

IAN WATT THE RISE OF THE NOVEL (1957)

Watt, Ian. The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Berkeley: U of California P, 1957.

"Realism and the Novel Form"

Watt's seminal The Rise of the Novel represents perhaps the crucial attempt in the twentieth century to understand both the emergence and the rise to dominance of the novel as a genre as well as of 'realism' as the literary mode of choice in the nineteenth century and, indeed, almost ever since. The novel, he argues, was a creature of the time and the place: Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. He points out that the issue which the novel raises more sharply than other forms is the "problem of the nature of the correspondence between words and reality" (12) and, by extension, the "problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates" (11). The nature of the realism of the novel is best clarified, he contends, "by the help of those professionally concerned with the analysis of concepts, philosophers" (11).

Since at least Aristotle, it was widely argued that "it is universals, classes or abstractions, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception, which are the true realities" (11). There dominated a strong tendency towards the generalising and the universal, rather than the particular and the individual. Hence, the views of theorists such as Pope and Johnson on the proper subject matter of poetry which we discussed earlier. Modern realism, however, "begins from the proposition that the truth can be discovered by the individual through the senses" (12). Its general temper is "critical, anti-traditional and innovating" (12). The great contribution of Descartes in particular was his concept of the "pursuit of truth as a wholly individual matter, logically independent of the tradition of past thought" (130).

The novel is the literary form, Watt argues, which "most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation" (13). The novel rejects traditional "formal conventions" (13) in general and "traditional plots" (13) in particular. Writers from Chaucer to Milton "accepted the general premise of their times that, since Nature is essentially complete and unchanging, its records, whether scriptural, legendary or historical, constitute a definitive repertoire of human experience" (14). Hence, the use of "timeless stories to mirror the unchanging moral verities" (22). From about the Renaissance, however, there was a growing tendency "for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality" (14). This is reflected in the work of novelists like Defoe who totally subordinates the plot of Robinson Crusoe "to the pattern of autobiographical memoir" (15) in the first "defiant . . . assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel" (15).

Changes in plot were accompanied by *changes in characterisation*: the "plot had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background determined by the appropriate literary convention" (15). This is a literary change analogous to the philosophical turn from universals to particulars. This was also the result, Watt points out, of the "application to literary problems of the psychological approach of Hobbes and Locke" (16). One of the hallmarks of the novel is "particularity of description" (17) or "realistic particularity" (17) especially concerning the presentation of character and background. The novel is "distinguished from other forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed

presentation of their environment" (18).

The "particularising approach to character" (18) essentially boils down to the "problem of defining the individual person" (18), an issue which Locke had placed on the front burner of philosophical speculation ever since the publication of the Essay Concerning Human Understanding in 1690. Given that the "problem of personal identity is closely related to the epistemological status of proper names" (18) in that names are the "verbal expression of the particular identity" (18), *naming* became a crucial element in the individualisation of character in the novel. Traditionally characters were named in such a way that they recalled a set of "expectations formed from past literature, rather than from . . . contemporary life" (18-19). The first novelists broke with tradition by naming their characters in such a way as to suggest that they were "completely individualised entities" (18).

Another development in characterisation in the novel is related to Locke's argument that identity is not a given but something established through the use of memory: the individual establishes, Locke argues, an identity of consciousness over time, getting in "touch with his own continuing identity through memory of his past thoughts and actions" (21), as Watt puts it. The hallmark of the novel is the fact that, as Watt points out, the main subject is the "exploration of the personality as it is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness" (21). The main principle of individuation, according to Locke, is the individual's "existence at a particular locus in space and time" (21). Characters in the novel "can only be individualised if they are set in a background of particularised time and place" (21). Because the universe is not unchanging, *time* is the "shaping force of man's individual and collective history" (22). The plot of the novel is distinguished by the fact that it uses "past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences" (22). The novel, not least the 'stream of consciousness' novel, has "interested itself more than any other literary form in the development of its characters in the course of time" (22). The novel presents the individual life "as a historical process . . . being acted out against the background of the most ephemeral thoughts and action" (24). *Space* is the necessary correlative of time (the word 'present,' for example, indicates both simultaneously). In traditional literary works, place is vague and generalised as a result of which Shakespeare's Rome is as much his contemporary England as is his Venice. The novel's "solidity of setting" (26) and vividness of detail functioned to put "man wholly into his physical setting" (27).

In short, the novel aims to provide "what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals" (27). Another key device in this respect is *diction*. Traditionally, or at least prior to Bacon and Locke, less attention was paid to the "correspondence of words to things" (28) than to the "beauties which could be bestowed upon description and action by the use of rhetoric" (28). It was precisely such embellishment and adornment which theorists from Bacon to Jonson to Wordsworth feared. The novel substituted for this emphasis on style and eloquence a "descriptive and denotative use of language" (29) which views language as a "purely referential medium" (28). The goal of the novel is to achieve the "immediacy and closeness of the text to what is being described" (29) in an effort on the part of the novelist to "make the words bring his object home to us in all its concrete particularity" (29). This is, again, a very Lockean view of language, the purpose of which is to convey a knowledge of things. From this point of view, the novel functions as a "transcription of real life" (30) (what the great French novelist Flaubert would term 'le réel écrit'), operating by "exhaustive presentation" (30), rather than the "elegant presentation" (30) of yore.

The innovativeness of the novel, in short, reflects the philosophical shift and the

change in world view which

has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one – one which presents us . . . with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places. (31)

The novel's imitation of human life "follows the procedures adopted by philosophical realism in its attempt to ascertain and report the truth" (31). Realism in general and the novel in particular is based on the following "premise, or primary convention" (32):

that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the time and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. (32)

What should not be forgotten is, firstly, that the novel is not life but an artistic imitation of life; secondly, that the novel form is a culturally and historically specific literary convention to which we have become immured to the point where readers are resistant to reading other forms of literature as well as other kinds of prose (e.g. experimental novels of a James Joyce or a Erna Brodber) merely because they are unable to relate to them.