new genre. The rise of a new kind of aesthetic consumption demanded a new critical language, and so did the emergence of pedagogical values that were part and parcel of a new social imaginary. Along with the need for discipline went a need to understand and define the features of novelistic narratives, in particular the readerly involvement that characterized their consumption. Simultaneously, practitioners of the new genre and critics who placed trust in its pedagogic virtues, such as Clara Reeve – who embodies both categories – sought to establish a distinction between good and bad novels and asserted the value of novelistic writing by defining it in historical terms.

Keywords: the novel, genre definitions, empiricism, eighteenth-century fiction.

While precursors and early examples of novelistic realism appeared in various European cultures, only the British developed a specific term to define the new genre, a fact that has been strongly relevant to all subsequent debates and that distinguishes the culture of the British eighteenth century[1]. Nevertheless, the rise of the new genre

[1] In other national cultures, the distinction between "novel" and "romance" does

ISSN 1824-3967
© Carocci Editore S.p.A.

label was anything but smooth. The meaning of "novel" remained volatile for a long time, and a variety of other labels were tentatively used. The century saw a tacit competition among definitions in the arena of public discourse, a competition fueled by an interplay of socio-cultural pressures, with manuals of conduct, reviews, and prefaces playing a key part[2]. In this essay, I will chart these pressures. The coalescence of the "novel" as a new genre category was due, ostensibly, to the demands of empirical epistemology and to the development of an empirically- and historically-oriented aesthetic sensibility. Both tendencies, however, became intertwined with the widespread need to discipline a new kind of entertainment, probably the crucial factor in the stabilization of the term towards the end of the century. The usage of the word "novel" emerged, I will argue, in response to a new kind of consumption that was perceived to be inseparable from a new kind of writing. Disciplining and defining went, in other words, hand in hand, implying a view of the reading subject that balanced rational detachment and emotional identification, allowed for personal and social improvement, and conceived of fiction as a tool for understanding, rather than obscuring, the reality of social intercourse.

However brief, a history of how "novel" rose to common usage should also focus on the other terms that were provisionally used to define the new genre. Experimental labels such as "history"

---

not exist. In Italian, for example, "romanzo" covers all long narratives, from the chivalric romance to nineteenth-century naturalism, and the French "roman" is employed in a similar fashion. In French culture, of course, the meaning of "roman" that emerged in the middle ages – like the Italian "romanzo" – changed as the landscape of fiction transformed, but it is notable that no new terms to define long realistic narratives coalesced in spite of the fact that the French term "nouvelle" was the seed out of which the term "novel" developed in British culture. While only a study of comparative lexicology could shed light on this terminological difference, it is probable that the rise of the "novel" to critical (and common) usage was due to the same factors that contributed to the spread of the novel as a genre in Great Britain. The existence of a highly developed, relatively freer, public debate that enabled a public assessment of fiction for a comparatively broader readership, was rooted in the idea of a civil society and its epistemological foundations.

[2] Crucial studies to chart the emergence of the idea of the novel are Williams 1970 and Nixon 2009, which include excerpts from most of the works I will quote in this essay. Important aspects of the history of the idea of the novel have been discussed by Rogers 1934, Gallaway 1940, Tinnon Taylor 1943, Kelly 1985, and Day 1987.

or "biography" were in fact key to the transition of the novel to cultural consciousness. And even assimilative, conservative definitions could highlight innovative features. As late as 1776, drawing from neoclassical theory, Lord Monboddo defined the new genre as "a species of narrative poem, representing […] the characters of common life" (Burnett 1776: 134). Not all the terms deployed, however, were able to voice the moral preoccupations raised by the increasing production and consumption of new fiction. Genre categorization became part of a broader assessment, informed by the fundamental ideals – social, epistemological, and pedagogical – that underpinned the emergent public sphere and the civil society independently of rank or party affiliations, although to a certain extent the hostility towards "the novel" was nourished by its residual ties to aristocratic culture (Kelly 1985). How could the focus of the novel on sentimental extremes form a rational subject? How could its empirically oriented verisimilitude be used as a tool for strengthening rather than undermining the sense of reality of young, and mostly female, readers? How could its vivid character portrayals be put to good use? Most of the terminological experiments I will discuss here implied similar questions, even those conducted by relatively progressive critics and writers. They all tried to define the novel with a view to disciplining its production and effects.

Definitions appeared, of course, within novelistic works themselves. Initially, self-presentations of the transitional, groundbreaking works that we now consider novels – the "history" of *Oroonoko*, the "life" of *Robinson Crusoe* – capitalized on the sensationalist interest in facts. However, they were not yet explicit attempts to objectify the new species of writing. In the fictitious editor's preface, *Moll Flanders* is ambivalently defined as a "private history" and is set in opposition to "novels and romances" (Defoe 1722: [iii]). If we accept Michael McKeon's view of the prehistory of the genre, which considers the Richardson-Fielding controversy as the moment in which the new species of writing fully rose to cultural consciousness, the first authoritative, quasi-explicit definition of the novel by a novelist appears to be that of Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*. All the more because, despite its metafictional subtext, *Pamela* still presents itself as a collection of letters (McKeon 1987)[3]. Marking his

[3] Other studies that focus on the origins of the novel concentrate on specific

distance from earlier narratives influenced by the French *nouvelle*, Fielding famously presented *Joseph Andrews* as a "biography" and as a "comic romance" or "a comic epic poem in prose" (Fielding 1742: vol. I, A). Fielding's definition was two-pronged. While his ironic use of "romance" and "epic" highlighted the persistence of features formalized by neoclassical theory – thus attempting an accommodation of the new form to preexisting notions – his use of "biography" was meant to highlight his commitment to the expansion of empirical knowledge. Likewise, in his preface to *Clarissa*, Richardson combines seemingly contradictory term: "The following History is given in a series of Letters […] the Collection contains not only the History of the excellent Person whose Name it bears, but includes The Lives, Characters, and Catastrophes, of several others, either principally or incidentally concerned in the Story" (Richardson 1747: vol. I, 5). As in *Pamela* – and in the manner of Defoe – he presents the letters exchanged by his characters as first-hand documents, mediated by an editor who certifies that they can be useful to the public. Later in the preface, however, his word-choice makes it clear that they compose a coherent, formalized whole, in that they contain "stories" and "catastrophes" and form a unified story with primary and secondary components. After the *Pamela* controversy, it was certainly easier to acknowledge the fictive status of this kind of work; nevertheless, Richardson still opted for a pseudo-empirical term, emphasizing the truth-value of the history of Clarissa.

Fielding and Richardson combined different terms to define the new genre by implication, setting a standard for subsequent definitions, which built on, or took advantage of, their terminological invention. "Biography" was still used by Sarah

---

cultural components of the new genre such as the economic context or epistemological notions (see, for instance, Sherman 2005 and Molesworth 2010). A useful contribution to the development of new generic categories is provided by Davis 1983. Davis argues that the novel emerged out of the news/novel matrix, that is, a discourse on contemporary life that ambivalently mixed fact and fiction. The use of the term "novel" (which also bespeaks novelty) was encouraged by this ambivalence, overcome as the new genre became easily recognizable as fiction. The slow rise of "the novel" to common usage, however, contradicts – at least at the terminological level – Davis's idea that there existed an undifferentiated news/novel matrix.

Scott as late as 1766 in her preface to *The History of Sir George Ellison* (which is also, needless to say, a "history"). To portray "common life" she was "induced to collect all the actions that came to my knowledge of the person to whom I have given the name of Ellison, and to reduce them into the form of Biography" (Scott 1996: 3). Along similar lines, although she mentions novels and their dangers, in her preface to *Evelina* (1778) Fanny Burney calls her main character "the heroine of these memoirs" and also refers to the novel as "these letters" and to herself as "the editor", implying, with the logic of "formal realism" already deployed by Richardson (Watt 1957) that the form of her work could be compared to that of a factual autobiographical work. Fully reminiscent of Fielding, however, she also states that "to draw characters from nature, though not from life, and to mark the manners of the times, is the attempted plan of the following letters" (Burney 1779: vol. I, xii-xiii). *Evelina*, she implies, does not focus on actual events, but on events that, although fictive, are "natural", that is, informed by the same laws that govern the realm of historical particularity. Likewise, in 1792 Mary Hays entitled her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* using the same label in the preface. However, a few lines later she acknowledges that it is a work of fiction (Hays 1996: 3). And in 1800, in her preface to *Castle Rackrent,* written with her father, Maria Edgeworth seems to follow the example set by Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*, resorting to the opposition between "history" and "biography or memoirs". While the former, concentrating on public events, does not provide access to individual feelings, the latter can help us "form a just estimate of the real rewards of virtue, or the real punishments of vice". It is notable, moreover, that Edgeworth associates her work with a well-established tradition of empirical writing:

> Some may perhaps imagine that the value of biography depends upon the judgment and taste of the biographer; but on the contrary it may be maintained, that the merits of the biographer are inversely as the extent of his intellectual powers and of literary talents. A plain unvarnished tale is preferable to the most highly ornamented narrative […] The author of the following memoirs has upon these grounds fair claims to the public favour and attention… (Edgeworth 2019: 18).

Time has passed, however. On the one hand, Edgeworth's ironic reluctance to acknowledge the nature of her work still conveys some emphasis on its foundation in truth minimizing that *Castle Rackrent* is ultimately a work of fiction. Consistently, her satirical portrait of the life of the landed gentry in Ireland is meant in fact to bring to public attention a state of moral decline: "Those who were acquainted with the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago, will want no evidence of the truth of honest Thady's narrative" (Edgeworth 2019: 19). On the other hand, Edgeworth's use of an empirical rhetoric as a device of authentication – the equation of reliability and simplicity of style still echoing the stylistic prescriptions of the Royal Society – occurs within a system of genres that is by now deeply entrenched and owes much to Fielding and Richardson. After the 1740s the language of pseudo-historicity that characterized early experiments with realism became more and more ironical. Judging by these examples, contingent on social rather than strictly epistemological factors, it seems to evince women writers' precarious standing. Less authoritative than their male counterparts, and especially aware of the bad reputation of the new genre – read by young women that were considered vulnerable to the arousing, delusive power of fiction – these writers wanted to stress that the novel was a reliable tool for understanding human nature and social intercourse. Eliza Haywood's claim to a special expertise in "love" at the beginning of the century has by now given way to a special emphasis on the factual underpinnings of fiction.

Unlike writers, critics were not so reluctant to acknowledge the fictionality of the new genre, so much so that the notion of "romance" survived as an inclusive category or became interchangeable with "novel", with an all-encompassing derogation of fiction or an attenuation of its self-proclaimed beneficial effects – and an intimation that fiction was in fact irretrievably fictive. In 1713, in *A Sermon Preached to Young Persons,* minister John Nesbitt warned that the "Authority of the Sacred Writings" was on the wane, because "young persons […] imploy their Time in reading Novels, Romances, Plays, and other such like writings, which corrupt the Mind, and greatly contribute to the Increase both of loose Principles, and profane Practices among us" (Nesbitt 2009: 277). At this stage, however, the meaning of "novel" has not yet evolved. Novels are short narratives, inspired by the French *nouvelle* and permeated by

aristocratic values, that deal with love intrigues and whose settings are closer to ordinary life than the fantastic sceneries of romance. Not having a specific epistemological agenda, they are grouped with all kinds of fictitious writings, including plays. This view can also be found in a 1740 sermon by George Whitefield, which warns the public against "Plays, Novels, and Romances" (Whitefield 2013: 157).

Ministers' hostility to fiction, strongly echoing Puritan warnings, is still fervent as late as 1794, as shown by John Kendall's *Remarks on the Prevailing Custom of Attending Stage Entertainments: Also on the Present Taste for reading Romances and Novels*. According to Kendall, novels and romances constitute one threat, although he seems to imply that "novels" are part of a specific wave of aesthetic consumption: "Novels, and other books calculated to afford diversion and entertainment; the sale and hire of which make a considerable part of the business of a book-seller, in most parts of the nation" (Kendall 1815: 406). Subsequent warnings from clergymen or authors of spiritual autobiographies show the emergence of the "novel" as a prominent genre, but they also tend to use the term as an umbrella term for all fiction. In 1796, William Jones remarked that "idle novels arise, to feed upon public folly; as worms breed in public flesh, and then live upon it" (Jones 1810: 261). In the same year, Hester Rogers wrote that "Dress, novels, plays, cards, assemblies, and balls, took up most of my time, so that my mother began to fear the consequences of my living so much above my station in life" (Rogers 1837: 14). In 1797, Thomas Gisborne equated "reading romances" and "reading novels", a practice that overstimulated feelings and misled young women into marrying the wrong man (Gisborne 1797: 216-217).

This strain of the anti-novelistic discourse showcased the existence of an increasingly popular, therefore highly threatening genre without making sharp distinctions. It blurred the boundaries between traditional Puritanical attacks on popular entertainment and the eighteenth-century preoccupation with a new experience of readerly involvement. Novels and romances were often equated, even in works specifically devoted to literature preoccupied with the delusions that fiction could instill into the minds of young readers. In an essay published in *The World* in 1754, Richard Berenger warns readers about "putting ROMANCES into the hands of young ladies […] being a sort of writing that abounds in characters nowhere to be

found", and he draws attention to "the ensnaring practice of reading NOVELS and ROMANCES" (Berenger 1828: 138): a distinction that seems merely accidental, the effects of fiction being invariably negative. Likewise, in 1773, Hester Chapone, the author of *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, preferred essays to fiction, whose effects are dangerous independently of genres: "the greatest care", writes Chapone, "should be taken in the choice of those *fictitious stories* that so enchant the mind – most of which tend to inflame the passions of youth […] add to this, that both the writing and sentiments of most novels and romances are such as are only proper to vitiate your style, and to mislead your heart and understanding" (Chapone 2013: 204)[4]. The target of Chapone is fiction as a whole, including both novels and romances, although her concern was certainly caused by the rise of a new consumption culture.

Nevertheless, such attacks on fiction are indicative of a set of interconnected transformations: a relatively broader readership has come into being, the rise of the public sphere has enabled debates over the role of fiction in civil society, and more and more works have been written that purport to focus on familiar contexts and events for the benefit of the audience, thus making the question of the nature and purpose of fiction far more relevant. Moreover, a new narrative technology has coalesced, one that – as contemporary reactions to *Pamela* and the increasing practice of silent reading document – allows a higher degree of readerly involvement[5]. Other responses to these changes showed a stronger awareness of the novelty of contemporary fiction, which constituted, at least potentially, a new tool for instruction, but also a new danger. It required, therefore, categories fit for a proper comprehension of its features. It is notable that, taking his cue from Fielding himself, the author of this anonymous review of *Tom Jones* begins by explaining its nature:

A book having been lately published, which has given great Amusement, and, we hope, Instruction to the polite Part of the Town, we think ourselves obliged to give our readers some Account of it.

[4] In Nixon 2009: 267.

[5] On this aspect, see Loretelli 2010, which focuses on silent reading and the immersive experience it provided.

It is entitled, *The History of TOM JONES*, a *Foundling*, by Henry Fielding, Esq; being a novel, or prose epick composition, and calculated to recommend religion and virtue, to shew the bad consequences of indiscretion, and to set several kinds of vice in their most deformed and shocking light. This piece, like all such good compositions, consists of a principal history, and a great many episodes or incidents; all which arise naturally from the subject, and contribute towards carrying on the chief plot or design[6].

This is both an assessment and a definition. The reviewer is not only trying to explain why *Tom Jones* is good, but also what *Tom Jones* is, echoing Fielding's own multifaceted definition in a way that aggravates its self-contradictions. His words evince, however, that a term is needed to identify the new province of writing with some degree of precision, and in doing so they echo Fielding's own words. On the one hand, in fact, the narrator of *Tom Jones* targets the novel as a consumption genre, thus revamping the contrast between high and low culture that was part of the Augustan outlook in an attempt to discipline the practice of fictional reading[7]. On the other hand, he offhandedly places his own work in the problematic jurisdiction of the novel – "But to let my reader into a secret, this knowledge of upper life, though very necessary for preventing mistakes, is no very great resource to a writer whose province is comedy, or that kind of novels which, like this I am writing, is of the comic class" (Fielding 1996: 649), thus suggesting, quite deviously, that his own is *a different kind of novel*. The anonymous reviewer seems to have promptly followed this suggestion, equating epic with the novel, a paradoxical definition that takes one further step in updating the meaning of the term.

---

[6] *The London Magazine, Or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, Volume 18, February 1749: 51.

[7] "What else is the subject of all the romances, novels, plays, and poems, with which the stalls abound" (Fielding 1996: 30); "a swarm of foolish novels and monstrous romances will be produced, either to the great impoverishing of booksellers, or to the great loss of time and depravation of morals in the reader" (422); "This young fellow lay in bed reading one of Mrs Behn's novels; for he had been instructed by a friend that he would find no more effectual method of recommending himself to the ladies than the improving his understanding… I am so far from desiring to exhibit such pictures to the public, that I would wish to draw a curtain over those that have been lately set forth in certain French novels; very bungling copies of which have been presented us here under the name of translations" (p. 458).

The relation between *Tom Jones* and its anonymous reviewer exemplifies, and probably established, a pattern that would prove durable. Fielding ultimately calls *Tom Jones* a novel, but alerts us to how dangerous and sloppy novels can be; likewise, the reviewer calls *Tom Jones* a novel, but he also lists its distinctive features to warn us against bad fiction. This contradictory attitude voices a core problem in the process of terminological reinvention: the need for a new term – with "novel" being the most palatable candidate – coexisted with the awareness that that term was already attached to a host of questionable books. One key component of what we now regard as seminal novels was, in other words, their own elaboration of the anti-novelistic discourse, which can also be found in *Pamela*, especially in Mr. B.'s metafictional reference to his and Pamela's story as a "novel" (Richardson 2001: 232). On the one hand, therefore, the word "novel" was a serviceable one, insofar as it defined narratives that focused on more familiar events than the traditional, pseudo-historical or mythological events of romances: narratives that dealt with moral problems closer to the everyday experience of young readers – such as the lures and dangers of sensual pleasure – and could immediately and easily be identified as "new". On the other hand, at mid-century novels were precisely what authors in search of elevation were derogating – while at the same time, however, appropriating to spice their own works. Unlike the strand of the anti-novelistic discourse that equated "novels" and "romances", Fielding and his reviewer meant both to dignify the new kind of fiction and to find a specific name for it[8]; inevitably, however, they had to come to terms with the fact that the only word available was tied to narratives that in spite of appearing "new" and having features in common with *Tom Jones* were also morally and artistically questionable.

In subsequent theoretical efforts, the idea of the novel as a potentially serious genre would be further developed. Two terminological tendencies emerged: one was external to novelistic discourse and was informed by an uncompromising need for social and aesthetic regulation, and targeted contemporary fiction

[8] For a reading of the origins of the novel as a process of cultural elevation that entails value judgment and the establishment – within novelistic writing itself – of a new hierarchy of fiction, see Warner 1998.

as a whole. The other was sympathetic – and often internal – to novelistic discourse and aimed at replicating the opposition between high and low literature within the emergent culture of the novel. In some cases, this last tendency resulted in a distinction between good and bad novels, in others in a distinction between novels and good examples of recent fictional writing. Acknowledging the existence of a new genre that could be beneficial to the public did not necessarily entail naming it, because the term "novel" was charged with negative overtones.

That novels could also be aesthetically sophisticated is suggested by Smollett in his 1753 Dedication to *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, in which he provided a definition that presupposes *Tom Jones* rather than *Love in Excess*:

> A Novel is a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of an uniform plan, and general occurrence, to which every individual is subservient. But this plan cannot be executed with propriety, probability or success, without a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene by virtue of its own importance (Smollett 1978: 2-3).

Building on Fielding's works and pushing his terminological experiment a bit further, Smollett theorizes what the novel is with the aid of neoclassical concepts and makes it explicit that, much like old romances, the novel can also be lengthy. And its size can be put to good use insofar as it provides an exhaustive picture of life.

Smollett's attitude, however, was still quite uncommon. In 1750, for example, Samuel Johnson, in his famous *Rambler* essay on fiction, goes so far as to admit that by virtue of its capacity to portray "passions and qualities which are really to be found in mankind" the new species of writing can be beneficial; however, he is reluctant to name it, being probably wary of the negative meanings associated to "novel". He speaks of "the works of fiction", "this kind of writing", and "these familiar romances" (Johnson 1750: 19)[9]. A certain reluctance to use the term can be found also in other critics. In 1750, in discussing *Pamela* Peter Shaw highlights that "there are swarms

[9] In his *Dictionary*, Johnson defines the novel as "a small tale".

of Moral Romances" (Shaw 1750: 14) and that "romances in general" are usually filled with "absurd, strained Characters" (p. 15). *Pamela*, nevertheless, "contains just Sentiments, and holds an Example of virtue and Honour", although "by no means […] deserves to be recommended from the Pulpit", being "too licentious" (p. 15).

Likewise, other critics distinguished between high and low fiction, disparaging the novel and evading the task of defining the acceptable examples of the new kind of writing. The novel was dismissed as a corruptive, disreputable genre, with which other new, but far more authoritative works should not be confused. The anonymous author of *An Essay on the New Species of Writing founded by Mr. Fielding* – probably Francis Coventry – makes a distinction between the latter's "new Species of Writing" and the menacing wave of contemporary fiction. Before Fielding published his works, he argues, "the World had been pester'd with Volumes, commonly known by the Name of Romances, or Novels, Tales, &c., filled with any thing which the wildest imagination could suggest" (Anon. 1751: 13). To avoid misunderstandings, he calls Fielding's work "this new kind of Biography" (p. 16) and "this Sort of Writing" (p. 18). In 1750, in his review of *Peregrine Pickle*, John Cleland complains about "that flood of novels, tales, romances, and other monsters of the imagination, which have been either wretchedly translated, or even more unhappily imitated, from the *French*" (Cleland 1751: 355), and remarks that the invasion of bad fiction has finally elicited a response in English writers – namely, Fielding, Smollett, and Sarah Fielding – who have invented a more useful kind of fiction, although still in need of a proper label:

> The necessity then of borrowing from truth its colour at least, in favour of fiction, a point so justly recommended by *Horace*, and common sense, occurred, at length, to some of our writers, who tried to experiment with success. To this new species of writing, the title of *biography*, humorously, and of course not improperly, assumed by the first ingenious author, has been however too lightly continued, since it certainly conveys a false idea. Pictures of fancy are not called portrait painting, and no body who distinguishes terms will allow the title of *biographer*, which can only mean a writer of real lives […] to be well applied to the authors of *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, *David Simple, Etc.*, who may be more justly styled comic-romance-writers. This piece of verbal criticism is the less insignificant, as it is owing to the mistake of a writer of great wit and humour, who likewise

calls this a *life-writing* age, which may be true too, and yet not applicable to it, on most of the examples he quotes for the grounds of this *epithet*.
If this epithet too is used by way of ridiculing, or exploding this species of writing […] the censure does not seem intirely warranted. There are perhaps no works of entertainment more susceptible of improvement or public utility, than such as are thus calculated to convey instruction, under the passport of amusement […]
Whereas romances and novels which turn upon characters out of nature, monsters of perfection, feats of chivalry, fairy-enchantments, and the whole train of the marvelous absurd, transport the reader unprofitably into the clouds, where he is sure to find no solid footing… (pp. 355-357).

Cleland foregrounds the terminological problems raised by the emergence of the new kind of narrative – "biography" is unsuitable for a work of fiction, although anchored in experience – and distinguishes between this new form and the "novel", equating the latter to "romance" and grouping it with the multitude of works that are not anchored in experience and have no pedagogical value. His terminological effort is meant, therefore, to establish distinctions between fiction and non-fiction – thus overcoming the ambivalence of the pseudo-empirical rhetoric – and to mark the boundaries of truly legitimate fiction, the novel being a disreputable companion with which "the new species of writing" should not be associated. The bad reputation of the novel is further evinced by a 1752 essay by John Hawkesworth which contains a classification of prose genres, both factual and fictional. The fictional genres are "the epic poem, "old romance" and "the novel", which "bears a nearer resemblance to truth" and "is confined within the narrower bounds of probability". In novels, Hawkesworth adds, "The distress is indeed frequently tender, but the narrative often stands still; the lovers compliment each other in tedious letters and set speeches, trivial circumstances are enumerated with a minute exactness and the reader is wearied with languid descriptions and impertinent declamation" (Hawkesworth 1752: 22).

The 1750s were therefore characterized by competing experiments with terminology, which paved the way for subsequent moves. On the one hand, Smollett seeks to modify the meaning of "novel" by trying to introduce a new genre label while also searching for common ground between landmark works, such as Fielding's and Richardson's, and preexisting transitional fiction. Cleland and

Johnson are more cautious – Fielding himself being, as we have seen, ambivalent. They feel that new works of fiction meant for the benefit of the public should be subsumed under a different category than that of the novel. Cleland debunks pseudo-empirical terms such as "biography", but does not provide alternative terms, and Johnson chooses to minimize the discontinuity between old and new romances. The landscape of contemporary fiction was, however, in flux: the long-term success of works of fiction that emphasized their own novelty – such as *Pamela* and *Tom Jones* – and of the other works that were written in imitation of them would make it more urgent to find a stable and suitable generic category. Moreover, the tidal wave of immersive fiction that used the narrative techniques of realism in questionable ways appeared dangerous and in need of regulation. And along with disciplining went understanding: while, as we have seen, a strain of the anti-novelistic discourse overlooked distinctions between the novel and romance, other commentators recognized that something had changed in the realm of prose fiction in the last few decades. The nature of the new genre became clearer in formal as well as historical terms and the need for a stable genre label became more urgent. In 1760, for instance, in the prologue to *Polly Honeycombe, a Dramatic Novel of one Act* – an example of the increasing popularity of the new genre – George Colman calls the novel "the younger Sister of Romance", highlighting that its sentimentality and its incidents ("plot, and elopement, passion, rape, and rapture") can cast a powerful spell on young, naive female readers (Colman 1761: [xii]). While Colman's idea of the novel also applies to the early eighteenth-century novels influenced by French *nouvelles*, the year in which he published his work suggests that what he had in mind were *Pamela, Clarissa*, and the novels they inspired. One of his characters, Polly – a Quixotic heroine like Arabella in *The Female Quixote* – asks: "D'ye think I'm as handsome as *Clarissa*, or *Clementina*, or *Pamela*, or *Sophy Western*, or *Amelia*, or *Narcissa*, or –" (p. 17).

With increasing sharpness, "novel reading" was presented as an unprecedented problem. The production of novels was seen as an overwhelming deluge of formulaic works that threatened to drown morality and decorum and cloud the minds of younger readers, especially young women. Novels were not works of art, but marketable, pleasurable commodities. In 1787, an anonymous article

in the *Gentleman's magazine* proposed that their consumption should be taxed[10]. In 1766, in his *Sermons to Young Women*, James Fordyce warned female readers against the dangers that attended the consumption of novels, saving only a fraction of incomparable works, represented by *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. In his view, the novel's "scenes of pleasure and passion" were "improper […] to behold" (Fordyce 1767: 149) and the feelings they portrayed were excessive and unrefined. Significantly, Fordyce is nostalgic about traditional fiction: "In the Old Romance the passion appeared with all its enthusiasm […] The men were sincere, magnanimous, and noble; the women were patterns of chastity, dignity, and affection" (p. 150). In 1780, William Jones condemned the overproduction of novels, written after the fashion, teeming with superfluous and improbable incidents, devoid of originality, harmful to virtue and religion, and all the more reproachable in that they dared present themselves as beneficial to the public: "These tricks are put upon the public every day, and they take those for their benefactor who thus impose upon them" (Jones 1810: 308). Consonant with this attack are those mounted in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft, who regarded the consumption of novels as a dangerous distraction[11], and in 1795 by Ann Wingrove, who exemplifies the dangers of "reading a novel" through the story of a young woman who, after reading *Sir Charles Grandison*, rejected all her suitors (Wingrove 1795: 1-14). Even Maria Edgeworth expressed, in 1798, similar opinions: "We know, from common experience, the effects which are produced upon the female mind by immoderate novel-reading" (Edgeworth

[10] "Novels have been long and frequently regarded not as being merely useless to society, but even as pernicious, from the very indifferent morality, and ridiculous way of thinking, which they almost generally inculcate. Why then, in the name of common sense, should such an useless and pernicious commodity, with which we are over-run, go duty-free, while the really useful necessar[ies] of life [are] taxed to the utmost extent? A tax on books of this description (for books of real utility should ever be circulated as free as air) would bring in a very considerable sum for the service of the Government, without being levied on the poor or the industrious", R. R. E., *Gentleman's Magazine*, no. 57 (December 1787), pp. 1048-9.

[11] Wollstonecraft warned women against the "reveries of the stupid novelists", who "describe meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties" (Wollstonecraft 1792: 268).

1815: 426-427)[12]. Especially in manuals of conduct, novel reading was deprecated. The new fiction was guilty of appealing to the senses more vividly, thus distracting from daily duties. By presenting far-fetched characters, moreover, novels could lead to wrong decisions, especially when it came to choosing a husband. These criticisms were not Puritanical commonplaces: what was at stake was the public function of new fiction in the face of immoderate consumption, a function defended by ambitious novelists and hotly discussed by commentators, theorists, and sermonizers.

Ubiquitous attacks on the novel arguably played a part in its tentative canonization. They further encouraged the establishment of a hierarchy within the field of novelistic writing, urging writers to elaborate on available definitions. This is not surprising: the works that closed the prehistory of the novel internalized, and to a large extent articulated for subsequent writers, what we now call the novel/romance dichotomy, although they could not yet stand on firm terminological ground. The novel has always tried to canonize itself by derogating fictional conventions that it was in fact appropriating. These attempts at self-canonization set a standard of moral and aesthetic evaluation that could also be used in critical discourse. In 1785, Henry Mackenzie complained about "the degradation" and "the debasement" of the novel. According to Mackenzie, novelistic writing requires no fewer skills than epic and drama; being, however, open to the judgment of all, "because it represents domestic scenes and situations in private life, in the execution of which any man may detect errors" (Mackenzie 1786: 77), it has been attempted by many authors, who have debased it. In 1790, Catharine Macaulay argued that "to confine literary occupation entirely to novels, and the lighter parts of the *belle lettres*, is a perversion of reason and common sense" (Macaulay 2014: 148) showing mixed feelings towards Richardson, Fielding, and Burney, whose artistic strengths she was nevertheless willing to acknowledge. Novelists, argues Macaulay, "are in general ranged on the side of virtue, but they are apt to deceive"; she concedes, however, that there are several novels "which are not devoid of the power of pleasing and improving" (p. 148). A division of novelistic writing into sub-categories that

[12] Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, "Books"; vol. 1 of *Practical Education*, 1798, 250.

distinguish between various registers and moral purposes was also advanced by Erasmus Darwin in 1797. Darwin divides "novels or romances" into three classes: "the serious, the humorous, and the amorous". "Serious" novels, which can "convey instruction in the most agreeable and forceable manner" include *Robinson Crusoe* and "modern novels" such as *Evelina*, *Cecilia,* and *Camilla*, while "humorous" novels include *Gil Blas* and *Tom Jones* (Darwin: 1797: 33). Despite his lack of historical focus, Darwin contributed to the development of the category by acknowledging that the genre could also be used in a committed fashion.

Moreover, although most debates on the new species of writing addressed its dangers, an independent discourse on its history developed, laying new ground for the stabilization of the meaning of "novel". Due to the density of examples, which made it easier to make distinctions between the present and the past, a sharper historical awareness was able to set in. In 1766, Richard Hurd asked "What are we to think of those *novels* or *romances* as they are called, that is, fables constructed on some private and familiar subject, which have been so current, of late, through all Europe?" (Hurd 1766: 21). Hurd was committed to prescriptive poetics and was interested in the novel only as a case of deviancy, but he felt compelled to acknowledge the existence of a new kind of prose narrative (although his uncertainty between "novel" and "romance" evinces his traditionalist mindset). In *The Progress of Romance* by Clara Reeve, published in 1785, the distinction between "novel" and "romance" seems, instead, a well-established one, or it seems high time to establish it permanently – and it should not be underestimated that Reeve was a novelist herself, busy with the task of reforming the newborn genre of the Gothic. "No writings are more different than the ancient *Romance* and the modern *Novel*, yet they are frequently confounded together, and mistaken for each other" (Reeve 1930: 7), argues Reeve by means of her characters Hortensius, Sophronia, and Euphrasia. She also adds that

> The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the time in which it is written. The romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened or is likely to happen. – The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes […] and the

perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joy and distresses, of the person in the story, as if they were our own (p. 111).

Reeve reviews various usages of the terms "novel" and "romance" and discusses examples of novelistic writing, ranging from Behn to Richardson and Fielding. Her effort to contain the volatility of the category is part of a broader, multifarious attempt to understand the new genre. With an all-inclusive perspective that marks a crucial step in the process of terminological reinvention, Reeve thinks in moral, formal, and historical terms. And although she is aware of the dangers of fiction, she ultimately aims at elevating the novel, whose vivid depiction of domestic life, which powerfully appeals to feeling, can be made fruitful.

But the anti-novelistic discourse was far from extinguished. A similar perspective could also be used to disparage the novel. In 1787, George Canning highlighted that "NOVEL-WRITING" was the younger sister of ROMANCE", and that "the Fiction of ROMANCE is restricted by no fetters or reason, or of truth" (Canning 1787, in Griffin 1788: 295). Nevertheless, he also threw into relief the many features that the romance and the novel had in common, echoing key arguments of the anti-novelistic discourse: too many works of fiction have been produced, and even the highest accomplishments in the art of novel writing, *Tom Jones* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, may encourage improper behaviour in young readers. Hugh Blair was like-minded. Like Reeve, he traces the history of the "familiar novel" from its pre-Christian roots, underscoring the strengths of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, and *Clarissa*, but concluding that

The trivial performances which daily appear in public under the title of Lives, Adventures, and Histories, by anonymous Authors, if they be often innocent, yet are most commonly insipid; and, though in general it ought to be admitted that Characteristical Novels, formed upon Nature and upon Life, without extravagance, and without licentiousness, might furnish an agreeable and useful entertainment to the mind; yet considering the manner in which these writings, have been, for the most part, conducted, it must also be confessed, that they oftener tend to dissipation and idleness, than to any good purpose. Let us now therefore make our retreat from these regions of fiction. (Blair 1783: 102)

In the same year (1783), in his *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, James Beattie set forth a historical taxonomy of "the new romance", alerting the public: although "a few […] of the best may be friendly to good taste and good morals", wrote Beattie, "romances are a dangerous recreation" (Beattie 1783: 573).

At this stage, the distinction between the novel and the romance has been developed on the historical plane, concomitantly with an appraisal of the empirical component of the former, which grounds its claims to public improvement. However, aesthetic and moral concerns are still enmeshed. Acknowledging the existence of that relatively new genre which is the novel, also entails acknowledging that most of its incarnations are dangerous and that their moving portrayal of reality can often be misleading. "Novel reading" and "novel writing" are ongoing, unmanageable trends that are spawning a deluge of groundless narratives, threatening the established social order and calling for regulation. Their dangers lie in what can also be seen as their strengths. Their realism threatens to substitute reality with an unreliable, though vivid, simulacrum, and their focus on sensibility – which could afford a deeper knowledge of the passions – can spoil feeling and cloud judgment. Nevertheless, disciplining the new genre entailed understanding it, a process fuelled by the expansion of empiricism. Moreover, attempts at definition were crucial for those who, like Fielding, Richardson, and Clara Reeve, believed in the civilizing power of fiction. The new forms of the anti-novelistic discourse urged novelists to elaborate on the good fiction/bad fiction dichotomy. There is no need to stress that this process also involved a self-conscious work with form. As *Northanger Abbey* shows, at the beginning of the nineteenth century an ambitious novelist like Jane Austen was still interested in redefining the novel, both conceptually and practically.

Nevertheless, the meaning of the term remained volatile, context-bound. The novel was both an ambitious genre that sought to disentangle itself from the escapist plots of romance to help readers navigate contemporary experience, and a larger family of works that set improbable events against a relatively familiar backdrop, appealing to the senses and blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. This state of affairs survived the eighteenth century. For the canonization of novel writing and reading to be fully accomplished, many other decades had to pass, and it would

remain a preoccupation of writers such as Walter Scott, George Eliot, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf. Resolved to capture contemporary life, to escape the constraints of ossified conventions, and, with increasing fervour, to vindicate the power of the aesthetic, novelists struggled (and still struggle) to set their works apart from the disreputable mass of contemporary fiction.

References

Anon., 1751, *An Essay on the New Species of Writing Founded by Mr. Fielding*, London.

Anon. [R. R. E.], *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 62, London 1787, pp. 1048-9.

Berenger, Richard, [1754] 1834, *The World 79,* Thursday, July 4, in Richard Berenger*et al.*, *The British Essayists: Containing the Spectator, Tatler, Guardian, Rambler, Idler, Adventurer, Connoisseur, Mirror, Lounger, World, Observer, Knox's Essays, Olla Podrida, and Microcosm,* London, vol. 4.

Beattie, James, 1738, *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, London.

Blair, Hugh, 1783, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Dublin, vol. 2 ("Fictitious History").

Burnett, Monboddo, Lord James, 1776, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language,* London*,* vol. 3.

Canning, George, 1787, *The Microcosm* 26 (May 14).

Chapone, Esther, 2013, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Cleland, John, 1751, Review of Peregrine Pickle, *The Monthly Review* 4, London: 355-358.

Colman, George, 1761, *Polly Honeycombe, a Dramatic Novel of one Act*, London.

Darwin, Erasmus, 1797, *A Plan for the Conduct of Private Education in Boarding Schools*, London.

Day, Geoffrey, 1987*, From Fiction to the Novel*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

Davis, Lennard J., 1983, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Defoe, Daniel, 1722, *Moll Flanders*, London.

Edgeworth, Maria and Edgeworth, Richard Lovell, 1815, *Essays on Practical Education: In Two Volumes*, London, vol. 1.

Edgeworth, Maria, 2019, *Castle Rackrent*, Broadview, Peterborough, Ontario.

Fielding, Henry, 1742, *Joseph Andrews*, London.

FIELDING, HENRY, [1749] 1996, *Tom Jones*, ed. By John Bender, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

FORDYCE, JAMES, [1766] 1767, *Sermons to Young* Women, London, vol. 1.

GALLAWAY, W. F., 1940, "The Conservative Attitude toward Fiction, 1770-1830", *PMLA* 55: 1041-59.

GISBORNE, THOMAS, 1797, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, London.

GRIFFIN, GREGORY *et. al.*, 1788, *The Microcosm: A Periodical Work*, London.

HAWKESWORTH, JOHN, 1752, "Of the different kinds of narrative, and why they are universally read", in *The Adventurer*, London, vol. I: 19-24.

HAYS, MARY, [1792] 1996, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, ed. Eleanor Ty, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

HURD, RICHARD, 1766, *A Dissertation on the Idea of Universal Poetry*, London.

JOHNSON, SAMUEL, 1750, *The Rambler*, Rambler No. 4, Saturday, 31 March, London. Available on line at: http://www.yalejohnson.com/frontend/sda_viewer?n=106854.

JONES, WILLIAM, [1796] 1810, *The Nature: Uses, Dangers, Sufferings, and Preservatives, of the Human Imagination. A Sermon*, in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. William Jones*, London, vol. 4.

JONES, WILLIAM, [1796] 1810, "On Novels", in *Letters from a Tutor to his Pupils*, in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. William Jones*, London, vol. 5.

KENDALL, JOHN, [1794] 1815, *Memoirs of the Lives and Religious Experience of John Kendall*, London.

KELLY, GARY, 1985, "'This Pestiferous Reading': The Social Basis of Reaction Against The Novel in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Man and Nature*, vol. 4: 183-194.

LORETELLI, ROSAMARIA, 2010, *L'invenzione del romanzo. Dall'oralità alla lettura silenziosa*, Laterza, Bari.

MACAULAY, CATHERINE, [1790] 2014, *Letters on Education*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

MACKENZIE, HENRY, [1785] 1786, *The Lounger* 20, 18 June, in *The Lounger. A Periodical Paper*, Edinburgh.

MCKEON, MICHAEL, 1987, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740.* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

MOLESWORTH, JESSE, 2010, *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, Magic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

NESBITT, JOHN, [1713] 2009, *A Sermon Preached to Young Persons,* excerpted in Nixon 2009: 277.

NIXON, CHERYL C. (ed.), 2009, *Novel Definitions. An Anthology of*

Commentary on the Novel, 1688-1815, Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ontario.

REEVE, CLARA, [1785] 1930, *The progress of romance and The history of Charoba, queen of Aegypt, reproduced from the Colchester edition of 1785, with a bibliographical note by Esther M. McGill*, The New York Facsimile Society, New York.

RICHARDSON, SAMUEL, 1747, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*, vol. 1.

RICHARDSON, SAMUEL, [1740] 2001, *Pamela*, ed. by Thomas Keymer, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

ROGERS, HESTER ANN, [1796] 1837, *Account of the Experience of Esther Ann Rogers*, New York.

ROGERS, WINFIELD. H., 1934, "The Reaction against Melodramatic Sentimentality in the English Novel", *PMLA* 49: 98-123.

SCOTT, SARAH, [1766] 1996, *The History of Sir George Ellison*, University Press of Kentucky.

SHAW, PETER, 1750, "Of Writings designed to improve morality", in *The Reflector: Representing Human Affairs, as They are: And May be Improved*, London.

SHERMAN, SANDRA, 2005, *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century: Accounting for Defoe*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

SMOLLETT, TOBIAS, [1753]1978, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, ed. with an introduction by Damian Grant, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

TINNON, TAYLOR JOHN, 1943, *Early Opposition to the English Novel*, Kings Crown Press, New York.

WARNER, WILLIAM, 1998, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

WATT, IAN, 1957, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies on Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

WHITEFIELD, GEORGE, [1740] 2013, *Sermons of George Whitefield*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass.

WINGROVE, ANN, 1795, "On Reading Novels", in *Letters, Moral and Entertaining*, London.

WILLIAMS, IOAN (ed), 1970, *Novel and Romance 1100-1800: A Documentary Record*, Routledge, London.

WOLLSTONECRAFT, MARY, 1792, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, London.