The Eighteenth-Century Invention of Literary Suspense

Rosamaria Loretelli

Abstract
In the last thirty years, scholars have been emphasizing the novelty of many aspects of eighteenth-century thinking and feeling. Articles and books have drawn attention, for example, to the new language of music and of politics, the new ways of administering justice, and the new idea of men and women. Book titles bearing the word "Invention" have consequently proliferated: *The Invention of History* (Stephen Bann 1990); *The Invention of Autonomy* (J.B. Schneewind 1998); *The Invention of Art* (Larry Shiner 2001); *Inventing Human Rights* (Lynn Hunt 2007); and *L'invenzione della libertà di stampa* (Edoardo Tortarolo 2011) among others.
This article maintains that among the many 'inventions' the eighteenth century can claim as its own, the invention of suspense is certainly not the least important. After bringing evidence of an increasing presence of the word in novels and periodical essays, the article shows how, through trial and error, novelists over the century developed a narrative technique which aroused suspense in readers. The essay relates this technique to the practice of individual and silent reading, which became prevalent precisely in the eighteenth century. This new narrative form contributed to the dissemination of a sense of future time, which Novalis would later define as the capacity "to notice the secret connections between past and future", seeing it as an eighteenth-century acquisition.

Keywords: Suspense, History of Time, Eighteenth-Century Narrative Theories and Forms.

> The poet artfully obstructs the flow of action,
> excites our curiosity, plays with our conjectures…
>
> L. S. Vygotskij, *Art as a Catharsis*

1. The psychology of suspense and eighteenth-century meanings of the word

In a painting by Walter Richard Sickert (1862-1942), a woman

Textus 3-2019, pp. 115-134
ISSN 1824-3967

is sitting on a chair, with her legs crossed and her face turned upwards, looking at something – perhaps a clock – which remains invisible on the mantlepiece. The painting is titled *Suspense,* but nothing would indicate its subject were it not for the title. The emotion of suspense is difficult to represent in a picture, which is the art of the figures and colours in space, as Lessing described it in *Laocoon* (Lessing [1766] 1948: XVI, 89), and does not allow for duration. Suspense is an emotion which can be properly conveyed only by media such as those which have time embedded in their own fabric, including, and perhaps most importantly, by narrative.

We cannot ignore, however, that written narrative was not always able to arouse suspense in readers, but acquired that ability at a certain point in history. In the present article, I will argue that this happened in the course of the eighteenth century[1]. As it will emerge, suspense is not simply a narrative form devoid of content, but it conveys the experience of future time to readers. Therefore, the 'invention' of suspense in the eighteenth century has a wider and more relevant cultural meaning.

Before starting to consider suspense historically, however, it is worth checking its definition in a modern dictionary, and delineating its characteristics from a psychological point of view. In *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (1980), SUSPENSE is defined as "the state of being uncertain, as in awaiting a decision, usually characterised by some anxiety or apprehension". Uncertainty, awaiting and anxiety, the features highlighted in this definition, are the psychological postures involved in suspense. This emotion arises when one is expecting an event (or a piece of information) which is felt to be important and whose outcome is uncertain. Suspense therefore implies awaiting; and awaiting implies time – a span of time. For this reason, of course, the visual arts traditionally found

[1] In the present article I will not tackle an aspect which, although pertinent to suspense, would induce us to shift our perspective and deviate from our line of reasoning. It is the new eighteenth-century assessment of curiosity in science and philosophy. For a perspective on curiosity in terms of cultural history, see, among the by now many works on the subject, Benedict 2001 and Burke 2000: chapter 5. I have partly dealt with curiosity and the reader's suspense in aesthetics in Loretelli 2000 and in Loretelli 2009.

it difficult to represent this emotion before they developed recent techniques, such as performance art[2].

The relation of awaiting and expectation to the human experience of time, of future time, to be precise, was famously brought to light in chapter 28 of Augustine's *Confessio*ns. Much later, in Lecture XXV of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalisis* (Freud [1916-17] 1954-74: vol. XVI) and in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Freud [1925] 1954-74: vol. XX), Sigmund Freud drew attention to anxiety as a corollary to expectation. While in *L'attente*, Paul Fraisse and Francine Orsini (Fraisse and Orsini 1955: 27-39) highlighted another fundamental element of the phenomenology of expectation, namely, delay. Expectation anxiety (in other words, suspense) develops in the "delay between two stimulations", the "stimulation" which gives rise to expectation, and the "stimulation" (be it an event or a piece of information) which puts an end to it. Fraisse and Orsini also added that expectation anxiety vanishes during this delay, if the person feeling it gets distracted from the object of his/her expectation ("il faut rester prêt à l'acte, et sans s'en selaisser détourner"). It would be pointless to offer a specific example here, since we all experience this almost daily.

In brief, suspense is the emotion one feels in the temporal hiatus between the moment when expectation is activated and the moment when this expectation is either satisfied or forgotten. The components of suspense are therefore *curiosity*, about a piece of information or the outcome of an event one is interested in; a condition of *expectation*, which implies a *span* of time during which the *information is delayed,* but the interest in knowing it has not vanished; *uncertainty*; and the feeling of *anxiety*.

In the present article, I will firstly draw attention to the different meanings of the word 'suspense' in eighteenth-century writings; and secondly show how novelists developed, through trial and error, a narrative form that activates the psychological mechanisms of suspense in readers. The feeling of suspense was of course not unknown in previous times, but the word acquires a heightened presence during the eighteenth century, becoming a sort of refrain

[2] Two recent installations about suspenseful time are for example Daniel Pasta, *Top Secret* (2017) and *Pacific time* – Time Flies (Pavillion of Kiribati, 58th International Art Exhibition – Biennale di Venezia, 2019).

towards the end of it. It appears time and time again in journal articles, treatises and novels. Its traditional meaning of suspension of action, decision or information, either completely or almost devoid of emotional connotations, is progressively supplanted by a notion of suspense which increasingly entails a sense of emotion. In addition, suspense becomes a literary concept, a narrative form that projects the reader towards the future, driven by curiosity and expectation. Interstingly enough, this concept and the narrative form which it helps engender are based, as we shall see, on an idea of the act of reading as an individual and silent practice.

In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), the entry for the headword SUSPENSE is lexically represented as "n.s. [*suspens*, French; *suspensus*, Latin] 1. Uncertainty; delay of certainty or determination; indetermination; 2. Act of withholding the judgement; 3 Privation for a time; impediment for a time; 4. Stop in the midst of two opposites"[3]. As an adjective, SUSPENSE is represented as "adj. [*suspensus*, Latin] 1. Held from proceeding; 2. Held in doubt; held in expectation". This second definition is followed by an example in which 'suspense' might be carrying some emotion. It is: "This said, he sat; and expectation held/His looks *suspense*, awaiting who appear'd/ To second or oppose. *Milton*". The word appears also in other entries, such as the entry for DOUBT, whose first meaning is "Uncertainty of mind; suspense; undetermined state of opinion"; the verb TO SATISFY, whose definition number four states: "To free from doubt, perplexity or suspense"; the verbs TO LINGER, whose definition number two is "To hesitate, to be in suspense"; and TO PERPLEX, whose first meaning is: "To disturb with doubtful notions; to entangle; to make anxious; to tease with suspense or ambiguity; to distract; to embarrass; to puzzle". Here, although the word 'anxious' is mentioned in the definition, no emotion is referred to in the examples. It is therefore the traditional meaning which prevails in Johnson's *Dictionary*. In *The Rambler*, however, there are occurrences meaning unemotional delay – such as "After a short s*uspense*" ([Number 123. Tuesday, 21 May 1751] *The Rambler* 1969: IV, 294) – and occurrences whose meaning is more nuanced. Number 181 (Tuesday, 10 December 1751)

[3] The examples in the *Dictionary*, which follow these definitions, represent *suspense* as a delay in time, devoid of emotional connotations.

tackles the "passion" for gambling, and begins with a letter which says: "Sir, I have passed much of my life in disquiet and suspense, and lost many opportunities of advantage by a passion which I have reason to believe prevalent in different degrees over a great part of mankind" (*The Rambler* 1969: vol. V, 187). Number 184 (Saturday, 21 December 1751) deals with the anxiety writers feel when the deadline for handing in an essay is approaching, and with how they try to get rid of that unpleasant feeling: "The mind rejoicing at deliverance on any terms from perplexity and *suspense*" (*The Rambler* 1969: vol. V, 202). Differently, Number 201 (Tuesday, 18 February 1752) discusses business mismanagement, which: "darkens those moments with expectation, *suspense*, uncertainty and resentment which are set aside for pleasure" (*The Rambler* 1969: vol. V, 284). Particularly interesting is, in my opinion, the concluding stanza of *The Vanity of Human Wishes,* which begins: "When then shall Hope and Fear their objects find? / Must dull Suspence [sic] corrupt the stagnant Mind?/"[4]. The meaning of 'suspense' is here traditional. It is a suspension of all physical and mental activity, without any curiosity, expectation, uncertainty or anxiety. There is no projection towards the future. However, it interestingly contains emotion, although of an altogether different type. Suspense here is "dull": under its influence, the mind becomes numb, when not downright depressed.

2. Representing suspense in characters

In the first half of the century, we already find several instances of the presence of the word *suspense* in printed materials of large distribution. I will provide just a few examples from The *Tatler* and *The Spectator*. In *The Tatler* Number 108 (Saturday, 17 December 1709) Joseph Addison has a character exclaim: "While I was in this Suspense, expecting every Moment to see my old Friend Mr. Betterton appear". The man is at the theatre, and is peacefully waiting for the performance to begin. He does not feel anxiety, therefore, but only expectation of something he knows is due to arrive (*The Tatler* 1987: vol. II, 154). In *The Spectator* Number 298 [Steele] of Monday, 11 February 1712, a letter from a girl tells about

[4] I would like to thank Robert DeMaria for having drawn my attention to the importance of this passage.

her several suitors, and at a certain point mentions a clergyman: "I find even among them there are indirect Practices in Relation to Love, and our Treaty is at present a little in Suspence [sic] till some circumstances are cleared" (*The Spectator* 1965: vol. III, 66). The meaning here is traditional. In Number 300 [Steele] (Wednesday, 13 February 1712), two people are said to exchange smart comments when they are in public, which is most of the time. Out of curiosity, their friends never leave them alone, since: "the whole Company stand in the utmost Anxiety and Suspence [sic] for fear of falling into Extremities which they could not be present at" (*The Spectator* 1965: vol. III, 72). In Number 330 [Steele] (Wednesday, 19 March 1712), "a State of Suspence" is mentioned as a period of time during which it has not yet been decided what a child will do in life. Again, the meaning is traditional (*The Spectator* 1965: vol. III, 218). In Number 635, [Grove] (Monday, 20 December 1714), we find: "The other, and that the Ultimate end of Man is the Enjoyment of God beyond which he cannot form a Wish. Dim at best are the Conceptions we have of the Supreme Being who, as it were, keeps his Creature in Suspence, neither discovering, nor hiding himself" (*The Spectator* 1965: vol. V, 172).

The examples might be multiplied, but they would offer no further information. More interesting, in my opinion, is to find the feeling represented in fictional characters. Several instances appear in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. In Letter 41 (Miss Clarissa Harlowe to Miss Howe, Tuesday, March 21), for example, Clarissa relates having received a letter from her mother, in which the lady, with apparent tenderness and covert threatening, tries to convince her to comply with her family's wishes. After reading the letter, Clarissa is expecting at any moment to be summoned to her father's study. She paces her bedroom, sits down and stands up again,

> I walked backward and forward: I threw down with disdain the patterns [materials for dresses her family has given her], now to my closet retired I; then, quitting it, now threw I myself upon the settee; now upon this chair; now upon that and then into one window, then into another – I knew not what to do! – And while I was in this suspense (Richardson 2004: 190).

As we can see, Clarissa's statement that she is in suspense is preceeded by an immersive description of her frantic gestures and

uncontrollable movements, which create an atmosphere of great anxiety.

In Letter 464 ("Mr. Belford to Robert Lovelace Esq., Tuesday, 5 Sept, 9 in the morning, at Mr. Smith's"), Lovelace's friend writes:

> When I read yours of this morning, I could not help pitying you for the account you give of the dreadful suspense you labour under. I wish from my heart all were to end as you are willing to hope: but it will not be; and your suspense, if the worst part of your torment as you say it is, will soon be over; but, alas! In a way you wish not (Richardson 2004: 1336).

Lovelace's unpleasant feeling of suspense will soon be over, as delay and the consequent uncertainty will end with the arrival of news. There will be grief then, but no longer suspense.

In both the above examples, which are in no way exhaustive of the presence of suspenseful situations in Richardson's works (Koehler 2013: 317-338), suspense is intended as a disrupting anxiety felt by the protagonists when waiting for events which determine their lives but which are beyond their control. These scenes present delay and uncertainty, which cause the characters to feel curiosity and expectation anxiety. All the ingredients of real-life suspense are shown as embodied in the fictional characters. Representations of suspenseful expectation in novels multiply throughout the eighteenth century, to become a constant towards the end of it. It should be noted, however, that represented suspense does not automatically activate the actual feeling in readers, as eighteenth-century novelists would soon discover.

3. Arousing suspense in audiences and readers

So much for *lexical occurrence*s and so much, for the moment, for *representations* of suspense. Still, it is worth repeating that represented suspense does not transfer itself automatically to readers and that, in order to arouse this feeling in them, novelists had first to consider their psychological and cognitive responses during the act of reading.

Of course, as I suggested above, the feeling of suspense was not unknown before the eighteenth century, and some characters were *said* to be in the grip of anxiety even in the narratives of the distant

past. However, they were simply *said* to be so, and their feelings were *not* transferred onto the readers. They were transferred to listening audiences, however, through the gestures and real-life delays of the person who read aloud, but not to readers when the practice of silent reading took over.

A short survey will help clarify this point[5]. Medieval storytellers could and did arouse suspense in audiences gathered to listen to their stories, by interrupting their tales and inserting real-life silences and pauses, which enhanced their listeners' curiosity. Although most marks of this practice have disappeared during the act of transcription of these texts, some are still visible. For example, in a passage of the medieval text *Huon de Bordeaux*, the protagonist is ready to wake up a giant whom he intends to challenge. The narration is interrupted at this point and the narrator, the oral storyteller, says that he is going to stop the tale since he is tired and the night is approaching. He invites his audience to drink with him, adding that if they want to know the outcome of the adventure they should come back the following day, bringing money – in order to pay him, of course (Duggan 1999: 163-72)[6].

The practice of reading narratives aloud continued throughout the Renaissance and to the end of seventeenth century. So, until that time narratives could have recourse to real-life silences and delays in order to trigger suspense in listeners. Over the eighteenth century, however, silent reading progressively took over with an increasing number of people, and was soon to become prevalent. Accordingly, authors realised that changes were needed in narrative form in order to render it more effective within the new channel of communication. Among these changes, they realised that some should be intended for the arousal of suspense in readers who now read individually from a book they had in front of them. They realised that it was very unlikely that such readers would close the book at crucial points in the story, just in order to create suspense for themselves. Therefore,

[5] For a lengthier survey, one may see chapters two, "La lettura ha una storia", and three "I racconti e la voce" in Loretelli 2010: 19-123. Since the present article is written in the context of other research I have published, and hopefully amplifies it, my readers will, I hope, excuse my repeated references to my own earlier publications.

[6] For other examples, see Thornbury 2014: ch. 3; and Pilch 1996.

it was no longer possible to count on the insertion of real-life pauses in the telling of a story.

Vocalised reading gave the reader – the only person who had the book in front of him (it was always a man who read to an audience) – the opportunity to decide whether and when to deliver the information to his listeners, and allowed him to insert a span of time between the moment when their curiosity was aroused and the moment when it was satisfied. Obviously, the question is different with individual readers, since in this case each single reader has direct access to the source of the message and can satisfy his/her curiosity as soon as it arises, even before expectation anxiety is triggered. How to create suspense in individual, silent readers is one of the problems eighteenth-century authors feel themselves called upon to solve. This is one of the questions hovering over their reflections about narrative.

It became evident that the bare mention of characters overwhelmed by uncertainty and expectation anxiety did not transfer this emotion onto the people reading about them, if a delay was not introduced in the release of information. A very suspenseful situation is for example when a character is told that a woman has been killed and suspects that she is his beloved. However, when we come across it in Heliodorus'*Aethiopica*, we, as silent readers, do not share the character's anxiety because the text immediately informs us that it was not Chariclea who was killed. The *Aethiopica* was intended for vocalised reading (Loretelli 2010: 90 ff.), and the person reading to his audience could insert a real-life delay between the moment when his listeners became curious to know whether the woman really was the character's beloved, and the moment when they were informed that the corpse was not Chariclea's. If we do not feel anxiety it is because, as silent readers, we reach the crucial information immediately, since it comes in the following sentence. In other words, to individual readers with a direct access to the book, the written story immediately gives itself away. Eighteenth-century novelists seem to have realised that all delays and impediments to the progress of the story should come from the words printed in the book, and not from what was outside it. They became aware that new narrative features were required in order to create that delay which would activate uncertainty and anxiety in silent readers. In the eighteenth century, the frequent mentions of the word *suspense*

and the many characters represented as feeling it point to the authors' interest in arousing suspense in their readers. Significantly, many attempts were also made in that direction. For example, when Richardson presents his characters in the throes of anxious uncertainty, he does it in a way which is completely different from that of past narratives. Before focusing on the actual experimenting with suspense arousal in readers, however, it is worth drawing attention to some instances of eighteenth-century reflections on this question.

In *The Tatler* Number 152 (Thursday, 30 March 1710), Joseph Addison writes: "The Poet, having thus with great Art kept the Curiosity of the Reader in Suspense" (*The Tatler* 1987: vol. II, 354). Addison had tackled the question at length in a previous issue of *The Tatler* (Number 133, Tuesday, 14 February 1710), where he began his article mentioning silence: "Silence is sometimes more significant and sublime than the most noble and expressive Eloquence" (*The Tatler* 1987: vol. II, 269), and had gone on to consider various types of silences, including pauses in music. The crucial point in his argument, however, is when he discusses tragedy. It is worth quoting the whole passage:

> I have often thought that our Writers of Tragedy have been very defective in this Particular, and that they might have given great Beauty to their Works, by certain Stops and Pauses in the Representation of such Passions as it is not in the Power of Language to express. There is something like this in the last Act of *Venice Preserved*, where *Pierre* is brought to an infamous Execution, and begs of his Friend, as a Reparation of past Injuries and the only Favour he could do him, to rescue him from the ignominy of the Wheel, by stabbing him. As he is going to make this dreadful Request, he is not able to communicate it, but withdraws his Face from his Friend's Ear, and bursts into Tears. The melancholy Silence that follows hereupon, and continues till he has recovered himself enough to reveal his Mind to his Friend, raises in the spectators a Grief that is inexpressible, and an Idea of such a complicated Distress in the Actor as Words cannot utter. It would look as ridiculous to many Readers to give Rules and Directions for proper Silences, as for *Penning a Whisper*: but it is certain, that in the Extremity of most Passions, particularly Surprise, Admiration, Astonishment, nay, Rage itself, there is nothing more graceful than to see the Play stand still for a few Moments, and the Audience fixed in an agreeable Suspense during the Silence of a skilful Actor (vol. II, 271-2).

It is easier of course to arouse suspense in spectators, and, in this, actors have more strings to their bow than novelists. But the argument Addison seems to be turning over in his mind here is wider than the theatre. This will become more explicit in *Spectator* 420 [Addison] (Wednesday, 2 July 1712), where he writes:

> We love to see the Subject unfolding itself by just Degrees, and breaking upon us insensibly, so that we may be kept in a pleasing Suspense, and have time given us to raise our expectations, and to side with one of the Parties concerned in the Relation (*The Spectator* 1965: vol. III, 574).

Addison's reflection has now taken a step forward in the direction of what will be the solution to the question. In order to arouse suspense in readers, the story should proceed slowly.

Though one of the first, Addison is certainly not the only author to focus on the reader's suspense, and on his/her curiosity. In the 1725 preface to her *Works*, for instance, Mary Davys maintains that fiction has an advantage over history, precisely because

> Invention gives us Room to order Accidents better than Fortune will be at pains to do; so to work upon the Reader's Passions, sometimes to keep him in Suspense between Fear and Hope, and at last send him satisfied away (Bartolomeo 1994: 29).

Such instances will multiply in the course of the century. In his 1748 review of *Clarissa* in the *Jacobite's Journal*, Henry Fielding praises Richardson's novel "for its compelling simplicity, its pictures of manners, its deep penetration into nature, its Power to raise and alarm the Passions and to create overpowering suspense" (Mayo 1962: 100). A fact confirmed by Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who writes: "The interest which *Clarissa* excited, was increased by the suspense in which its readers were so long held" (Barbauld 2011: vol 1, CIX). A statement similar to Addison's considerations in *The Spectator,* is to be found in number 4 of *The Adventurer* (Saturday, 18 November 1752), where Hawksworth writes: "such a complication of circumstances, as hold the mind in an anxious yet pleasing suspense, and gradually unfold the production of some unforeseen and important event" (*The British Essaysts* 1817*:* vol. XXIII, 18)[7].

[7] In *The Adventurer*, Number 55 (author unknown: Tuesday, 15 May 1753. *The*

Particularly interesting, however, is Number 83:

> The intrigue is formed by a compliction of different interests, which keep the mind of the reader in a pleasing suspense and fill him with anxious wishes to see the obstacles that oppose the designs of the hero happily removed. The solution consists in removing the difficulties, in satisfying the curiosity of the reader by the completion of the intended action. (*The British Essaysts* 1817: vol. XXIV, 263).

Again, these are only a few instances of what was repeated over the century. But we do not need to bring additional examples. However, before moving on with our argument, I would like to quote a compelling reflection from Lord Kames's treatise *Elements of Criticism*, which reads:

> How ought to stand a person who has been told that he is to be told bad news? […] The man is still in suspense. Every one knows how distressful suspense is to the bulk of mankind. Such distress we wish to get rid of at any rate, even at the expense of bad news (Kames, 1970: vol I, ch II, 205).

This is an accurate psychological description of the feeling of suspense, but we would not find it so interesting, were it not for the fact that it appears in a chapter entitled "Emotions caused by Fiction", and refers to the suspense aroused in readers by a narrative text. It is to be noted that this description also emphasises the relation of suspense to future time. Its heightened curiosity projects the reader's mind towards the future, and induces her/him to accelerate the means of getting to the information that would end that distressful feeling. This means prompting silent readers to go on reading, possibly at an accelerated pace, to the end of the story. Moreover, it entails reaching the conclusion of the book sooner, and therefore reading – i.e. buying – more books. It is easy to detect the commercial reward of the invention of suspense.

British Essaysts vol. XXIV, vol. XXIV, 81-82), Number 73 (Tuesday, 17 July 1753. *The British Essaysts,* vol. XXIV, 193*)* and 91 (by Hawksworth: Tuesday, 18 September 1753. *The British Essaysts*, vol XXIV, 310) we find the other two types of suspense too.

4. Experimenting with the reader's suspense

As I suggested, authors experimented with *curiosity* arousal and with the creation of *delay*. Richardson, more than others. In this perspective, it is worthwhile recalling a well-known passage from the introduction to *Clarissa*[8]:

> All the Letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (the events at the time generally dubious). So that they abound not only with critical Situations, but with what may be called *instantaneous* Descriptions and Reflections (proper to be brought home to the breast of the youthful Reader); as also, with affecting Conversations; many of them written in the dialogue or dramatic way.
> *Much more* lively and affecting, says one of the principal characters (vol. VII, p. 73) must be the Style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress; the mind tortured by the pangs of *uncertainty* (the Events then hidden in the womb of Fate); than the dry, narrative, unanimated Style of a person relating difficulties and dangers surmounted, can be; the reader perfectly at ease; and if himself unmoved by his own Story, not likely greatly to affect the Reader. (Richardson 1751: VIII)

Richardson's famous practice of "writing to the moment" allows him to present characters in "critical situations", the outcomes of which are unknown to both characters and readers. The minds of the characters are "tortured by the pangs of uncertainty", because the events are "dubious" and "hidden in the womb of fate"'. Thus the reader, who becomes cognitively and emotionally (Loretelli, 2016: 694-723) involved in the story, feels an enhanced curiosity. As a matter of fact, the creation of delay was pivotal to Richardson's narrative practice and, to this end, he experimented also with a technique which is now forgotten. It is therefore worth recalling it here, before concisely addressing the other longer lasting techniques.

In the early editions of *Clarissa*, Richardson inserted fleurons to indicate delay, often charged with emotion. About two hundred fleurons, differently shaped according to the character experiencing delay, were scattered throughout the novel, wrote Janine Barchas,

[8] I am quoting from the introduction to the third edition of 1751, in which the author added a few sentences that interest us here.

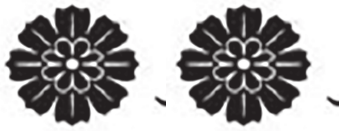
who counted them and saw that their function was to represent a span of time charged with emotion (Barchas 2003: 118-152). In Letter XX, from "Miss Howe" to "Miss Clarissa", for example, we find:

… that your suspense may be as short as possible

I will soon follow this…. (p. 126)

In Letter XXII, Clarissa writes to her friend:

What a cruel thing is suspense! --- I will ask leave to go to church this afternoon. I expect to be deny'd: But if I do not ask, they may allege, that my not going is owing to my self.



The experiment of introducing fleurons – or, in the case of other authors, a series of small asterisks and dots (Barchas 2003: 153-172; Loretelli 2010: 145-155) – in the attempt to create delay, was soon abandoned. An explanation is not hypothesised in Barchas, as she focuses on book history and on the transformation of print. But if we widen the perspective, taking also literary and cultural histories into consideration, I am convinced that a credible explanation can be found. The conclusion I have come to (Loretelli 2010: 161 ff) is that Richardson's and other authors' intention in inserting those fleurons was to make readers *experience* delay and uncertainty, triggering their expectation anxiety. However, novelists soon realised that the eyes of silent readers jumped fleurons, asterisks and dots, in order to reach the subsequent words directly, without their

minds even noticing the presence of those typographic devices. As a consequence, they did not succeed in making silent, individual readers experience delay, which needs duration, as it consists in a span of time during which the mind is projected towards the future in expectation of events to come. This is why, I believe, those typographic contrivances were soon abandoned.

In the meantime, however novelists had been experimenting with other techniques[9], which proved to be more functional to the purpose, and therefore became standard. Although not the first to apply a strategy towards this end – Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding had done this before him – it was Horace Walpole who first theorised a solution. In the preface to the second edition of his *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), he explains the presence of dialogues which do not forward the story and appear to be pointless, by stating that:

> The very impatience which the reader feels, while delayed by the coarse pleasantries of vulgar actors from arriving at the knowedge of the important catastrophe he expects, perhaps heightens, certainly proves that he had been artfully interested in, the depending event.

Walpole was aware that a delay was needed in order to keep the reader's interest alive, and that this delay could come only from words. In printed narratives to be read individually and silently, delay could no longer be created by having recourse to real-life silences, as did narratives intended for listening audiences. Now, silences and delays had to be produced by words alone. Eighteenth-century narratives *could no longer count on silences as interruptions of discourse, but needed to create silences within discourse, silences filled with words*. The eighteenth century invented a delay that prompts readers to experience suspense through words which do not forward the story.

What Walpole proposes in his preface is the most naif way of creating a delay functional to suspense. Although without being theorised, other and more sophisticated techniques were developed in the course of the century in order to expand written discourse so as to slow down the tale. The result was a narrative structure which can be described as follows: the text gives the reader to understand

[9] For a wider perspective on these techniques, see Sternberg 1978.

that a crucial piece of information for the destiny of the characters he/she feels involved with is missing, thus arousing his/her curiosity, uncertainty and expectations. The text then becomes reticent and delays the satisfaction of the reader's curiosity, without, however, allowing him/her to forget the object of his/her expectations. This delay – which, unlike digressions (Loretelli 2011: 36-55), keeps the object of expectation before the reader – is the time of the reader's suspense.

We find this structure fully fledged in Anne Radcliffe's novels. Although she deploys such expressions as "torturing suspense", "horrible suspense", "painful suspense", "dreadful suspense", it is not for their presence that her readers experience that feeling. It is through the way in which she carries on her stories. Let us examine, for example, the beginning of her *The Romance of the Forest*, a novel I have chosen at random. In order to shun his creditors, Pierre de la Motte leaves Paris with his wife and two faithful servants. One of them, Peter, is a very talkative person, and his pointless rambling discourse is an example of the delaying device Horace Walpole suggested. A plethora of such servants with their confused, incoherent dialogues appear in Radcliffe's novels; foremost, among them, Paulo, whom we all remember as Vivaldi's faithful servant in *The Italian*. In *The Romance of the Forest*, it is Peter's digressive chatter that activates retardation. One, not the only, means to this end.

In fact, as the novel proceeds, other narrative devices fulfil the function of creating delay (Sternberg: 1978, 159-186). Outside Paris, the night is "dark and tempestous", and La Motte halts his carriage at a place where several roads cross, not knowing where to go. He sees a house in the distance, reaches its front door and rings the bell. A voice from within asks him what he wants, and when he says that he would like to be directed to the nearest town, the door opens and a tall man invites him in. He would never reach the town in such a night and with such roads, says the man leading him

> through a passage into a room almost unfurnished […]. The forlorn and desolate aspect of this aparment made La Motte shrink involuntarily, and he was turning to go out when the man suddenly pushed him back, and he heard the door locked upon him (Radcliffe 1998: 4).

The novel has thus contrived the first mystery for the character and the reader to unravel. La Motte examines the room, and begins to make conjectures about the intentions of the people who are holding him captive. This is the first of the many reflections, in the novel, about possible counterfactual scenarios. They expand the plot and slow down the narrative pace, while keeping the attention of the reader all the time focused on the subject of his/her curiosity. An enigma has taken shape, and many others will soon follow. In fact, immediately after – surprise! – a weeping girl is thrown into the room. These two enigmas will not be explained simultaneously, and in the novel there is always at least one enigma still to be solved, which holds the reader's attention, while his/her expectations are never allowed to relax. The intertwining of enigmas with their step by step partial unravellings, the creation of delays through counterfactual thinking (Capoferro 2017a: 163-68; Capoferro 2017b: 91-106) and the dialogues which do not forward the story form the narrative texture which arouses and maintains the feeling of suspense in readers.

This is how the eighteenth century 'invented' literary suspense, a technique which had slowly started to take shape since the end of the previous century, to become standard in the course of a number of decades. This technique, it is worth repeating, was consonant with the practice of silent reading.

5. Why the 'invention' of suspense matters

To conclude, I would like to stress that discussing suspense in literature does not simply mean talking about narratological technicalities. As we have seen, suspense is a narrative form which triggers cognitive and emotional responses involving ways of feeling and thinking. First of all, curiosity and time perception. Suspense projects the mind of the person feeling it towards the future.

Although characters in the grip of suspense are present in the literatures of all times, it was only in the eighteenth century that narrative acquired the capacity to arouse it in readers, developing techniques to create delay in plots in order to arouse curiosity and expectation anxiety – psychological components of suspense – in individual, silent readers. These techniques needed plots of a certain length, which moved from one enigma to the other, without the interruptions caused by separate episodes and prolix digressions,

which were the basic characteristics of the plots of previous times, when the reading of narratives was generally still oralised.

If we now widen the perspective, we realise that the technique that triggers suspense in readers and that has become standard since the end of the eighteenth century, has broader applications than in adventure stories, detective, or mystery plots. As a matter of fact, suspense is only an emotionally intensified form of the experience of future time which all modern plots generate. It is what, as Fielding put it, "makes the reader go on reading forever" (*Tom Jones*, book 1, chapter 1).

If plots are symbolic forms of our perception of time (Ricoeur 1983: 17-18), and we can plausibly hypothesise that, when they change shape, they reflect and at the same time contribute to changes in such perception, there is a relation between the eighteenth century 'invention' of narrative suspense and the new contemporary sense of time. This is why inquiring into this phenomenon matters. The acquisition by narrative (the novel) of the capacity to arouse suspense subliminally disseminated among its many readers a sense of time, which projected their minds towards the future. It was, in my opinion, a momentous event, which joined forces with contemporary philosophical thinking about time, achieving together what Novalis (Koselleck 1986: 301) called the capacity "to notice the secret connections between past and future", combining memory and expectation. This is one more piece of evidence of how powerful linguistic agents can be in moulding and subliminally disseminating ways of perception and unspoken mental assumptions (Chafe 1990: 77-98).

References

BARBAULD, ANNA LAETITIA, [1804] 2011, "Life of Richardson", in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson,* Anna Laetitia Barbauld (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

BARCHAS, JANINE, 2003, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

BARTOLOMEO, F. JOSEPH, 1994, A *New Species of Criticism. Eighteenth-Century Discourse on the Novel*, University of Delaware Press, Newark Toronto, Associated University Presses, London and Toronto.

BENEDICT, M. BARBARA, 2001, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

CAPOFERRO, RICCARDO, 2017a, *Novel. La genesi del romanzo moderno nell'Inghilterra del Settecento,* Carocci editore, Roma.

CAPOFERRO, RICCARDO, 2017b, "Fears, Apprehensions and Conjectures", *English Literature*, 4, 91-106.

CHAFE, WALLACE, 1990, "Some Things that Narratives tell us about the Mind", in Britton B. K. and A. D. Pellegrini (eds), *Narrative Thought and Narrative Language*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdal, 77-98.

DUGGAN, JOSEPH J., 1999, "Modalità della cultura orale" in P. Boitani, M. Manciniand A. Varvaro (eds), Lo *spazio letterario del Medioevo*, vol. II, Il *Medioevo volgare*, t. 1 *La produzione del testo*, Salerno editrice, Roma, 147-185.

FREUD, SIGMUND, [vol. XVI, 1916-17], [vol. XX, 1925-6] 1954-74, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Stratchey and Anna Freud (eds), Hogarth Press, London.

FRAISSE, PAUL AND ORSINI, FRANCINE, 1955, "Études expérimentales des conduites temporelles. I. L'attente", *L'Année psychologique*, 55, 27-39.

KAMES, HENRY HOME LORD, [1762] 1970, *Elements of Criticism*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim –New York.

KOEHLER, MARTHA J., 2013, "Suspense in Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, *The Eighteenth Century. Theory and Interpretation,* vol. 54, n. 3, Fall, 317-338.

JOHNSON, SAMUEL, 1755, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Printed by W. Strahan, for J. and P. Knapton; T. and T. Longman, C. Hitch and L. Hawes; A. Millar; and R. and J. Dodsley, London. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/, last accessed 28.9.2019.

JOHNSON, SAMUEL, 1969. *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, *The Rambler*, vols IV and V, in W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (eds), New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

KOSELLECK, REINHART, [1979] 2007, "'Spazi di esperienza' e 'orizzonte di aspettativa': due categorie storiche", in ID., *Passato future. Per una semantica dei tempi storici*, Clueb, Bologna.

LESSING, GOTTHOLD E., [1766] 1948, *Laocoonte*, Sansoni, Firenze.

LORETELLI, ROSAMARIA, 2000, "The Aesthetics of Empiricism and the Origin of the Novel", *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 41, 2, 83-109.

LORETELLI, ROSAMARIA, 2009, "David Hume's Reader-Response Narratology: A New Perspective on the Rise of the Novel", *1650-1850. Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, 16, 44-63.

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

LORETELLI, ROSAMARIA, 2013, "Towards a History of Digressions: A Marginal Form at the Centre of the Canon", in F. O'Gorman and L. Guerra (eds), *The Centre and the Margins in Eighteenth-Century*

British and Italian Cultures, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 12-35.

LORETELLI, ROSAMARIA, 2010, "The Space of Time: *Fleuron*s as Temporal Markers in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and Ugo Foscolo's *Ortis*", in R. Loretelli and F. O'Gorman (eds), *Britain and Italy in the Long Eighteenth Century. Literary and Art Theories*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 145-155.

LORETELLI, ROSAMARIA, 2016, "Per una storia culturale dell'empatia. Storia e neuroscienze", *Rivista storica italiana*, CXXVIII, 2, 694-723.

MAYO, D. ROBERT, 1962, *The English Novel in the Magazines*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, and Oxford University Press, London.

PILCH, HERBERT (ed.), 1996, *Orality and Literacy in Early Middle English*, Gunter Nar Verlag, T bingen.

RADCLIFFE, ANNE, [1791]1998, *The Romance of the Forest*, Penguin, London.

RICHARDSON, SAMUEL, [1748] 1751, *Clarissa. Or, the History of a Young Lady*, Printed for S. Richardson: and sold by John Osborne, by Andrew Millar, by J. and J. Rivington, and by J. Leake at Bath, vol l.

RICHARDSON, SAMUEL, [1748] 2004, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*, edited with an introduction and notes by Angus Ross, Penguin Books, London.

RICOEUR, PAUL, 1983, *Temps et Récit*, tome 1, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

STERNBERG, MEIR, 1978, *Expositional Modes amd Temporal Ordering of Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis.

The British Essaysts; with Prefaces, Historical and Biographical, 1817, A. Calmers (ed). Printed for Nichols, Son, and Bentley, London

THORNBURY, EMILY V., 2014, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England,* C.U.P., Cambridge.

The Spectator (1711-12) 5 vols., 1965, edited with an introduction and notes by Donald F. Bond, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

The Tatler, (1709-1711) 3 vols., 1987, edited with an introduction and notes by Donald F. Bond, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 1980, Dorset and Baber, New York.