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Source: *Cultural Critique*, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 159-181
Published by: University of Minnesota Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354286
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Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel

Michael McKeon

Twenty-five years after its first appearance, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* continues to be the most attractive model we have of how to conduct the study of this crucial literary phenomenon.[1] The phenomenon is crucial because it is modern. If the novel originated in early modern Europe, it should be possible to observe and describe its emergence within a historical context whose richness of detail has no parallel in earlier periods. But of course this is no coincidence: it is the rise of an unprecedented historical consciousness, and of its institutional affiliates, that has both encouraged the preservation of historical detail, and legitimated contextual methods of study which use that detail as a mode of understanding. Watt's book is attractive because it is fully responsive to the call for a historical and contextual method of study that seems somehow implicit in his subject. Thus his concern with the rise of a distinctive set of narrative procedures — "formal realism" — is informed by a concern with a parallel innovation in philosophical discourse, and these he connects, in turn, with a set of socioeconomic developments at whose center are the rise of the middle class, the growth of commercial capitalism, and the concomitant eclipse of feudal and aristocratic modes of intercourse. The analogy

1. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). The following essay summarizes one central argument of my forthcoming book, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

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between these historical strands is most succinctly accounted for in their shared "individualism" — that is, in their common validation of individual experience — a term that allows Watt at various points to argue the importance to his subject of a fourth major strand of historical experience, the Protestant Reformation.

Watt's account of the unity of the historical context in which the novel arose is far more subtle, as all readers know, than this bald outline can suggest. And its general persuasiveness is evident in the fact that the sort of criticism to which it has seemed most vulnerable has aimed not to refute the relevance of historical context, but to complicate Watt's version of it. The problem is perhaps most notorious in the social strand of his context. Where is the evidence, critics have asked, for the dominance of the middle class in the early eighteenth century? How is it distinguished from the traditional social categories of the nobility and gentry, which clearly survive the rapid social mobility of the seventeenth century and persist into the eighteenth with considerable power and prestige? Don't the novels of Henry Fielding, an indispensable figure in the rise of the novel, evince a social attitude much closer to that of a middling gentry than to that of a putatively flourishing commercial middle class? But even in the literary realm, critics have also been preoccupied with a problem of persistence. The narrative procedures of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Fielding may explicitly subvert the idea and ethos of romance, but they also draw, without apparent irony, on many of its stock situations and conventions. Although Watt pays little attention to it, and then only as a superseded genre, romance can be seen to inhabit both the form and the content of these early eighteenth-century narratives. And once again it is Fielding who points the problem most acutely, since he has little use for several of those narrative procedures that have been advanced as the *sine qua non* of the new form.

From this brief summary it is clear that the two central problems with Watt's account of the rise of the novel are versions of each other. His treatment of the early modern historical context, because of its very richness, has sensitized us to what has been left out: the romance and the aristocracy. By the end of the eighteenth century, the conceptual categories of "the novel" and "the middle class" will be sufficiently stable to enjoy the stability of that nomenclature. But it is of course precisely in the period that we wish most definitively to understand — the period of crucial transformation — that such categories are most un-

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stable and most resistant to being strictly identified either as what they are going to be, or as what they once were. What is required, then, is an understanding of how conceptual categories, whether "literary" or "social," exist at moments of historical change: how new forms first coalesce as tenable categories by being known in terms of, and against, more traditional forms that have thus far been taken to define the field of possibility. We must begin, in other words, with the very fact of categorial instability in the later seventeenth century.

Let me pause for a moment before entering my argument, in order to summarize it. What I have to say is based on a set of terms and relations that will recur from time to time throughout the essay. They are not particularly complicated, but I think it will be helpful to lay them out as quickly and clearly as possible. I plan to describe the two great instances of categorial instability that are central to the rise of the novel. The first sort of instability has to do with generic categories; the second, with social categories. The instability of generic categories registers an epistemological crisis, a major cultural transition in attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative. For convenience, I will call the set of problems associated with this epistemological crisis, "questions of truth." The instability of social categories registers a cultural crisis in attitudes toward how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members. For convenience, I will call the set of problems associated with this social and moral crisis, "questions of virtue." Questions of truth and questions of virtue concern different realms of human experience, and they are likely to be raised in very different contexts. Yet in one central respect they are closely analogous. Questions of truth and virtue both pose problems of signification: What kind of authority or evidence is required of narrative to permit it to signify truth to its readers? What kind of social existence or behavior signifies an individual's virtue to others?

As we will see, the instability of generic and social categories is symptomatic of a change in attitudes about how truth and virtue are most authentically signified. But for both questions, we can observe the process of change only if we break it down into its component parts. Let me summarize this break-down: first, for questions of truth. At the beginning of the period of our concern, the reigning narrative epistemology involves a dependence on received authorities and a priori traditions; I will call this posture "romance idealism." In the seventeenth century, it is challenged and refuted by an empiricist epistemol-

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ogy that derives from many sources, and this I will call "naive empiricism." But this negation of romance, having embarked on a journey for which it has no maps, at certain points loses its way. And it becomes vulnerable, in turn, to a counter-critique that has been generated by its own over-enthusiasm. I will call this counter-critique "extreme skepticism." As we will see, in refuting its empiricist progenitor, extreme skepticism inevitably recapitulates some features of the romance idealism which it is equally committed to opposing. For questions of virtue, the terms alter, but the two-part pattern of reversal is very much the same as for questions of truth. We begin with a relatively stratified social order, supported by a reigning world view which I will call "aristocratic ideology." Spurred by social change, this ideology is attacked and subverted by its prime antagonist, "progressive ideology." But at a certain point, progressive ideology gives birth to its own critique, which is both more radical than itself, and harks back to the common, aristocratic enemy. I will call this counter-critique "conservative ideology."

Needless to say, contemporaries did not articulate these several positions as consciously-formulated and coherent doctrines. I have abstracted these ideologies and epistemologies from a large body of early modern discourse, in order to isolate the principal stages in the process of historical change that we refer to when we speak of "the rise of the novel." By this means, I think, we may come closer to conceiving how change occurs: how the past can persist into the present, and help to mediate the establishment of difference through the perpetuation of similarity. Let me now proceed to fill in the spaces in my argument.

I

I will begin with questions of truth and the instability of the system of narrative genres in the seventeenth century. Evidence for the unstable usage of terminology lies everywhere, but it is most striking in explicit attempts to categorize the several genres of narrative. In 1672, the bookseller John Starkey advertised his list of publications in a catalogue divided into the following categories: Divinity; Physick; Law; History; Poetry and Plays; and Miscellanies. Under the heading of "history" he includes Suetonius, Rabelais, what he calls the "Novels" of Quevedo, biographies, travel narratives, and a contemporary work

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that we would be likely to see as a popular romance.[2] By modern standards, the most pressing problem raised by such usage is the absence of any will to distinguish consistently between "history" and "literature," "fact" and "fiction." But on the other hand, the catalogue of William London, printed fifteen years earlier, obligingly separates "History" from "Romances, Poems and Playes."[3]

What is most significant about this sort of usage is that it is not entirely foreign to us. Unlike traditional generic taxonomies, it evinces a real, but markedly inconsistent, commitment to comprehend its categories within a basic discrimination between the "factual" and the "fictional." Indeed, it is the inconsistent imposition of this recognizably "modern" concern on a more traditional system that makes the usage of this period look so chaotic. What it represents, I think, is a movement between opposed conceptions of how to tell the truth in narrative. Another sign of this movement is the transformation which the term "romance" has undergone in the past hundred years. Despite the neutral usage that I have just quoted, by the end of the seventeenth century the ascendant meaning of "romance" is both far broader, and far more pejorative, than before. Increasingly the idea of romance dominates the thought of the Restoration and early eighteenth century as a means of describing, and most often of discrediting, a particular, idealist way of knowing. Romance comes to stand for a species of deceit that undiscriminatingly includes lying and fictionalizing; and the category to which it is most often opposed is not "the novel," but "true history."

Many cultural movements contributed to the naive empiricist championing of "true history." Three of the most important are also closely intertwined: the scientific revolution, the typographical revolution, and the Protestant Reformation. Moreover in all three of these movements we can see both the dominant influence of naive empiricism, and the stealthy emergence of a subversive, extreme skepticism. I will begin with the new science. In his history of the founding institution of the new science, Thomas Sprat compares unfavorably the ancient mode of natural history with that of his fellow moderns: it "is

2. *The Annals of Love, Containing Select Histories of the Amours of divers Princes Courts, Pleasantly Related* (1672), sig. Dd7^{v}-Ee4^{v}. Except where noted, place of publication of early modern works is London.

3. *A Catalogue of The most vendible Books in England* . . . (1657).

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not the true following of *Nature* . . . It is like *Romances,* in respect of *True History* . . ."[4] The new science was dedicated, of course, to objective observation, experiment, and related principles of empirical method. And it was deeply interested in trying to embody these principles in literary technique and form. According to the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, "we have more need of severe, full and punctuall Truth, than of Romances or Panegyricks."[5] To this end, the Society even undertook to instruct foreign travellers in the best literary techniques for ensuring what we might call the "historicity" of their journals. It enlisted the aid of Robert Boyle and the mathematician Lawrence Rooke to formulate directions not only for how to keep a travel journal, but also for how to turn it into a narrative without diluting its crucial historicity.[6]

It is not too much to say that these directions amount to one of the most important, explicit bodies of literary theory composed in conjunction with the origins of the English novel. They prescribe a preferred style and rhetoric that correspond to a new type of the man of letters, the ethically and socially humble recorder of reality who is enabled to master the new knowledge by his very innocence of the old. In Sprat's words, the new breed are "plain, diligent, and laborious observers: such, who, though they bring not much knowledg [sic], yet bring their hands, and their eyes uncorrupted: such as have not their Brains infected by false Images . . ."[7] One such observer is described by the editors of the multi-volume collection of travel narratives in terms that might collectively be called the convention of the claim to historicity: "This Narrative has nothing of Art or Language, being left by the editors of a multi-volume collection of travel narratives in that might collectively be called the convention of the claim to historicity: "This Narrative has nothing of Art or Language, being left homely Stile, which it was not fit to alter, lest it might breed a Jealousy that something had been chang'd more than the bare Language."[8]

4. *The History of the Royal-Society of London* . . . (1667), 90-91.
5. *Philosophical Transactions,* 11 (1676), 552.
6. See *Philosophical Transactions,* 1 (1665-66), 141-43, 186-89. Boyle's instructions are excerpted from his *Some Considerations of the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy* (1663).
7. *The History of the Royal-Society of London* . . . 72.
8. Awnsham and John Churchill, eds., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* . . . (1704), I, viii.

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According to another, equally conventional, traveller, "it would be no difficult Matter to embellish a Narrative with many Romantick Incidents, to please the unthinking Part of Mankind, who swallow every thing an artful Writer thinks fit to impose upon their Credulity, without any Regard to Truth or Probability. The judicious are not taken with such Trifles; . . . and they easily distinguish between Reality and Fiction."[9]

At the heart of the claim to historicity is the assertion that what one is describing really happened. And it is not hard to hear in these sober claims the naive empiricism of Defoe and Richardson, both of whom pretend to be only the editors of authentic documents whose plain and artless truth is above question. But if we permit the sobriety of the voices slightly to extend into self-parody, we also can detect the extreme skepticism of Swift and Fielding, subverting the claim to historicity by carrying it to absurdity. This is one example of how naive empiricism generates its own, radically skeptical, critique. Let me turn now to another example, one related not to the new science but to the new typography.

To a certain extent, we owe the very notion of comparative and competing accounts of the same event to the opportunity for comparison uniquely provided by print. Printing produces documentary objects that can be collected, categorized, collated, and edited. Like science, it promotes the norm of "objective" research, and it favors criteria of judgment that are appropriate to discrete and empirically apprehensible "objects": singularity, formal coherence, and self-consistency. Finally, print encourages a test of veracity that accords with the process itself of typographical reproduction: namely, the exact replication of objects or events in their external and quantitative dimensions.[10] Contemporaries were conscious of the epistemological powers of print. William Winstanley describes "some I have known (otherwise ingenious enough) apt to believe idle Romances, and Poetical Fictions, for Historical Varieties [i.e., verities], . . . and for this only reason, *Because they are Printed.*"[11] But only a slight extension of this awe brings us to the satiric stance of Cervantes, who has a great deal of fun at the expense of

9. Edward Cooke in ibid., II, xix.

10. See in general Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Chap. 2 and passim.

11. *Histories and Observations Domestick and Foreign* . . . . (1683), sig. A5^{v}, A6^{r}.

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characters — including Sancho Panza — who naively believe everything they see in print. In fact much of the self-reflexive pleasure of Part II of *Don Quixote* lies in watching its characters compare the documentary objectivity of part I (which has already been printed) with the more fallible standard of truth upheld by private memory and experience.[12] Cervantes himself naively claims that his book is a "true history" dedicated to the critique of chivalric romance. But we know to read this affiliation, as well as his playful attitude toward print, as at least in part a skeptical critique of naive empiricism.

My third and final example concerns the contribution of Reformation thought to naive empiricism and its subversion. Protestantism, like the standard of "true history," elevates individual and closely observed experience over the a priori pronouncements of tradition. But Protestantism is also the religion of the Book, of the documentary object, and as such it inevitably tends to elevate the truth of Scripture as the truth of "true history." This documentary and empiricist emphasis is clear in the great works of the Protestant tradition. The central aim of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563, 1570) is the documentation of the Protestant martyrs, and the task is achieved in an aura of scrupulous historicity and with a battery of editorial procedures that are dedicated to the critical authentication of every historical detail.[13] Such authenticating procedures may also be found in John Bunyan's *Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (1680), even though its protagonist is a palpable fiction. Bunyan claims that it is based on "True stories, that are neither *Lye,* nor *Romance* . . . All which are things either fully known by me, or being eye and ear-witness thereto, or that I have received from such hands, whose relation as to this, I am bound to believe."[14] By the same token, Protestant spirituality encouraged individual saints to a scrupulous documentation of their own "true histories." When Ralph Thoresby first went up to London, his father sent him a typical directive: "I would have you, in a little book, which you may either buy or make of two or three sheets of paper, take a little journal of any thing remarkable every day, principally as to yourself . . ."[15]

12. E.g., see *Don Quixote,* II (1615), ii-iv.

13. See the discussion of William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 122, 159-60, 213-14.

14. Bunyan, *Life and Death,* 326, sig. A4^{v}.

15. *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby, FRS, Author of the Topography of Leeds (1677-1724),* ed. Rev. Joseph Hunter (1830), I, xv, quoted in George A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Auto-*

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So from the beginning, Protestantism was deeply invested in the materialistically-oriented techniques of naive empiricism as a useful means to its spiritual and otherworldly ends. The potential contradiction between worldly means and otherworldly ends is most apparent in writings like the "apparition narratives" of the later seventeenth century; Defoe's *A True Relation Of the Apparition of one Mrs. Veal* (1706) is the best-known of them today. These narratives use the evidence of the senses in order to prove the extra-sensory world of spirit. They deploy an extraordinary arsenal of authenticating devices — names, places, dates, events, eye- and ear-witness testimony, etc. — in order to prove the reality of the invisible world. Richard Baxter explained his own important contribution to the form in terms that poignantly convey the dilemma of a culture divided between two competing standards of truth that still seem somehow reconcilable: "Apparitions, and other sensible Manifestations of the certain existence of Spirits of themselves Invisible, was a means that might do much with such as are prone to judge by Sense."[16] But it is a very short distance from Baxter's earnest and spiritualizing dependence on the evidence of the senses to the realm of conscious satire. Consider those moderns in Swift's early satires who mistake their own bodily wind for the spirit of intellect and divinity.[17] Once again, that is, the counter-critique of extreme skepticism is involuntarily extruded by naive empiricism itself as a form of subversive self-parody.

But over time, extreme skepticism emerges as a self-conscious and autonomous stance in its own right. Its premises are the same as those of the naive empiricism which it undertakes to negate. It is equally critical, that is, of "romance," but it is so thoroughly skeptical as to discredit empiricist skepticism itself as nothing more than a new, and artfully modernized, species of the old romance. It is this counter-critique that will issue eventually in Fielding's narrative form. Along the way we may observe certain milestones, narratives — like William Congreve's *Incognita* (1691) — which elegantly achieve the double negation that is characteristic of the form: first, of the fictions of romance, and then of naive empiricism itself. But like its antagonist, the counter-critique of extreme skepticism undergoes a considerable development; I have space only to offer several exemplary quotations.

biography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 10.

16. *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* . . . (1691), sig. A4^{r}.

17. E.g., *A Discourse concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* . . . . (1704).

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Richard Steele is an important figure in the attack on naive empiricism. Echoing pamphleteers of the mid-seventeenth century, for example, he argued in one of his periodical letters that newspapers were to England what books of chivalry had been to Spain.[18] Steele was also critical of the claim to historicity in the genre of the secret memoir, which was especially popular among what he called "some merry gentlemen of the French nation." The secret memoir claimed, as Steele observed, to give the true history of military campaigns or court intrigues even though their mendacious authors had really been cowering behind the lines or scribbling in a drafty garret.[19] Writing of the same phenomenon, Pierre Bayle observed that thus "the new romances [that is, these supposedly historical memoirs] keep as far off as possible from the romantic way: but by this means true history is made extremely obscure; and I believe the civil powers will at last be forced to give these new romancers their option; either to write pure history, or pure romance . . ."[20] Henry Stubbe compared the natural histories of the Royal Society to "the story of *Tom Thumb,* and all the *Legends* or *falsifications of History,* which the *Papists* obtrude upon us."[21] The language is striking: whether implicitly or explicitly, over and over true history is discredited as the new romance. The skeptical critique of travel historicity was similarly acerbic. The dubious reader of a typically authenticated travel narrative of 1675 confuted the pamphlet's overheated claims by coolly writing on its title page: "By a new fashion'd Romancer."[22] The most thorough and trenchant critique of travel historicity was made by the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, who began, as Steele did, with the remark that "these are in our present Days, what *Books of Chivalry* were, in those of our Forefathers."[23] As the critique of naive empiricism gained momentum toward the end of the century, parodic impersonation seemed to offer itself as the most likely means of subversion. Another dubious reader of travel narratives wrote the

18. *Tatler,* No. 178, May 27-30, 1710.

19. *Tatler,* No. 84, Oct. 22, 1709.

20. *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr Peter Bayle* (1697), 2nd ed. (1734-38), IV, "Nidhard," n. C, 366.

21. *The Plus Ultra reduced to a Non Plus* . . . (1670), 11.

22. See the copy of [Richard Head,] *O-Brazile, or the Inchanted Island* . . . (1675) reproduced in *Seventeenth-Century Tales of the Supernatural,* ed. Isabel M. Westcott, *Augustan Reprint Society,* No. 74 (1958).

23. *"Soliloquy:* or Advice to an Author" (1714), in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times,* 2nd ed. (1714), I, 344.

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following parody of a rival's fashionably plain style of objective narration: "*We cast Anchor: We made ready to Sail. The Wind took Courage.* Robin *is dead. We said Mass. We Vomited.* [Then he continues in his own, sarcastic voice.] Tho' they are poor Words any where else, yet in his Book, which is half compos'd of them, they are Sentences, and the worth of them is not to be told."[24]

But if this kind of extreme skepticism was to become more than an (admittedly liberating) act of subversion, it was obliged, like the subversive stance of naive empiricism before it, to elaborate an alternative, positive, and coherent conception of how to tell the truth in narrative. And here its position was quite as unstable as that of its opponent. For if the claim to historicity is naively posited as the negation of the negation of romance idealism, how tenuous must be that secret sanctuary of truth, distinct both from romance and from too confident a historicity, which is defined by the meta-critical act of double negation? With hindsight we might want to say that the counter-critique of extreme skepticism was groping toward a mode of narrative truth-telling which, through the very self-consciousness of its own fictionality, somehow detoxifies fiction of its error. But the ingenuity of this maneuver could itself look more like a mask for the stealthy recapitulation of romance lies. Consider Fielding's ostentatious indulgence in romance conventions, or Swift's obviously parabolic narratives. Indeed the sheer defensiveness of this counter-stance makes it parasitic upon, and reproductive of, the errors of the enemy. If naive empiricism is too sanguine regarding its own powers of negating romance fiction, its critique is too skeptical about that possibility, and it risks, through its reactive method of parodic impersonation, the effectual affirmation of what it is equally committed to replacing.

Both epistemologies, in other words, are unstable. I would argue that they attain stability not in themselves but in each other, in their dialectical relationship, as two competing versions of how to tell the truth in narrative, which, in their competition, constitute one part of the origins of the novel. The paradigmatic case is *Pamela* (1740) vs. *Shamela* (1741), since it is then that the conflict emerges into public consciousness and is institutionalized as a battle over whether it is Richardson or Fielding that is creating the "new species of writing." My

24. [François Misson,] *A New Voyage to the East-Indies, by Francis Leguat and His Companions* . . . . (London and Amsterdam, 1708), iv. The rival is the Abbot of Choisy.

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argument is that it is, rather, the conjunction of the two. But I would also point out that the logic of our progress through the seventeenth century into the middle of the eighteenth argues against trying to pinpoint "the first novel," or even its first dialectical engagement. Before *Pamela* and *Shamela,* for example, there is the tacit but crucial confrontation between *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a confrontation to which I will return. The novel rises not in the isolated emergence of a great text or two, but as an experimental process consisting of many different stages.

II

So far our attention has been focussed on epistemological instability, and the series of critiques by which questions of truth are propounded. We must now turn to the analogous questions of virtue, to the instability of socioeconomic categories, and to the interaction between what I have called the aristocratic, progressive, and conservative ideologies. In the seventeenth century, the traditional imprecision in the use of status categories is complicated by an unprecedented rate of social mobility. The effects of this mobility are suggested by the fact that it is at this time that attempts begin to be made to assess the population not according to a traditional, status stratification, but by annual income and expenditures. This amounts to the first, systematic emergence of the modern impulse to classify society according to the fundamentally economic criteria of class.

The form taken by these population tables is quite relevant to our purposes, because they provide the sort of evidence of instability, on the subject of social categories, that we found in publishers' book lists on the subject of generic categories. Gregory King's celebrated table of the 1690's ostensibly aims to give a continuous financial, and therefore quantitative, progression from the top to the bottom of English society. But he is obliged to work with both honorific and occupational categories, and around the middle of his table the two sorts of category become intermixed in a way that undermines the purpose of the project. For in several cases, King lists status categories above occupational ones, even though the crucial standard of average yearly income should reverse the orders. In other words, King's abiding respect for the traditional status hierarchy momentarily overrules his modernizing aim to create a hierarchy of incomes. The qualitative criteria of

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status infiltrate and disrupt the effort at a quantitative categorization.[25] Half a century later, in 1760, Joseph Massie carried over King's six traditional categories of elevated status to the top of his own table. But they repose there aloof and untouched, a kind of honorific gesture that has nothing to do with the real work of economic discrimination, for which Massie uses completely different categories in the rest of his table. In other words, status categories persist here as a vestigial remnant of a mode of thought which, however useless in the definitive description of contemporary English people by class, still appears indispensable.[26]

In both men, the instability of social categories owes to a discrepancy between two standards of classification, that of "status" and that of "class." It reflects what we might call a crisis of "status inconsistency," a divergence of power, wealth, and status widespread and persistent enough to resist the methods by which stable societies traditionally have accommodated the instances of non-correspondence that occasionally must arise. One such method is the traditional granting or selling of honors to newly enriched but ignoble families. To speak of "traditional" societies is also to speak of societies dominated by what I have called an "aristocratic" ideology. In aristocratic culture, it is not only that power, wealth, and honorific status most often accompany each other; honor also is understood to imply personal merit or virtue. Thus the social hierarchy is a great system of signification: the outward forms of genealogy and social rank are taken to signify an analogous, intrinsic moral order. The seventeenth-century crisis of status inconsistency therefore strikes at the moral foundations of aristocratic ideology. The sale of honors became, in Lawrence Stone's phrase, an "inflation," and the latent tension between honorific and monetary criteria became a glaring contradiction for contemporaries.[27] The word "honor" itself acquired a more complicated import. As a neutral

25. See the discussion in David Cressy, "Describing the Social Order of Elizabethan and Stuart England," *Literature and History,* No. 3 (March, 1976), 29-44.

26. See Peter Matthias, "The Social Structure in the Eighteenth Century: A Calculation by Joseph Massie," in *The Transformation of England: Essays in the Economic and Social History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 176, 186, 188.

27. See Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), Chap. 3. For a discussion of "status inconsistency" and reference-group theory in the context of seventeeth-century historiography, see Stone's *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529-1642* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), Chap. 1.

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term of description, its meaning was, in effect, internalized, changing from "title of rank" to "goodness of character."[28] But "honor" in the more traditional sense of the term, like "romance," had fallen on very hard times.

We can hear this in the genial contempt expressed by Bernard Mandeville. For Mandeville, honor "is only to be met with in People of the better sort, as some Oranges have kernels, and others not, tho' the outside be the same. In great Families it is like the Gout, generally counted Hereditary, and all Lords Children are born with it . . . . But there is nothing that encourages the Growth of it more than a Sword, and upon the first wearing of one, some People have felt considerable Shutes of it, in Four and twenty Hours."[29] The aristocratic system of signification held no illusions for Stephen Penton, either. For "if Merit were to be the Standard of Worldly Happiness, what great desert is there in being born Eldest Son and Heir to several Thousands a Year, when sometimes it falls out, that the Person is hardly able to Answer Two or Three the easiest Questions in the World wisely enough to save himself from being Begg'd?"[30] William Sprigge plausibly argued that "the younger Son is apt to think himself sprung from as Noble a stock, from the loyns of as good a Gentleman as his elder Brother, and therefore cannot but wonder, why fortune and the Law should make so great a difference between them that lay in the same wombe, that are formed of the same lumpe; why Law or Custome should deny them an estate, whom nature hath given discretion to know how to manage it."[31] And Defoe draws the versified conclusion:

> What is't to us, what Ancestors we had?
> If Good, what better? or what worse, if Bad?
> . . . . . .
> For Fame of Families is all a Cheat,
> *'Tis Personal Virtue only makes us great.*[32]

In the realm of social change, the idea of "personal virtue" occupies

28. A generalization based on the use of the term in dramatic contexts: see C.L. Barber, *The Idea of Honor in the English Drama, 1591-1700,* Gothenburg Studies in English, 6 (Göteborg: Elanders, 1957), 330-31.

29. *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), ed. Phillip Harth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), "Remark (R)," 212-13.

30. *New Instructions to the Guardian* . . . (1694), 135-36.

31. *A Modest Plea for an Equal Common-wealth Against Monarchy* . . . . (1659), 62-63.

32. *The True-Born Englishman. A Satyr* (1700), 70-71.

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the place that "true history" does in epistemology. For progressive ideology, elevated birth is an arbitrary accident which should not be taken to signify worth. If it is, it becomes a fiction, an imaginary value, like "honor" a mere "romance." Thus Defoe observes that when gentlemen "value themselves as exalted in birth above the rest of the world . . .," it is upon the basis of a strictly "imaginary honour."[33] *Real* honor, honor of *character,* attaches to personal virtue. And Defoe heartily approved of the assimilationist practice whereby the meritorious and newly-risen crowned their merit through the purchase of titles of rank.

But what were Swift's views on questions of virtue? Swift was as caustic as Defoe on the subject of aristocratic pretension. But he was far more inclined to see the ideas of inherited honor and gentle birth as useful fictions that had an instrumental social value. "Suppose there be nothing but *Opinion* in the Difference of Blood," he wrote. "Surely, that Difference is not wholly imaginary . . . . It should seem that the Advantage lies on the Side of Children, born from noble and wealthy Parents . . . [And] Ancient and honorable Birth[,] . . . whether it be of real or imaginary Value, hath been held in Veneration by all wise, polite States, both Ancient and Modern."[34] It may seem puzzling that men like Swift should return to half-embrace the very fiction they have rejected. But we already have seen this sort of movement in the return of extreme skepticism to a form of self-conscious romancing. For progressives like Defoe, aristocratic ideology was subverted and replaced by a brave new view of social signification. Virtue is signified not by the a priori condition of having been born with status and honor, but by the ongoing experience of demonstrated achievement and just reward. Thus the status inconsistency endemic to aristocratic culture is rectified, in this progressive view, by upward mobility through state service, private employment, or any other method of industrious self-application. To conservatives like Swift, this progressive model of the career open to talents was deeply repellant, as we will see. But the negation of both aristocratic and progressive ideology left conservative ideology without a positive and stable view of how the social injustice of status inconsistency ever might be overcome.

33. *The Compleat English Gentleman* (written 1728-29), ed. Karl D. Bülbring (London: David Nutt, 1890), 171.

34. *Examiner,* No. 40, May 10, 1711; (Irish) *Intelligencer,* No. 9 (1728).

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From the conservative point of view, progressive ideology only replaced the old social injustice by a new and more brutal version of it, unsoftened now by any useful fictions of inherited authority. At the heart of this new system was the naked cash nexus. For the conservative, the archetypal progressive upstart rose by exploiting the capitalist market, and especially the new mechanisms of financial investment and public credit which were established at the end of the seventeenth century. For men like Swift, only landed property had real value. All other property was, as he put it, "transient and imaginary," but most of all that of exchange value.[35] Defoe also recognized that the modern world of exchange value was ruled by, in his phrase, "the Power of Imagination."[36] And he perceived that in some mysterious sense, capitalist credit was only a secularization of aristocratic honor. But Defoe was convinced that the circulation of money and the opportunity for capital accumulation were essential if individual merit were to be dependably signified and rewarded. For Swift, the market exchange of commodities only established a new elite of the undeserving on the grounds of a new, and far more dangerous, species of corruption. That is, it only institutionalized a new form of status inconsistency: namely, wealth and power without virtue. As for honorific status, the situation had become hopelessly confused. To the conservative mentality, there was an obvious corruption in those progressive upstarts who sought to legitimate their rise by the purchase of a title. But the system of honors was itself corrupted, and many ancient landed families were as thoroughly indebted to the capitalist market for the improvement of their estates as anyone.

Here, as on questions of truth, the doubly-critical posture of men like Swift left very little ground for the affirmation of any positive social signifier of merit and virtue. With the triumph of Whig oligarchy in the eighteenth century, the aristocratic order seems to regain its stability after the rapid social mobility of the previous century. But the status category of "aristocracy" has altered considerably, even if the terminology has remained the same. The status orientation itself has been complicated by a class orientation — by individualistic and monetary criteria and by capitalist practices. The rise of the middle class, in other words, was not the rise of a discrete and determinate social entity, but a

35. *Examiner,* No. 34, Mar. 29, 1711.
36. *Review,* III, No. 126, Oct. 22, 1706.

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historical process in which traditional status groups were altered as much from within as from without. And the rise of the middle class is inseparable from the rise of a class orientation toward social relations. Men like Swift knew this; they knew that the enemy was not so easily distinguished as an ungentle, upstart invader from without. Nevertheless, for lack of a more dependable signifier, they retained in their minds the possession of land and gentle status as a self-consciously conventional signification of what seemed an increasingly embattled virtue.

Why should narrative, in particular, be suitable for the representation of progressive and conservative ideologies? The term "ideology" often is used to suggest a simplistic reduction of human complexity. But as I intend the term, "ideology" is discourse whose purpose is to mediate and explain apparently intractable social problems — in this case, the problematic questions of virtue. To explain the condition of status inconsistency is not to explain it away, but to render it intelligible. In fact, the very plausibility of ideological explanation depends on the degree to which it appears to do justice to the contradictory social reality that it seeks to explain. In the present context, ideological explanation works by telling stories. The question of how virtue is signified has an inherently narrative focus because it is concerned with genealogical succession and individual progress, with how human capacity is manifested in and through time. This concern can be seen in the "macro-narrative" of seventeenth-century history itself, which provided writers with an important model for their novelistic micro-narratives. Seventeenth-century England was vitally concerned with the problem of political sovereignty and its sources. At the beginning of the century, sovereignty seemed to rest with the king and to be validated by, among other things, his genealogical inheritance of royalty. In 1642, Charles I warned that parliament's challenge to royal sovereignty threatened the very continuity of the historical succession. The great danger, he said, was that at last the common people would "destroy all rights and proprieties, all distinctions of families and merit, and by this means this splendid and excellently distinguished form of government end in a dark, equal chaos of confusion, and the long line of our many noble ancestors in a Jack Cade or a Wat Tyler."[37]

37. "Answer to the Nineteen Propositions," June 18, 1642, in J.P. Kenyon, ed., *The Stuart Constitution, 1603-1688: Documents and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 23.

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Charles was not entirely wrong in this apocalyptic prophecy: seven years after it he was decapitated. And before the end of the century, the nation had joined together to depose another rightful monarch and to exclude the next fifty-seven prospective heirs to the throne. In their place was crowned a foreigner, and in the place of sovereignty by genealogical inheritance was affirmed sovereignty by achievement: the simple and pragmatic fact that a peaceful and stable settlement had been achieved.[38]

In the language of questions of virtue, the fall of Charles I is the most infamous instance of status inconsistency in the century. And after the Battle of Worcester in 1651, prince Charles wandered the land in disguise like nothing so much as a romance hero destined, after much travail, to be discovered and restored to his aristocratic patrimony.[39] But to readers of a progressive persuasion, the triumphs of Oliver Cromwell and William of Orange showed, in different ways, the superiority of industrious valor to mere lineage. Progressive ideology even entered into the making of Cromwell's New Model Army. In 1643 he declared: "I had rather have a plain russett-coated captain that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that which you call a gentleman and is nothing else . . . Better plain men than none, but best to have men patient of wants, faithful and conscientious in the employment . . ."[40]

Cromwell's language here reminds us that Calvinist Protestantism has an important relevance to progressive ideology, for God's mark of inner nobility was superior to any external social elevation. Speaking of divine election, Cromwell asked: "May not this stamp [of God] bear equal poise with any hereditary interest . . . ?"[41] And, as a coreligionist affirmed, "It is not the birth, but the new birth, that makes men truly noble."[42] If Calvinist election argued a new aristocracy alternative to

38. See Gerald M. Straka, *Anglican Reaction to the Revolution of 1688,* State Historical Society of Wisconsin (Madison, Wi.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962).

39. See *Charles II's Escape from Worcester: A Collection of Narratives Assembled by Samuel Pepys,* ed. William Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 40, 42, 44, 50, 74, 96.

40. To Suffolk County Committee, Aug. 29, Sept. 28, 1643, in *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell,* ed. Wilbur C. Abbott (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1937), I, 256, 262.

41. Quoted in Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 266.

42. Thomas Edwards, "The Holy Choice," in *Three Sermons* (1625), 63-64, quoted in *ibid.,* 235.

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that of birth, Calvinist discipline dictated a spirit of service and reform that worked both to glorify the works of God and to signify one's possession of grace. But what are the narrative implications of this dovetailing of Protestant belief and progressive ideology? As early as Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, the apocalyptic battle between the Roman Catholic hierarchy and God's saints is colored by the progressive contest between corrupt noblemen and industrious commoners. Foxe's "Story of Roger Holland, Martyr," for example, is the tale of an apprentice who is idle and licentious until the moment of his Protestant conversion. Thereafter he prospers wonderfully as a merchant tailor. So when the reformed apprentice is finally called up before his papist inquisitor, he is able to manifest, through a spirited resistance and a serene martyrdom, that spiritual grace which already has been apparent in his labor discipline and his material prosperity.[43]

Calvinist doctrine encouraged in progressive narrative the self-serving conviction that divine grace could be internalized as virtue, and externalized once again as worldly achievement. But Calvinism also counselled against the proud sufficiency of human desire, and it sharpened the conservative critique of enthusiasm and the Protestant ethic. The adventures of Robinson Crusoe exemplify both the ethical obstacles to progressive ideology, and the power of that ideology to drive all before it. Robinson Crusoe is an industrious younger son whose worldly success at first signifies nothing more than acquisitiveness and ambition. But once he is shipwrecked, his island turns out to be a progressive utopia. Because it excludes all human society, it provides an arena in which the anti-social passions of avarice and domination can be indulged without suffering the consequences. Thus Robinson can accumulate goods without creating exchange value. He can exercise absolute sovereignty without incurring the wrath of a greater authority. And when human society finds him, and it comes time to leave the island, he is able to naturalize the artificial, laboratory conditions of his utopia because he has learned to internalize divinity, to identify his own passions with the will of God. A slighter version of this progressive, utopian plot is given by Henry Neville, whose George Pine is an industrious city apprentice who happens to stumble into a travel narrative.[44] Stranded with four women on an Edenic desert

43. See *Acts and Monuments*, ed. S.R. Cattley (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1839), VIII, 473-74.

44. See *The Isle of Pines* . . . (1668).

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island where productive labor is unneeded, Pine resourcefully proceeds to manifest his merit through reproductive labor, populating the island with offspring who then constitute a new genealogy and social order, of which he is the unquestioned sovereign.

But the progressive battle between aristocratic corruption and industrious virtue could of course be waged in a setting closer to home. Often it was embodied in plots that pitted aristocratic seducers, rapists, and dunderheads against chaste and canny young women of the middle and lower orders. The obvious exemplar is Richardson's *Pamela* (although it is by no means the rule that virtue should be so ostentatiously rewarded as hers is). Behind Pamela lies a succession of Pamela-like heroines, including the sister of Gabriel Harvey (Spenser's college friend), who left a manuscript account of her pert resistance to seduction.[45] The most important development of this particular progressive plot model was achieved by Aphra Behn, whose ingenious variations include a female aristocratic oppressor who is pathologically fixated on nobility of birth as the trigger of sexual desire, and who is finally reformed by falling in love with an apparent nobleman who turns out to be the son of a Dutch merchant.[46]

Whatever their differences, progressive plots have in common the aim to explain the meaning of the current crisis of status inconsistency, and, in the symbolic realm of fictional action, to overcome it. How do conservative plots manage this explanation so as to subvert progressive ideology itself? One method is by making the oppressor an aristocrat not by birth but by purchase, and his ruling corruption not sexual desire, but the lust for money and power. But the villains of conservative plots need not be aristocrats at all. Fielding's undeserving upstarts, like Shamela and Jonathan Wild, show an obvious debt to the assorted rogues, highwaymen, and pirates of criminal biography. When Charles Davenant undertook to describe the fall of English virtue under the Whigs, he cast his macro-history in the pseudo-autobiographical form of a micro-narrative about the rise of the rogue figure Mr. Double, "now worth Fifty thousand Pound, and 14 years ago I had not Shoes on my Feet." Mr. Double's story is that of a bad appren-

45. See "A Noble Mans Sute to a Cuntrie Maide," in *Letter-Book of Gabriel Harvey, 1573-1580,* ed. Edward J.L. Scott, Camden Society, N. S. 33 (London: Nichols and Sons, 1884), 144-58.

46. See *The Fair Jilt: or, the History of Prince Tarquin, and Miranda* (1696), in *The Histories and Novels Of the Late Ingenious Mrs Behn* . . . (1696).

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tice whose vice is not idleness but too much industry, and he ends his allegorical autobiography by comparing himself to "most of the Modern Whigs . . . Did they rise by Virtue or Merit? No more than my self."[47]

When conservative protagonists are sympathetic, they are victims of the modern world — either comically ingenuous innocents, or sacrifices to its corrupt inhumanity. One of the striking achievements of *Gulliver's Travels* is that its protagonist is able to fill both of these conservative roles. Like Robinson Crusoe, Lemuel Gulliver begins as a naive and industrious younger son, a quantifying empiricist and an upwardly-mobile progressive. In Lilliput he falls into the role of the obsequious new man, hungry for royal favor and titles of honor (recall his assimilationist vanity at being made a Nardac, the highest honor in the land). But Gulliver in Lilliput is also a hardworking public servant who ruefully learns, like Lord Munodi later on, the conservative truth about modern courts and their disdain for true merit. However in his final voyage Gulliver so successfully assimilates upward that he goes native, believes he is a Houyhnhnm, and is forced to endure the comic rustication of an unsuccessful upstart, bloated with pride and uncomprehendingly indignant at his failure to make it.

In this final character of Gulliver (or in that of Shamela) we see the industrious virtue of the progressive protagonist pushed to its limits, so that it breaks open to reveal an ugly core of hypocritical opportunism. This technique of parodic impersonation is typical both of conservative ideology, and of its epistemological counterpart, extreme skepticism. It is the mark of a stance so intricately reactive as to be hard to pry loose, at times, from what it opposes. Moreover unlike progressive narrative, conservative plots are far from hopeful about the overcoming of the social injustice and status inconsistency which they explain with such passion. Their frequent pattern is a retrograde series of disenchantments with all putative resolutions, and conservative utopias tend to be, as Houyhnhnmland is and as Robinson Crusoe's island is not, hedged about with self-conscious fictionality, strictly unfulfillable and nowhere to be found.

Let me now briefly summarize this attempt to rethink the rise of the novel. In order to overcome some deficiencies in the reigning model of

47. *The True Picture of a Modern Whig . . .*, "6th ed." (1701), 14, 32.

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what this movement amounted to, I have isolated, as its central principle, two recurrent patterns of "double reversal." Naive empiricism negates romance idealism, and is in turn negated by a more extreme skepticism and a more circumspect approach to truth. Progressive ideology subverts aristocratic ideology, and is in turn subverted by conservative ideology. It is in these double reversals, and in their conflation, that the novel is constituted as a dialectical unity of opposed parts, an achievement that is tacitly acknowledged by the gradual stabilization of "the novel" as a terminological and a conceptual category in eighteenth-century usage. But we have also been concerned with a pattern of historical reversal that is of broader dimension than this movement, and from whose more elevated perspective the conflicts that are defined by our double reversals may even appear to dissolve into unity. For as we have seen over and over again, the origins of the English novel entail the positing of a "new" generic category as a dialectical negation of a "traditional" dominance — the romance, the aristocracy — whose character still saturates, as an antithetical but constitutive force, the texture of the category by which it is in the process of being replaced.

Of course the very capacity of seventeenth-century narrative to model itself so self-consciously on established categories bespeaks a detachment sufficient to imagine them *as* categories, to parody and thence to supersede them. And with hindsight we may see that the early development of the novel is our great example of the way that the birth of genres results from a momentary negation of the present so intense that it attains the positive status of a new tradition. But at the "first instant" of this broader dialectical reversal, the novel has a definitional volatility, a tendency to dissolve into its antithesis, which encapsulates the dialectical nature of historical process itself at a critical moment in the emergence of the modern world.

I have argued that the volatility of the novel at this time is *analogous* to that of the middle class. But it is clear that in a certain sense, the emerging novel also has *internalized* the emergence of the middle class in its preoccupation with the problem of how virtue is signified. From time to time we can observe the distinct questions of virtue and truth being raised simultaneously by writers of the most diverse aims and formal commitments. At such times we sense that writers wish to "make something" of the analogous relation between these questions, if only through their tacit juxtaposition. And occasionally the analogy will

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even be explicitly asserted. In this way, questions of truth and virtue begin to seem not so much distinct problems, as versions or transformations of each other, distinct ways of formulating and propounding a fundamental problem of what might be called epistemological, sociological, and ethical "signification." And the essential unity of this problem is clear from the fact that progressive and conservative positions on questions of virtue have their obvious corollary positions with respect to questions of truth. What this means is that epistemological choices come to have ideological significance, and a given account of the nature of social reality implies a certain formal commitment and procedure. Moreover we may conceive these correlations of truth and virtue also in terms of narrative form and content, so that the way the story is told, and what it is that is told, are implicitly understood to bear an integral relation to each other.

But I do not mean to suggest that the conflation of questions of truth and virtue occurred easily or quickly. On the contrary, it is the result of much thought and experimentation, a very small portion of which I have described here, expended over a considerable period of time. And the conflation itself begins to occur when writers begin to act — first gingerly, then systematically — upon the insight that the difficulties of one set of problems may be mediated and illuminated by the reflection of the other. This insight — the deep and fruitful analogy between questions of truth and questions of virtue — is the enabling foundation of the novel. And the genre of the novel can be understood comprehensively as an early modern cultural instrument designed to confront, on the level of narrative form and content, both intellectual and social crisis simultaneously. The novel emerges into consciousness when this conflation can be made with complete confidence. The conflict then comes to be embodied in a public controversy between Richardson and Fielding — writers who are understood to represent coherent, autonomous, and alternative methods for doing the same thing. At this point — in the mid-1740's, after the first confrontation between Richardson and Fielding — the novel has come to the end of its origins. And it begins then to enter new territory.

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