

Hans-Peter Wagner

# An Introduction to British and Irish Fiction

Renaissance to Romanticism



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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier  
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier  
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier  
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: (0651) 41504  
Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>  
E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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I take full responsibility for any remaining errors.



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## Introduction

This book is concerned with the proliferation of prose fiction in England in the long eighteenth century; it also includes works by writers who were not English – i.e. Scots and Irishmen. By prose fiction, I mean especially, but not exclusively, the novel. Thus, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* is not a novel, but one of the most important prose satires in English literature. I deliberately avoid the term “rise”, as in Ian Watt’s seminal book about *The Rise of the Novel*, because if we take seriously what recent literary criticism has taught us, we cannot assume that there was a teleological development that finally saw the triumph of the novel form.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, if Watt was criticized by younger literary scholars<sup>2</sup>, and especially by feminist critics drawing attention to the neglected “mothers of the novel”<sup>3</sup>, it was primarily because of his tendency to outline a development (both chronological and teleological), although his major concerns were realism and the rising middle class.

Most literary critics – and perhaps New Historicists and Marxists in particular – agree today that literature should be interpreted in its particular discursive environment, i.e. in the context of other forms of verbal and visual representation that co-existed or preceded it. This is so because both factual and fictional writing depends on, or in turn gives voice to, the politics (in the widest sense) of the time in which it is produced. While neither literary texts nor visual representations (e.g. paintings or engravings) or the musical/theatrical productions of any given time can be said to reflect social reality, they are inseparable from it precisely because they react to it in many different ways. It is the job of the critic to show how this works.

Perhaps the best way to justify my approach in this book is to consider the concept of the rhizome. Originally a botanical term, it was applied to cultural phenomena by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1970s and 1980s to describe the universal connectedness and heterogeneity of discourses in any given society (Deleuze/Guattari 1976 and 1989). Borrowing this idea from the two French critics, I argue in this book that the formation of the eighteenth-century novel may be considered as cartography, as a way or form of representation that continually draws on major existing forms of discourse, not all of them literary or verbal. To refer to just a few examples, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* has close links with contemporary debates in economics and theology; Richardson’s *Pamela* reacts to and in turn fires discussions of patriarchy, class

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- 1 See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. [1957]. London: Penguin, 1972. Repr. with a new introduction (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001).
  - 2 See the important revisionary studies of Lennard Davis (1983), Clive Probyn (1987), Michael McKeon (1987), and J. Paul Hunter (1990), listed in the bibliography of this book. Also see the excellent survey of the response to Watt, up to 2000, by Seager (2012), especially chaps. 3-7.
  - 3 See especially the works of Dale Spender (1986), Nancy Armstrong (1987), Cheryl Turner (1992), and Helen Thompson (2005). Also see Seager (2012), chap. 5.

distinctions, and sexual abstinence; Fielding's novels engage with the discourse on anti-social behaviour; and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* provides a novelistic riposte to Enlightenment discussions of procreation and genetics.<sup>4</sup> The one discourse that has been most neglected in the rhizome of eighteenth-century fiction, I claim, is the discourse of art.

This book, then, attempts to take cognizance of these facts by "reading" a selected number of eighteenth-century works of prose fiction in the discursive context of their time while providing "close readings" of representative text passages. One of its novelties is the strategic use of visual material. I have integrated engravings and paintings by eighteenth-century English artists, not to "illustrate" important aspects in the traditional sense but to show how visual representations reacted to issues alongside the writers of fiction, and how the latter responded to pictures of all kinds. By throwing a slightly different, and often helpful, light on the same issues, the visual material I used (in J. Hillis Miller's sense<sup>5</sup>) should provide a better, richer, understanding of contemporary eighteenth-century issues.

I have especially drawn on the prints of William Hogarth (1697-1764)<sup>6</sup>, England's outstanding artist in this period, while being fully aware of the fact (I hope) that his pictures cannot be treated as if they were photographic snapshots of the reality of eighteenth-century life in England, though to this day, both historians and literary critics have misused Hogarth's works in this sense.<sup>7</sup> Like the fictional texts of his time, Hogarth's painted and engraved images are not realistic, but take sides with the enlightened (mostly middle-class) critics of the time. The visual art of Hogarth and his

4 The title of Stuart Sim's highly interesting monograph, *The Eighteenth-century Novel and Contemporary Social Issues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008), is misleading in this context because Sim considers eighteenth-century fiction in the context of twentieth-century social issues rather than those of the age of Enlightenment.

5 See J. Hillis Miller (1992), who argues that illustrations throw light on one particular aspect of a text while leaving much else in the dark. A picture integrated in, or about, a text does not, then, represent it – or translate words into images –, it foregrounds aspects and dimensions of the verbal representation in very particular ways, thus enriching our understanding of what we are reading. See also my *Reading Iconotexts* (1995), in which I discuss eighteenth-century works combining texts and images (e.g. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Hogarth's engravings).

6 For commentaries on his enormously influential and popular engravings, including the famous picture stories on the harlot and the rake, see Ronald Paulson, comp. *Hogarth's Graphic Works* (1989), quoted hereafter as *HGW*; and Paulson's major study of Hogarth's entire oeuvre in three volumes entitled *Hogarth* (1991-93). A shorter, sound, introduction to Hogarth's life and work is Mark Hallett's beautifully produced *Hogarth* (2000). See also my edition of Hogarth's major engravings, *Hogarth* (2012).

7 See, for example, Derek Jarrett, *England in the Age of Hogarth* (London: Hart-Davis, 1974, repr. 1976), and Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012), and my critique of such an approach in "How to (Mis)Read Hogarth or Ekphrasis Galore." *1650-1850. Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 2 (1994): 99-135.

fellow artists integrated in this book, then, is not supposed to be mere by-work, i.e. decorative additional material. It is employed alongside the fictional texts, with the assumption that pictures are as rhetorical, biased, and non-realistic as the texts they “illustrate” (in the sense explained above by Miller). This does not mean, of course, that the pictorial sources do not contain realistic elements; we shall see, for instance, that Hogarth’s images operate with realistic aspects, allegory, allusion, and narrative means very much reminiscent of eighteenth-century fiction. Indeed, Hogarth’s narrative methods were to some extent adopted by contemporary writers, above all by Henry Fielding.

Life in eighteenth-century England (and especially London), however, was not only rich in a visual respect we must consider when reading English novels from the period. There is also the much-neglected aspect of the make-up of the books published at the time. In a splendid study recovering some of the visual delight offered by eighteenth-century novels, Janine Barchas<sup>8</sup> has drawn attention to the fact that during the genre’s formation, the novel’s material embodiment as printed book rivalled its narrative content in diversity and creativity. This is the reason why I have included and discussed some title pages, frontispieces, illustrations, and other aspects of what Gérard Genette, in a verbal pun, has called the “thresholds” leading the reader into the main text of a book.<sup>9</sup> These paratexts have generally been much neglected by modern editions. They provide additional verbal and visual delight; as we shall see in the case of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, they are also vastly important in semantic and hermeneutic respects.

Finally, a word about the canon, i.e. the works of fiction I have selected for more extensive discussions. When Terry Eagleton published his predominantly Marxist-based introduction to *The English Novel* in 2005, many, especially feminist, scholars criticized him for the fact that his canon was a traditional one. In the words of Hammond and Regan, he had ignored

early eighteenth-century amatory fiction ... the Gothic ... and less well-known spin-offs and sub-genres, such as the novel of circulation or women’s utopian fiction. In Eagleton’s account, moreover, there were no notable women novelists before Jane Austen. (*Making the Novel*: 227)

Those readers interested in such early women novelists as Aphra Behn, Mrs Manley, Eliza Haywood, and Charlotte Lennox, to name just the most important, will find ample and competent discussions of their works in the excellent monographs of Augustin (2005), Hammond and Regan (2006), and Seager (2012: chap. 5). In this book, I have tried to steer a middle way because, like Eagleton, I believe in the historical importance (in terms of form and genre) of the works of fiction I introduce in this book. However, since I also agree with Hammond/Regan about the importance of *all*

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8 See Janine Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-century Novel* (2003).

9 See Genette’s *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), trans. Jane E. Lewin, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997).

fictional discourses in the formation of the novel, I deal with some female authors in chapters 2 (The Romance) and 16. My special contribution lies in the consideration of the co-existence and mingling of verbal and visual discourses, an issue neither Eagleton nor Hammond/Regan or Seager have sufficiently considered.