

# REALIST LITERARY HISTORY: McKEON'S NEW ORIGINS OF THE NOVEL

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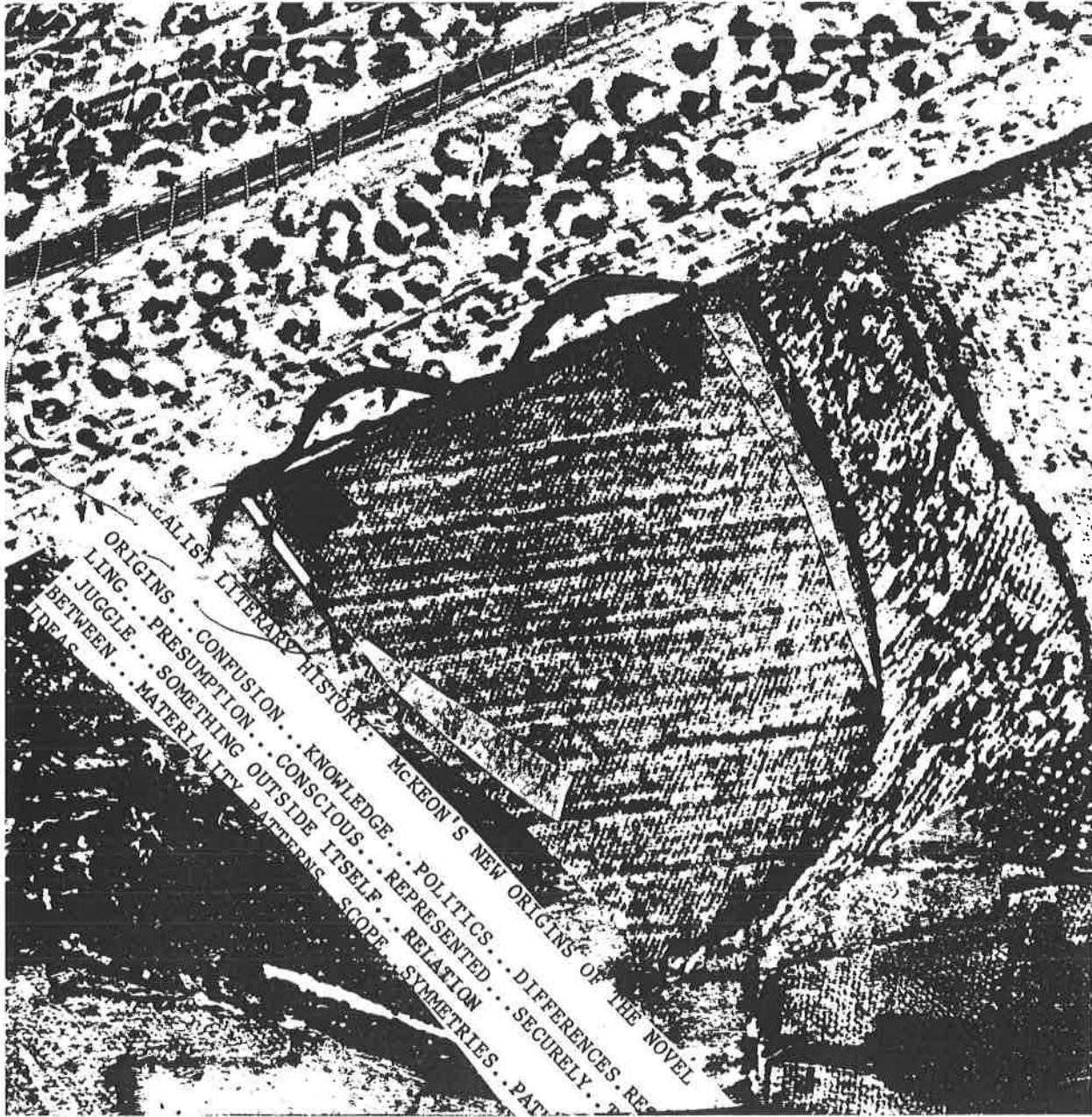
McKeon, Michael. THE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL:  
1600-1740. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.

There is a new fascination among scholars with the question of the novel's origins.<sup>1</sup> Michael McKeon's book aims to untie what might be called the Gordian knot of eighteenth-century studies: how does one explain the cultural prominence won by the novel over the course of that century? This question depends upon a certain scholarly consensus: that as of 1700 there were very few texts that we would now call novels, but by 1800 there were many; and, while at the earlier date a general terminological confusion prevailed in England around the use of the terms "romance," "history," and "novel," by the later date the term "novel" was used with confidence to refer to a morally serious species of prose fiction that had won wide popularity and was beginning to claim a cultural centrality equivalent with the established literary genres of epic, drama, and poetry [25].

In *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740*, Michael McKeon's approach to the question of the novel's rise has its provenance in a large and influential body of marxist literary history. There, the novel's origin becomes a signal instance of a vast but decisive modern cultural shift from aristocratic to middle-class norms and audience. An ample elaboration of the marxist contexts of McKeon's study would require a patient exposition of themes that I will simply summarize here under the rubric "the axioms of marxist novel theory." The special affinity marxist thinkers and critics—beginning with Marx and Engels, through Lukács and Bakhtin, to Watt and Jameson—have demonstrated for the novel seems to result from the way the novel anticipates at a cultural level those achievements toward which marxism aspires at the level of both knowledge and politics. The novel does a detailed analysis of the social; it is cast in the form of purposive progressive historical narratives; the novel achieves immense popularity in the modern period. Within literary studies, a marxist critique of formalistic and psychoanalytic approaches to the novel has helped justify a shift from considering it as a genre or a literary type

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1. In addition to recent books by Nancy Armstrong and John Bender discussed in this essay, I have in mind Leonard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983); Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986); Robert W. Uphaus, ed., *The Idea of the Novel in the Eighteenth Century* (City: Colleagues Press, 1988); and Frances Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* 10: 88-112.



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ORIGINS... CONFUSION... KNOWLEDGE... POLITICS... DIFFERENCES RE  
LING... PRESUMPTION... CONSCIOUS... REPRESENTED... SECURELY...  
JUGGLE... SOMETHING OUTSIDE ITSELF... RELATION... SYMMETRIES... PAT  
BETWEEN... MATERIALITY PATTERNS... SCOPE...  
IDEALS

to considering it as a historical problem. By embedding the question of the rise of the novel within the context of the many changes of economy, social class, and ideology to which it seems tethered, the origin of the novel becomes a historical enigma which, if properly fathomed, might afford marxist critics a way to understand how a particular new form of literature—the realistic novel—has played its part in cultural change. Thus in marxist accounts of the novel's rise, like those of Kettle, Watt, and Eagleton, the distinctive explanatory power of their literary histories depends upon deriving that rise from something other than the literary—whether it is shifts in economy, class, or ideology.

These premises of marxist approaches to the novel help explain why, for marxist criticism, the novel becomes a historical problem calling for an historical investigation, issuing in literary historical narratives. Arnold Kettle poses the question this way: "Why did the novel arise when it did?" [Kettle 7, 35]. On the opening pages of *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt asks, is "the novel a new literary form? . . . Does it differ from the prose fiction of the past? . . . And is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?" [Watt 9]. McKeon takes up the question of the novel's origins once again but seeks to frame his study in more rigorously historical terms. McKeon criticizes the vagueness of the historical recipe in which certain elements—capitalism, the new middle class, and the modern subject—when thrown into the caldron of early eighteenth-century English history, produce (presto!) a new literary form—the Modern Novel. McKeon insists that Watt fails to take account of the rich eighteenth-century development of romance, the difficulty of defining the "middle class," and the belatedness of its rise, all of which are at stake in Watt's failure to account for the centrality of Fielding to the early novel [McKeon 1–4]. But McKeon's difference from Watt extends much further than these explicit disagreements, to include an attempt to reconceive the literary history of the novel. Although McKeon's study seems closer in its theoretical premises to the "cultural materialism" practiced in Britain than to the New Historicism now in such vogue in North America, his study is part of the broad new turn and return to history in literary studies. McKeon shares with the New Historicism the insight that our culture represses the ideological determinants of its cultural formations through a forgetting of its history. In order to overcome that complacent forgetfulness that allows the novel to appear as a self-evident cultural artifact, McKeon responds to the historical imperative in contemporary criticism by narrating the origins of the novel, one of the chief cultural inventions of the epoch of the rise of the middle class and capitalism.

In order to consider what is at stake in McKeon's attempt to provide a more rigorously historical account of the novel's rise, we need a clear image of what vitiates the old historicism, what in fact is *anti-historical* about Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*. In the first chapter of his book, Watt's overview of the "rise" of the modern novel pivots on a double understanding of the novelistic form that emerges in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, this form is motivated by a bold utopian effort to achieve "the immediacy and closeness of the text to what is being described" [Watt 29], which would thereby offer "a full and authentic report of human experience . . . [with] such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms" [32]. On the other hand, Watt is at pains in this opening chapter to insist that what emerges from this program is "only a convention" which produces, through a certain "formlessness" of form, the "impression" of representing the real [13]. In fact, what results is "a report on human life" not "any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres" [32]. As long as Watt's account of the novel preserves a fruitful balance between an emerging novelistic convention and the novel's utopian program, between its "form" and its "realism," it provides a frame for conceiving the emergence of the novel historically. The arbitrariness of the new form's conventions qualifies its purchase on the "real"; the contingencies of

its history would compromise its claims to truth. But beginning with the first chapter, and over the course of his study, Watt becomes an enthusiastic spokesman for the novel's utopian program and the novel's irresistible "rise." The basic elements of formal realism take on the authority of Kantian categories and come to define a universal desideratum for any effective representation in language. This produces an implicit teleological pull in Watt's narrative, whereby Defoe and Richardson seem to labor in their writing labs to invent "formal realism" for future generations rather than writing as eighteenth-century authors as yet unaware of the modern novel as we have come to live it.

Watt's celebratory narrative of formal realism's triumph produces the often noticed bias in critical valuations of Watt's book, most blatantly his favoring of Richardson over Fielding. It is during his readings of *Pamela* and *Clarissa* that the ideological stakes of that bias begin to become apparent. When Watt demonstrates how Richardson uses formal realism to achieve an unheralded psychological realism, this realism is no longer considered as a conventional form that might be arbitrary or artificial. Through this reading of Richardson, Watt's book becomes an exponent of a certain idea of the human: its complex, rich, ambivalent interiority which the novel is no longer conspiring to invent but is unveiling in its transhistorical reality. At this point, rather than explaining the emergence of a certain modern, psychologically centered humanist ideology, or how the novel might function as its discursive underpinning, Watt simply champions it.<sup>2</sup> I suspect that a good deal of the conceptual and narrative appeal of Watt's book comes from its sense of closure on two fronts: the novel is perfected as a representational apparatus for the modern period while at the same time it successfully articulates "the human" as having a modern, vaguely psychoanalytic complexity. Mimesis and humanism work together, and Watt functions discursively like the early celebrators of film who codified a representational system which seemed to them to arrive, in a definitive new fashion, at a truth to reality [Bordwell et al.]. By contrast, McKeon casts his study so that he can take account of the history, at once intellectual, discursive, political, and social, by which two ideological formations—the modern subject and the diverse narrative means of putting it into language—are coimplicated in the emergence of the modern novel.

The problem posed by Watt's history for those who would pursue his aim on other terms may be put this way: how can one do a history that will not make the novel's rise the means by which the Western bourgeoisie fulfills its cultural manifest destiny? In order to envision a demystified but politically valuable history of capital, Marx sought to overcome the developmental bias of bourgeois political economy, the presumption that "the history of economy culminates in us." In explicit analogy with Marx, McKeon attempts to overcome the developmental bias of Watt's literary history of the novel's rise by doing a more rigorously historical study of those pre-novelistic forms of narrative, those original ideological struggles, out of which the novel emerged. Marx offers a method of historical inquiry which, by being both self-reflexive and self-critical about the standpoint of its historical investigation, develops a way to trace the history of a modern cultural formation such as "labor" or the "novel" without reducing either the alterity of its origins or the complex and various specificity of its modern forms. McKeon maintains that, before 1740, there is, as far back as one can go, an "ever-pre-giveness" of narrative forms resembling later novelistic practice. But beginning in 1740, through the debates between Richardson and Fielding about the proper form of novelistic narrative, "the novel" emerges in England as a "simple abstraction" [17]. The culture can then abstract a group of diverse and complex narrative practices into something single—that (only apparent) unity named "the novel."

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2. For a different account of Richardson's novels, and a more detailed description of the ideological underpinnings of Watt's readings, see my *Reading Clarissa: The Struggles of Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), especially chapter 7.

In order to offer a representation of the cultural matrix out of which the novel will emerge, McKeon devotes the first two-thirds of his study to the ways narratives in the early modern period engage two fundamental questions: the "question of truth" and the "question of virtue." The calculated vagueness of these two questions is indispensable to the role they have in McKeon's historical account. By becoming the conscious experience and represented content of cultural strife in the early modern period, these two questions organize and mediate that strife. Since these questions inflect news, travel, history, memoirs as surely as the high cultural production of art and philosophy, following their development results in an "intellectual history" that cuts across a very broad band of social life. Throughout his history, McKeon makes us see the way the questions of truth and virtue reflect the pressure of a heterogeneous series of quite specific crises: an ongoing secularization; the English civil war with its attendant political conflicts and social dislocations; exchange value's ever-accelerating power to create new wealth; and a resulting "status inconsistency" between virtue and status—to name only the most salient. But the questions of truth and virtue "address" these particular crises in a fashion that is general, abstract, and indirect. In this way, they can produce "solutions" to ideological problems which, though never fully acknowledged during their cultural negotiation, still satisfy because they are complex and mystifying enough to seem natural and correct.

### *Dialectical History: From Literal History to Realism*

But a problem dogs McKeon's literary history. The "dialectical" form of narration McKeon uses risks returning his narrative to the novelistic and dialectical protocols—of a seamless temporal unfolding, of securely accumulating subjecthood, of stable causal explanation—that he would stand outside of and expose to a rigorous defamiliarizing historical analysis. In order to assess the efficacy of the dialectical narrative McKeon deploys to tell the story of the origins of the novel, I will retrace one thread of McKeon's argument—his account of the early modern efforts to find a way to tell the truth in narrative. Part 1 of McKeon's book offers a rich and dense compendium of the remarkable variety of narrative practices through which "the question of truth" was fought out and underwent transformation. What drives these shifts in narrative practice is a skeptical critique and an idealistic quest: how might one devise a narrative that eschews contamination by the vitiating fictionality of romance, so one might faithfully deliver the facts to its reader? In following the responses to this question through McKeon's own critical narrative, it will become apparent that McKeon's late modern attempt to write a truthful literary history can hardly stand apart from the problems encountered in these early modern experiments in narrative.

McKeon's history demonstrates that what has traditionally justified the intensifier "true" in "true history" is not the bare facts but the supplement from some "other" region—of religion, ethics, and providential pattern. The difficulty of finding a this-worldly verification of narrative truth may be illustrated with the problem of quantitative completeness. When John Foxe collects the histories of Protestant martyrs, he demonstrates a "self-conscious devotion to the pursuit of truth in all its exhaustive contingency and detail, that is worthy of a skeptical new philosopher" [92]. But when Foxe's account of the martyrdom of three women and an unborn child mentions nothing about the father of the child, Foxe's narrative comes in for the suspicions of one "master Harding," who implies this omission argues the child's illegitimacy; the mother's failure to "plead her belly" only compounds the guilt [92]. Foxe's defense of his narrative procedure, as quoted by McKeon, suggests what short-circuits the certification of truth through an exhaustive accounting of the facts:

*To express every minute of matter in every story occurrent, what story-writer in all the world is able to perform it? . . . Although it might be done, what reasonable reader would require it? . . . what if it were not remembered of the author? what if it were to him not known? what if it were of purpose omitted, as a matter not material to the purpose? . . . And shall it then by and by be imputed to shame and blame, whatsoever in every narration is not expressed? [93]*

The account of the facts will always necessarily be limited by the ability of the “story-writer,” the reason of the “reader,” the memory, knowledge, and shaping intelligence of the “author.” Then other cognate problems come to the fore: any recording that is merely factual begins to feel like meaningless dross [96]. When the details of a true story are lacking, must one add (invented?) detail—detail suggestive of meaning—to make the story’s truth convincing? [95]. Because of the fundamental instability of any relation between facts and the language that would bear those facts, the skeptical quest for truthful narrative, which motivates initial revisions of “romance” narrative, doubles back to contaminate the creditability of the new empirical narrative. McKeon schematizes this debate about “history” versus “news,” as well as many analogous debates, into a single dialectical pattern: “The empiricism of ‘true history’ opposes the discredited idealism of romance, but it thereby generates a countervailing, extreme skepticism, which in turn discredits true history as a species of naive empiricism or ‘new romance’” [88].

McKeon’s critical narrative demonstrates the extremely short “half-life” of any position developed for telling the truth in narrative. By following McKeon’s account of the efforts of Awnsham and John Churchill to discriminate the true from the false in their extensive anthology of travel narratives, we can go further into the problem of language’s unreliability in representing truth. In assessing the truthfulness of travel narratives gathered in their anthology, the Churchills, pursuing the ideals of the new science, develop and juggle diverse criteria for scanning language so as to ascertain its truth and historicity. Here is a sequence of the difficulties they encounter. The Churchills are skeptical of any travel stories shaped to religious ends, but there is no sure and direct way to disprove them [107-08]. One way to certify truth is with original documentation, though this might be flooded with useless details and can be forged [108]. Eyewitness is always superior to hearsay testimony, but the reliability of both will depend upon the disinterestedness and integrity of the traveler [108]. Any assessment of the truthful character of the narrator will depend upon an assessment of their style—for example, its plainness—but this can be mimed [109]. McKeon notes that when the Churchills take a wrong turn and credit what we would not credit, there is a strong temptation to ascribe irony to their text in order to preserve some of the text’s authority and truth-value [109].

The Churchills’ anthology of travel narratives suggests that the test of truthfulness requires movement through a broad range of criteria, all of which can be imitated in language and whose assessment modulates from a dependence on the naive empiricist criterion of *quantity* of facts presented to a synthetic judgment about the *quality* of the narrative and its source. McKeon associates the latter strategy with “extreme skepticism” and “conservative ideology” as practiced by Shaftesbury, Swift, Fielding, and others. But McKeon’s description of the Churchills’ critical practice also exposes the ineluctable gap that opens beneath the quest for truth in narrative: once it has been transported from the space or time of its production, no text, whatever its aspirations to facticity and truth, can bear a mark in its own language that can truly verify its relation to something outside itself.

McKeon’s patient archeology of many species of narrative, and the claims to truth that each attempts, allows him to trace the steps by which the purity of early claims to historicity—“behind this language is an event or object which existed in a certain time and place”—encounters various specific difficulties and impasses, including the unexpected effect of language as it impedes and displaces the movement toward truth, finally to issue

in a compromise-formation—"realism"—which aspires to very different kinds of truth through literary narrative.

*Once the claim to historicity is systematically acknowledged to be not an absolute but a relative claim, once writers and readers are obliged to address themselves seriously to the question of how much documentation, what sort of detail, is needed to satisfy the demands of "true history," competing theories of "realism" in the modern sense of the term are firmly in the ascendant. But for this to transpire, the quality of being history-like must become separable from the fact of being history and acquire a validity of its own. [93]*

In other words, through the narrative practice, and critical reflection of narrators like Foxe, the Churchills, and numberless others, the access to truth in narrative came to depend upon the use of rhetoric to attain a certain effect—"the quality of being history-like." "History," "truth," and "reality" are no longer the result of a stable and adequate relation between the world and its linguistic imitation, but adjectival properties of a kind of text, "the novel," which can be said to be so realistic and truthful that it is "like history." What, according to McKeon, are some of the axioms of this realism? Realism will assume the separability of the aesthetic realm from the demand for a literal historicity but, not giving itself over completely to lies and romance, will also be responsive, through the practice of verisimilitude, to the empirical world. Now, claims to spirituality are made for artistic activity and art. McKeon tells us: "Doctrines of literary realism, which rise from the ruins of the claim to historicity, reformulate the problem of mediation for a world in which spirituality has ceased to represent another realm to which human materiality has only difficult and gratuitous access, and has become instead the capacity of human creativity itself" [120]. By making use of Aristotelian ideas about the "separation of history and poetry, the factual and the probable, the singular and the universal," realism "validates literary creation for being not history but history-like, 'true' to the only external reality that still makes a difference, but also sufficiently apart from it (hence "probable" and "universal") to be true to itself as well. . . . [reality] is internalized in art itself as a demystified species of spirituality" [120].

McKeon's description of the emergence of "realism" out of earlier, more radical efforts to render the truth in language is one of the most compelling parts of his story and what makes his study far more precise and cogent than Ian Watt's account of the novel's "rise." McKeon does not venture to apply the findings of this historical narrative to interrogate his own efforts to do a more rigorously truthful literary historical narrative of the novel's origins. He does not consider how the limits of a naively empirical appeal to historicity encountered by early modern narrators might circle back to put in question McKeon's own narrating literary history. But if he did explain his finessing of this problem, I suspect he would appeal to the power of a "dialectical method" to come to terms with what he calls the "dialectical essence of historical change" [270]. For this reason, we need to evaluate McKeon's use of the dialectic to inform his literary history.

### *The Question of the Dialectic as a Pathway to Historical Truth*

*The Origins of the English Novel* makes pervasive use of the dialectic. McKeon's theoretical introduction claims explicit affiliation with Marx's attempt to develop a materialist dialectic out of Hegel. McKeon organizes his own book in three parts ("The Question of Truth"; "The Question of Virtue"; "The Dialectical Constitution of the Novel"), each of which is, in its turn, divided into three broad movements that articulate his historical descriptions of early modern narrative practice into the three broad dialectical patterns. Near the very end of the first two parts of his study, McKeon writes

a chapter subsection entitled "The Conflation of Truth and Virtue." There McKeon states his hypothesis about the dialectical emergence of the novel, which we can distill into this formula: *the novel may be said to originate when writers begin to develop the 'analogy' between the questions of truth and the question of virtue* [266]. Because this thesis is inextricably entangled with the dialectical form of McKeon's literary history, a critical consideration of the dialectical machinery that shapes McKeon's critical narrative is necessary.

Why does McKeon seek to give his book such a strictly dialectical form and content? In Hegel, Marx, and McKeon, the dialectic affords a way to describe a process by which a subject—whether it is "Spirit," a revolutionary working class, or the novel—comes into being without prior agency, with a certain autonomy, as an enormous range and number of tangled factors, from the global sphere of thought or history, are articulated together as they coalesce in one object or event. Each of these dialectical narratives is centrally focused upon the ways change happens. Since nothing is in principle excluded from the representation of each history, each makes an at least theoretical claim to totality. For McKeon, it is dialectic that "delivers" the inchoate variety and mobility of "history" to the question of the novel and its origin. The dialectic justifies and structures this book's epic scope, its density of presentation, and its formidable length. If it becomes required reading in graduate seminars devoted to the eighteenth-century novel, it will quickly earn the nickname *Das Novel*.

McKeon's multifaceted use of the dialectic to write his history involves him in certain ironies. Although his early theoretical chapter uses Marx and Althusser to warn against the simplifying teleology that shapes retrospective developmental narratives, the dialectical symmetries and mechanics of his own narrative efface what is contingent and arbitrary in the ideological confrontations of early modern culture. Dialectic ends up making the emergence of the novel appear as the inevitable culmination of early modern cultural conflict. And the greater the number of origins for the novel—McKeon's arduous historicism compels him to explore many—the more abstract and schematic the conceptual framework must be to put together a unified conceptual narrative. Though a number of reviewers admit to a certain exhaustion with McKeon's effort to offer a comprehensive account of the origins of the English novel, his narrative is no more complete than those of the naive empiricists he describes. Inevitably there are origins of the English novel "lost" to this account. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Nancy Armstrong demonstrates the pertinence of the eighteenth century's rich and various conduct discourse to the novel's rise; in *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth Century England*, John Bender narrates the intimate exchange between the techniques of transparent narration found in the early novel and the idea of the penitentiary. Though both Armstrong and Bender analyze discursive networks closely related to the questions of "truth" and "virtue," McKeon finds little or no place for them in his history. What about cultural developments that seem discontinuous with these two questions? In his review of McKeon's book for *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Eric Rothstein mentions the "alleged rise of family companionability" and the circulation of pornography as a commodity [Rothstein 230]. Of course, there are many more examples. Yet McKeon's use of the dialectic precludes him from conceptualizing the incompleteness of his account as inevitable or systemic.

In the conclusion to his book, McKeon anticipates objections that there is something too "dialectic about his method" and the mobile interplay of unstable categories it explains. Here is his preemptive reply to this critic: "the problem lies not with the method but with the subject matter to whose features it seeks to be adequate. It is . . . not method but history that is dialectical . . ." [420]. Any scholar who seeks to represent the subject matter of history in a faithful and adequate fashion must be as dialectical as history is. Anything less will "let slip" what he calls the "the dialectical essence of historical change" [270]. Because history is essentially dialectical, and the dialectic is the pathway



to historical knowledge, history and dialectic are a tandem McKeon habitually invokes together. This connection is based upon the remarkable synthetic powers of the dialectic to make many things part of one process or narrative. Through the use of dialectic, history and knowledge of history become coherent, and, in spite of its diverse and mobile plurality, history appears as a "continuum." Thus, as McKeon claims in his introduction, his history is cast in terms of what he finds to be "fundamental to all historical life: the inseparability of diverse social formations within the dialectical continuum of history . . ." [18].

Because McKeon assumes that history "is" a dialectical continuum, his dialectical history of the origins of the English novel engages in various forms of idealization. Since he assumes that the substance of history is ideas—beliefs, ideologies, questions of truth and virtue—which are open to a dialectically patterned representation, his text becomes an intellectual history. He not only pays privileged attention to many high cultural thinkers (from Plato to Mandeville) and canonical texts (from Cervantes to Fielding) but also schematizes many lesser known writers in terms of the two "questions" of truth and virtue. A certain idealization is evident in this very terminology: why are these questions called "truth" rather than "truth and error," "virtue" rather than "virtue and vice, or evil"?

Throughout his study, McKeon uses the notion of mediation to explain the novel's cultural role:

*The social significance of the English novel at the time of its origins lies in its ability to mediate—to represent as well as contain—the revolutionary clash between status and class orientations and the attendant crisis of status inconsistency. The novel gives form to the fluidity of crisis by organizing it into a conflict of competing interpretations. [173–74]*

In McKeon's account, the novel becomes the linguistic medium that mediates the negotiations of those questions (of truth and virtue) which are as yet open in early modern culture. By the way it understands mediation, McKeon's study betrays quite rational assumptions. The idea that some cultural form, C, exists to mediate A and B—the novel emerges to mediate truth and virtue—imbues the process of mediation with a strong teleological pull. Like the not unrelated simple arithmetic equation  $A + B = C$ , the explanatory appeal of this proposition comes from the way it produces a bounded conceptual space, within which it seems safe to exclude the temporarily irrelevant terms E, F, G, . . . Within this proposition, each term is properly and efficiently on the way to something else; and once a new cultural formation arrives, it has to arrive in the form it does. It is the correct sum of its antecedent terms, in a conceptual space bound by an arithmetic logic. Such a formula for the novel arranges its explanation through the exchange of commensurate, balanced, conflictually opposed terms which are always already ready for their dialectical exchange. It assumes that nothing of consequence has been lost along the way or subsists within the new cultural form in such a way as to remain invisible to the analytical eye/I which has framed this narrative to explain the origins of a phenomenon. This idea of cultural mediation precludes thinking how a plurality of incommensurate terms could come into play in the happening of a text or incident, or how the emergence of the novel could be traversed by adventitious contingencies and bear their effects. When McKeon describes the novel's emergence from its cultural contexts and pretexts, his narrative makes it difficult to think these novels as striated and heterogeneous, bearing thoughts and ideas that remain unconscious to the interpreting critic, holding in reserve unrealized, or as yet unrealized, possibilities.

Finally, McKeon idealizes history because in tracing its trajectory nothing is lost or wasted, nothing is forgotten or drops out. In McKeon, no less than in Hegel or Marx, the dialectic becomes that remarkable salvage system by which everything that has existed

acquires a new place and purpose. Since nothing falls outside the economy or archival memory of culture, everything can contribute to the future, which is constantly building. Through the magic of dialectical narrative, it seems that nothing *could* get lost or lose its way, least of all the dialectic, which guides history toward one culmination in the novel. By the way the two dialectical triads of romance idealism, naive empiricism, and extreme skepticism and the aristocratic, the progressive, and the conservative ideologies are developed out of McKeon's many examples, they can now be used to reach back and salvage any neglected or newly uncovered narrative practice as one more "origin" for the novel.

In spite of the scrupulously historicist ground rules of McKeon's study, he does not seem to have considered that the dialectic he uses to structure his history has a history itself. This history does not disqualify the dialectic's valuable use, but it should qualify McKeon's overly enthusiastic embrace of dialectical method. The historical dialectic as invented by Hegel and adopted by Marx incorporates various Enlightenment and Romantic assumptions about history—that history is progressive; that it moves forward in view of its ongoing autotelic transformations; that it realizes successively more inclusive forms of truth. This idea of history implies a certain ethos: that men and women of good faith should be concerned to join together in working fundamental improvements in society. If McKeon had made a more critical and self-critical use of the dialectic, he would have considered how dialectical history might carry a freight of ideas within its form that are at odds with the less dialectical moments of his own study as well as parts of the early modern culture he studies. Thus, for example, dialectical history seems to be at variance with the side of "conservative ideology" that is conserving in its return to the past of romance and aristocracy and therefore makes quite modest claims for the reforms it envisions. Swift's political use of satire may aim at an improvement of humankind, but surely it is much more circumscribed than the change envisioned by later thinkers as diverse as Rousseau and Marx and embedded in the notions of dialectic and revolution. McKeon never ascribes dialectical or revolutionary thought to Swift, but he produces a certain dramatic irony in making Swift and Fielding the culminating figures in his dialectical history.

My reading of McKeon's use of dialectic suggests that he does not finally live up to the rigorous terms of Althusser's critique of Hegel's rational dialectic, as McKeon invokes it in the introductory theoretical framing of his study. In adapting Althusser's gloss on a passage from Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* to the terms of McKeon's own study, McKeon seems to agree that history is not dialectical the way Hegel thought it was—where difference arises out of simplicity within the womb of contradiction, undergoes a plural development to arrive as a simple unity at an ever more concrete totality, "enriched by the past labor of their negation," "without ever getting lost in this complexity itself, without ever losing in it either its simplicity or its unity— . . ." [Althusser 197, 198]. This has considerable consequences for McKeon's history: the passing from the ever pre-giveness of the novel to its emergence as a simple abstraction in 1740 is not controlled by any dialectical process that could track something like the novel from its origins to its present form(s). This would mean a history uncontrolled by any internal gyroscope or autopilot, a history that cannot give itself over to the abstract triadic patterns of the dialectic, a history not given an implicit after-the-fact necessity by the dialectical patterns it "happens" to follow. To narrate a history of early modern narrative open to the contingencies that befall it means attempting to think a history that comes with no dialectical guarantees.<sup>3</sup>

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3. The notion of a "Marxism without guarantees" comes from Stuart Hall's critique of the marxist concept of history and culture. See especially "The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.2 (1986): 28–44.

It is one of the effects of McKeon's dialectical casting of his history that every early modern origin and cause of the English novel is given a retrospective destiny, a covert necessity, whereby it must eventually arrive at its correct—its culturally useful and fruitful—"address" in the modern novel. But McKeon's account of efforts to embody truth in narrative suggests that every original mark or sign of what would become the novel bears within itself a differential tendency, a possibility of errancy which shadows every possibility of destinational success. Derrida coins the term "destinerring" to take account of the complicity of purposiveness and error that shadows destinationally processes like writing, the postal code, or history.<sup>4</sup> McKeon's own study suggests some of the ways the novel that emerged in 1740 had been displaced into tendencies that have an ironic relation to their originally intended trajectory, that the novel arrived where it did only by erring on its way. In recasting Weber's famous thesis from *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, McKeon gives a vivid instance of this process:

*That the piety and fervor of Protestant reformation should have aided in the development of [a capitalist] ideology in which human self-sufficiency renders God strictly superfluous is only the most strikingly paradoxical instance of the general truth that once set in motion, absolutist reform reforms absolutely. ... Weber's argument forces us to acknowledge the contradictory movement that inhabits the heart of historical change. [200]*

McKeon's description of the "contradictory movement" of reform *could* be inserted in an Hegelian narrative so that the shape of that narrative gives what is deviant an after-the-fact motive and teleology. Here the story would be how all of the earlier movements of history get drawn into the formation of capitalism; they "serve" Capital, as the force which dominates modern history. Some marxisms seem attracted to such an ultimately Hegelian story. By contrast, a non-Hegelian narrative might go like this: that the ethos of personal and economic conduct valorized within Protestantism undergoes, or is taken through, displacements which involve a "destinerrance" of reform, a historical change motivated by the effort to arrive at a certain destination (for example, a unification of the personal life in and around a calling which would be both spiritual and material) but which—through errant movements none control or foresee, displacements which are in part contingent—comes to bear systematic effects that have a "paradoxical" relation to original intentions. McKeon's history offers two examples of a surprising "destinerrance" in the history of the novel: the emergence of realism out of claims to historicity and (in Bunyan) the emergence of a materialist literal narrative out of religious allegory. They suggest, against the grain of McKeon's dialectical organization of his literary history, that the movement from the early modern "origins" of the novel to the novel is not guaranteed by a dialectical process or model of development. McKeon's history suggests an idea its genealogical impulse discourages: that the crest of the modern novel may be crossed with the double bar of the bastard. The novel, in its complex plurality, may be deracinated—cut off from "its" origins by graftings, translations, or historical effects that were unforeseen and that continue to resist causal dialectical narratives which would align before and after in a rational fashion.

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4. See this general argument as it is developed in the "Envoi" section of *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. and ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987); and in "My Chances / Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies," in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, M. D., and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 16.

McKeon's insistence that "history is . . . dialectical" [420] undergirds his composition of a dialectically patterned narrative that often seems to claim that there is an event "out there"—the novel's origin—which his own literary history has disclosed and reported "as it happened." Rather than seeing McKeon as succumbing to a "naive empiricist" faith his own study so probingly critiques, it seems more accurate to understand McKeon's text as engaging a "literary historical realism." Such a realist critical practice would achieve its effects of truthfulness through a verisimilitude that aligns the novel with an historically attuned account of the culture within which the novel emerges. Just as novelistic realism fashions its language so as to represent the time, space, character, and action of a referent supposed to be "real," so a realist literary history fashions its critical text so that literary text and "its" world inhabit a common space, where their diverse meanings and references can be brought into communication with one another. Both realist practices promote effects of immediacy, the facticity of the event, the authority of narrative, the rhetoric of precision, the possibility of "the find," and the evocative power of the illusory space their descriptive powers make to seem actual. McKeon's narrative tracing of the "origins" (from the Latin *oriri* 'to rise') of the English novel can be understood by analogy with horticulture: the novel originates, rises, and grows out of history as a plant rises out of its carefully prepared soil. In this way, McKeon's literary historical writing wins a certain representational effect: it "plants" the novel in the historical ground out of which it can then be seen to rise.

Literary historical realism achieves this alignment and commingling of context and text, history and culture by chaining writings/readings that are predominantly referential and thematic into a sequential developmental narrative. I can describe here only a few of the traits of this reading as McKeon practices it. At issue here is not a criticism of McKeon for failing to read in some "true," intrinsically literary rather than historical fashion. Instead, I shall index the kinds of reading his dialectical narrative supports and makes necessary. To characterize McKeon's readings is of importance not simply because of literary studies' traditional concern with how literature gets read but because the practice of reading has considerable significance for the kind of history of literature and culture one can do. In other words, what I am calling "realistic literary history" is not the only possible kind of literary history.

Because the questions of truth and virtue have their provenance and telos in the society from which literature gets its motives and energy, and toward which it is constantly oriented, McKeon refers literary and nonliterary texts to the social, the cultural, and history. There results a systematic subordination of literature to the social. This valuation is implicit throughout McKeon's study but is most evident in the placement of the reading of the literary—the six final chapters devoted to the original novels—after what is categorically prior, the historical elaboration of the dialectical sequences through a reading of prenovelistic narratives. This procedure results in a certain anticlimax, when McKeon's reader discovers that the literary texts confirm the conceptual structure that was elaborated to interpret them. McKeon is quite candid about his decision to limit his reading of literary texts to an exploration of their relation to his larger dialectical narrative. He begins his reading of the six original novels by saying that he is not seeking "comprehensive interpretations of the narratives, but [to] accentuate those features of great works . . . that confirm the utility of the [prior] argument" [267]. But the forthrightness with which McKeon states these limiting ground rules for his reading of "great works" should not deflect us from asking how his dialectical narrative, in order to verify its "utility" in explaining the origins of the novel, constrains the reading of both prenovelistic and novelistic narratives.

In order to root texts in the eighteenth-century social history to which they refer, McKeon frequently practices a style of reading that downplays the fictive processes working to shape narrative. Thus in his discussion of *Pamela*, McKeon shows how B, by his management of his estate, as well as for the criticisms B directs at both the old aristocracy and those upstarts who seek titles, is a “modernized aristocrat” and thus as much as Pamela a “transitional figure” on the way to middle-class sensibility [366]. Thus B is not the simple symbol of aristocracy earlier readings have made him, or that the broad ideological melodrama of the story makes him appear to be. Such a referential, social analysis of B bypasses the fictional factors in B’s social description—that he is an amalgam halfway toward Pamela, not primarily because such people really existed in eighteenth-century England but because “he” is a character in a fiction whose author designs him for marriage to Pamela.

Like many examples of novelistic realism, McKeon’s literary history uses thematic bridgework as a means to synthesize different terms of his far-flung narrative. When McKeon reads Defoe and Swift, in the paired chapters devoted to them (“Parables of the Younger Son,” part 1 and 2), he shows how their texts become diversely preoccupied with the same question. We are shown how Swift takes a figure Defoe and his text had made ambiguous—the enthusiastic projector—and reinterprets that figure so as to lay bare its contradictions. This helps to gloss the texts of Defoe and Swift, it unifies literary and intellectual history, and it gives us confidence that these texts are talking about issues that have an existence apart from their expression in these texts: nascent capitalism, the entrepreneur, and his falsity. But such a reading practice also downplays what other species of literary criticism and history have emphasized—the distinctness and difference of Defoe’s and Swift’s texts from one another, the way, for example, Swift’s version of the projector is shaped by particular literary forms (like Menippian satire) and is suffused with the distinct obsessions, perspective, and tone that criticism has found to be distinctly “Swiftian.”

Finally, McKeon’s critical narrative is realist in the way a presumptive commitment to empirical facts frees him from worrying about the critical novelty of his readings. Thus when McKeon writes of the way Fielding critiques both the aristocratic and the new men, and McKeon uses an elaborate new terminology to do this, we are getting old critical insights wrapped in new categories, or the relabeling of an argument worked out earlier by other critics and historians of literature, as for example, Ronald Paulson in *Satire and the Novel*. What is most “new” is the dialectical narrative which coordinates what is familiar in a new causal framework. Because McKeon’s readings minimize that allegorical dimension of interpretation that proceeds through surprising juxtaposition and interpretive invention, his realist literary history easily incorporates the readings of an earlier, more traditional criticism. McKeon’s use of historically intrinsic terminology (“truth” and “virtue”) as the unifying themes of his history increases the plausibility of those implicit claims to mimetic faithfulness made for his readings.

No technique is more useful to McKeon’s realist literary history than plot summary. Plot summary makes his readings seem self-evident. It becomes the junction where literature and history touch, and it is the main way that McKeon analyzes the ideological content and tendency of each narrative and gauges each narrative’s relation to the questions of truth and virtue and thus its part in the novel’s dialectical emergence. Each time a narrative is presented in McKeon’s study through plot summary, there is an effacement of that narrative’s formal properties. That there is a certain reduction or simplification of the texts being read this way is seldom acknowledged, but we do get this aside as McKeon is about to begin his reading of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*:

*If the following account of Part I’s literal plot suggests a more consistent thread of events than the actual reading process of a Burt or a Coleridge could ever*

*provide, it is only because I am purposely avoiding the many discontinuities of discourse and abstraction in order to assess its "material" flavor as immediately as possible. [302]*

Here we seem to get an apology for the way Bunyan is read so as to serve McKeon's narrative. To make Bunyan part of his story, McKeon must smooth out and make consistent something that is not—the "actual reading process," at least for the respected commentators Burt or Coleridge. But what is at stake in this avoiding of "discontinuities" so as to "assess its 'material' flavor," "as immediately as possible?" In reading Bunyan, McKeon insists upon the inadvertent and not completely controllable swerve toward the material in its development of allegory, such that it can serve as one of the precursors of the novel. But in order to get to that reading, one must also avoid "the many discontinuities of discourse and abstraction." Throughout *The Origins of the English Novel*, McKeon's representation of narratives effaces their rhetoric and language, so that they may be understood through plot summaries. The retelling of narrative through plot—without consideration of voice, mood, tone, or point of view, let alone metaphoricity, diction, etc.—offers a way to flatten things out, so they might, like the coin evaluated on the assessor's scale, be "assessed": made equivalent, weighed in relation to one another, calibrated as to their content of "aristocratic, progressive, and conservative" tendencies. Just as the assessor ignores the image and text so as to determine a coin's weight and worth, so McKeon uses plot summary to translate narrative into that refined form where he can get "as immediately as possible" at the "material 'flavor'" of a narrative. What allows him access to the fundamental "material 'flavor'" and concrete reality privileged by most realisms? By reading through plot summary, McKeon charts each narrative's relationship to that triad of ideological coordinates with which McKeon spatializes the possibilities of early modern history. Then, secured within the framing categories and temporal plotting of his literary historical narrative, McKeon is confident he has described each narrative's most essential relationship—its relationship to historical change.

### *The Dialectic Qualified*

In both Hegel and Marx, the allure of a dialectical narrative comes from its comprehensiveness, its sudden reversals, its promise of new formations. The prospect of all of these is, I think, an implicit part of the narrative contract McKeon makes with his reader in offering an account of the origins of the English novel. But near the end of part 1 of McKeon's study, when McKeon is supposed to present the "payoff" for the novel of the dialectical progression on "the question of truth" from romance idealism through naive empiricism to extreme skepticism, McKeon instead offers a qualification about the culmination of the dialectic. At this crucial moment in McKeon's narrative, the dialectical narrative founders. It seems that what had been plotted as the most advanced position on the "question of truth"—that of "extreme skepticism"—may not be so much of an advance as first seemed. By reading this moment in McKeon's narrative with care, by following the terms with which McKeon puts in question the dialectical force and direction of his own critical narrative, we can consider ways to interpret his historical findings outside of that dialectical framework.

In the passage I will quote at length, McKeon is at pains to distinguish his thesis from Bakhtin's theorizing of the novel's history. According to Bakhtin, the novel realizes its full potential to engage the plural heteroglossia of the social world only when the "second stylistic line" (for example, the novels of Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Jean-Paul) submits the aestheticizing and purifying impulses of the "first stylistic line" (the Baroque novel, the Sentimental novel, the novels of Richardson and Rousseau) to ironic and comic

subversion. According to McKeon, Bakhtin's "exclusive identification of novelistic discourse with the indirect discourse of self-conscious and parodic impersonation" bypasses the "relatively direct mode of critique entailed in naive empiricism" and thus accounts for only one of the "two major postures whose interaction constitutes the epistemological origins of the novel" [118]. But what begins as a defense of McKeon's own more complete dialectical account of the novel's origins modulates into a severe qualification of this dialectical model.

*In one sense it is easy to understand [Bakhtin's] partiality. The critical indirection of extreme skepticism has a subtle and suggestive power that seems very different from the earnest and sometimes plodding didacticism of naive empiricism. But it is a mistake to view extreme skepticism as a higher stage in the evolution of the novel—not only a negation but a correction of naive empiricism and the authentic "fulfillment" of novelistic discourse. For extreme skepticism is itself a highly vulnerable posture: the fundamental opposition to romance idealism that it shares with—and derives from—naive empiricism is rendered quite equivocal by the simultaneous opposition to naive empiricism itself. How tenuous must be that secret sanctuary of truth, distinct both from romance and from too confident a historicity, which is defined by the metacritical act of double negation?*

*By arguing the inescapability of romance in true history, extreme skepticism appears also to pursue a far more radical conclusion, the unavailability of narrative truth as such. . . . But the narrative truth more typically posited by extreme skepticism is a secularized category that is distinct from the idealism both of Christianity and of romance, and it is bereft of any alternative model. As a result, extreme skepticism can easily seem not the final, teleological triumph of the revolt against romance idealism that was crudely engendered by naive empiricism, but the untenably negative midpoint between these two opposed positions, in constant danger of becoming each of them by turns. If naive historicity is too sanguine about its own powers of negating romance fiction, its critique is too skeptical about that possibility, and the parodic impersonation of the romance of true history risks being nothing more, in the end, than an allusive and playful affirmation of both.*

*For these reasons extreme skepticism is impelled by its own quandary to experiment with the notion that the inevitable presence of "romance" need not entail prevarication. And so the standard of truth by which Shaftesbury would correct the empirical reliance on brute factuality is a more generalized and universalized "truth of things," a gentle secularization of Christian truth which may be taught by "judicious lies" (or material figures) as well as by facts.*  
[118–19]

Here McKeon is at pains to show that there is no "final, teleological triumph" for one kind of novelistic narrative—whether it is the naive empiricism that Watt had championed under the rubric "formal realism," or the "second stylistic line" Bakhtin celebrates as a fulfillment of the novel's dialogic potential. McKeon eschews any account of the novel's emergence that would assume an evolutionary model, where there is ascent to "a higher stage" that is distinct from prior types of narrative it decisively supplants. Applied to McKeon's own dialectical narratives, this means that in the passage between naive empiricism and extreme skepticism, the progressive and conservative, there is none of the *aufheben* one finds in Hegelian or Marxist dialectic, where an earlier idea, position, form is destroyed, conserved, and raised up in a synthetic movement that sublates the earlier in the later form. Extreme skepticism cannot rest as the apex of a triangle based

upon the subsumed, negated "truths" of romance and naive empiricism. Why? What makes extreme skepticism's claim on truth so "vulnerable," "tenuous," and "equivocal?" Extreme skepticism does not find a place above and apart from these two earlier, equally unacceptable ways of voicing truth. Instead, thrown into a "negative midpoint between" them, hearing their claims voiced with equal force, it repeats both in a different key. There it must attempt to articulate itself by using the languages and assumptions of each of these positions, without collapsing into a pure repetition which would alter nothing, thereby succumbing to the "danger of becoming each of them by turns" or being merely "an allusive and playful affirmation of both."

Extreme skepticism can hope to reach that veiled and "secret sanctuary of truth" only by pursuing the strategy of double negation: it must negate naive empiricism's skeptical negation of romance idealism. Thus its narratives must engage in a return to romance, but without simply repeating its discredited idealism; these narratives will assume the force of empiricism's critique of romance, without its naiveté about the possibility of apprehending truth and virtue in language. Finally, extreme skepticism must avoid the "radical conclusion" the double negative suggests—"the unavailability of narrative truth as such"—for this would cancel any efforts at narrative, including its own. How does extreme skepticism negotiate all these imperatives, what McKeon calls its "quandary" or dilemma? All that can be attempted is an "experiment" in language that uses a calculated irony, a "parodic impersonation," a remarked repetition which displaces positions and narrative means it can never leave behind. Thus he accords Fielding a privileged place in this study as that writer who periodically inverts the naive empiricism of Richardson at the same time that he returns with a difference to the narrative forms of romance and anti-romance. This more self-conscious, more consistently rhetorical use of language which becomes the privileged conservative strategy is given expression by Shaftesbury's vindication of fiction, or "judicious lies," for arriving at a certain truth in narrative: "For *Facts* unably related, tho with the greatest Sincerity, and good Faith, may prove the worst sort of Deceit: and mere *Lyes*, judiciously compos'd, can teach us the Truth of Things, beyond any other manner . . ." [117].

Our reading of the passage just quoted indicates that McKeon is aware of the precarious dependency of the conservative position, and its corollary failure to subsume its two precursors in a clear dialectical advance. Why then does McKeon persist in a broadly dialectical structuring of his argument? In part, it is because of the literary critical agenda of this book: McKeon is committed to account for Fielding's central role in the formation of the eighteenth-century novel, a role obscured by Richardson's recent critical vogue. But, more fundamentally, it is the dialectical formalization of the history of narrative in English from 1600 to 1740 which enables it to become the privileged interpretive context for reading the original novels, those six texts claimed to be the beginning instances of novelistic narrative—*Don Quixote* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pamela* and *Joseph Andrews* (and *Jonathan Wilde*). Dialectic delivers history to literature, context to text as the cause of an effect. Most broadly, it is the dialectic which guarantees the progress of history toward modernity and novelty, of literary history toward knowledge of that history and literature.

The inability of extreme skepticism to rise clear of its two antecedents, and its necessary return and repetition (with a difference) of romance idealism and naive empiricism, means that this literary historical intertextual matrix cannot be accounted for by two aspects of dialectic: the categorical purity of three distinct successively predominant terms, and the successive temporal unfolding of the dialectic's one-versus-two-produces-three. Instead, the conservative "posture" finds itself embedded, implicated, and dependent. It is woven out of repetitions that draw upon the unexpected reserves and potentialities of romance and empiricism, subsisting in plural striated texts that were never successfully accounted for by the conceptual abstractions used to label the



successive “positions” or “moments” of McKeon’s dialectical narrative. Dialectical narrative idealization of temporality produces a clear causal explanation but requires a reduction of the texts labeled and inserted in the dialectical narrative.

*From Dialectical History to a Historically Conditioned Problematic*

How are we to consider McKeon’s historical findings? I have offered a variety of reasons—some internal to McKeon’s study, others conceptual, others pragmatic—to distrust the dialectical structure within which McKeon represents the novel’s origins. But many terms of McKeon’s thesis and much of his historical evidence can be translated into a different sort of conceptual frame, a different sort of story. What I suspect his study establishes is not a dialectical history but the unfolding of a historically conditioned problematic of truth and virtue. McKeon’s study locates this problematic of truth and virtue in the many texts he reads, and recapitulates it within its own very distinctively triadic architecture. Rather than immediately explaining my idea in abstract terms, I will first develop a context for doing so, by glossing a historical “anomaly” which appears for McKeon when he turns his study from history to literature, from the two questions (of truth and virtue) to the two parts of Cervantes’s early novel *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615). In his reading of that text, McKeon locates the same two dialectical paradigms he has traced at large as they exfoliate within the English context between 1600 to 1740. This leads McKeon to ask a troubling question of his own study:

*One question remains. I have argued that the two parts of Don Quixote enact, albeit over a decade, that schematic movement (from naive empiricism to extreme skepticism, from progressive ideology to conservative ideology) which in the English context is spread over a much greater period and range of works, and which will be embodied, at the end of the English novel’s origins, in the intertextual dialectic of competing texts. What explains this anomaly? [292]*

McKeon’s reading of Cervantes’s two-part text offers so ample and exact a recapitulation of all the terms of the “questions” of truth and virtue that it compromises the historical grounding of McKeon’s argument. For how could one text occupy so many of the positions articulated by so many texts over a century and a half in England—the vast portion of which have not yet been written? Cervantes, as McKeon reads him, embarrasses those separations that McKeon’s narrative seeks first to preserve and then overcome. They are the separations between history and literature, between pre- and post-novelistic narrative, between the “questions” of truth and virtue in the dialectical labor of their collision, prior to their embodiment in novelistic narrative.

How can such an “anomaly” of Cervantes be explained so that *Don Quixote* does not become an anachronistic early novel so compelling that it makes the later English “invention” of the novel seem redundant? If McKeon puts aside the “tautological argument for Cervantes’s transcendent genius,” his appeal to Spain’s distinct early modern history seems to be a doctrinaire way to reassert history as the only active matrix for the development of narrative. McKeon bypasses a possibility that his treatment of the questions of truth and virtue in Greek and medieval times suggests: that wherever there is a full textual rendering of questions like truth and virtue, the basic positions of the problematic achieve expression. When the problem of truth comes into view for a culture, then the idealist, empirical, and skeptical answers to these question will gain successive, competing, and reciprocally critical expression. And in the articulation of social virtue, whenever one pathway is overvalued among the triad of the aristocratic, progressive, and the conservative positions, the other two will become critical alternatives.

But to suggest the relative autonomy of these problematics across the span of Western culture does not mean that they have an absolute autonomy from history such that they come to function as the genetic destiny of any particular literature. McKeon's study shows the many ways history becomes the condition of the possibility of these problematics. They are not simply translated into the vernacular of a local culture's strife of social and economic and political positing; they are also given energy and precise form by that strife. The particular forms of these positions are traversed by global historical traumas (the English Civil War, the Restoration, the Walpole regime), as well as those pervasive historical currents McKeon traces (secularization, the rise of science and capitalism, successive waves of reform). Each of these problematics, as they operate outside and inside narrative practices, becomes the terms within which the culture reflects itself, knows itself, and names and negotiates the conflicts of its histories.

The limits I am suggesting to the usefulness of a certain totalizing dialectical idea of a history—which transforms itself in each successive epoch—has a certain unexpected benefit. There may be reasons to qualify McKeon's claim, in the conclusion to his study, that the questions of truth and virtue are "drastically reformulated" as they pass into a very different Romantic exaltation of creative subjectivity, or separation of self and society [419]. As a historically conditioned problematic, rather than a historical dialectic, the impulses toward literal historicity and progressive justification (of life through a narrative that rewards virtue) may lie like potentialities within the transmitted forms of novelistic narrative. In fact, I suspect that these "questions" constitute a problematic which has a rich afterlife in the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. Thus it would not be difficult to read the central problem of any one of Jane Austen's novels—by what ethical standards, and by what practice of knowledge is the female protagonist to distinguish the true from the false suitor?—as pervading every aspect of the novel's plot and character, irony and narrative. The "resolution" of this overt problem of the Austen novel pivots upon doing precisely what McKeon finds Richardson and Fielding doing in the 1740s—taking the problems of truth and virtue as analogues of one another. This same problem, and "solution," can be found woven deeply into the novels that follow the career of Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer. It is not entirely clear that contemporary descendants of the novel of manners have left these questions behind. Thus a novel like Nabokov's *Lolita*, from its apparently postmodernist parodic mode, may be engaging the problematics that McKeon finds at play in the origins of the novel. In its invocation of the tropes of romance and seduction; in its manipulation of "truth" from the standpoint of the unreliable narrator, where it develops a version of extreme skepticism; in its reassertion of the position of a slothly incompetent, from a sense of what is tedious about bourgeois progressive narratives, or the ideals of high heroism; in all these ways, Nabokov's text may be translating a conservative ethos into a modern register which renders them decadent.

By understanding the questions of truth and virtue as a historically conditioned problematic, one can begin to rethink the double role of history and language in a literary history of the novel. The novel did not become a practiced genre, a culturally influential medium, until a historical episode like the Richardson/Fielding rivalry could catalyze, and receive the support of, a system of printing, distribution, readership, and critical response that institutionalizes the novel as a new type of cultural machine. No longer depending upon the unique qualities of an individual author or cultural debate, the novel becomes a repeatable experience for those large numbers who read, write, and quarrel over novels. Thus a basic equivocation upon the historicity of the novel inflects my critical rearticulation of Michael McKeon's valuable study.

The historical conflicts waged in the early modern period etch themselves, in ways never entirely accessible to contemporary or subsequent observers, into the languages and forms and selective practices of novelistic writing. In this way, the novel—while never

a transhistorical entity—can nonetheless carry forward within its language the ideas, ethos, and unexpected reserves born in an early cultural epoch. Only by coming to terms with the historical conflicts McKeon describes can literary history interpret the distinct obsessions that inform those early modern narratives which seed and graft themselves into the first narratives which come to be called novelistic. But only by taking account of the systematic interrelation of the different positions of what I've been calling the problematic of truth and virtue can one account for the inertia, momentum, and "staying power" of eighteenth-century novelistic invention as it is carried into later epochs, where the novel is open to subsequent repetitions, revision, and invention.

McKeon remarks the plurality of the novel's origins with the "s" in the second word of his title: "the origins of the English novel." My essay has demonstrated the many ways that plurality is sharply abridged by the dialectical form of his narrative. It is not simply that there are other "questions" and problematics operating in the same history and texts—from the ideas of the domestic woman to that of the penitentiary, from the woman writer to the conversation of the sexes [Armstrong; Bender; Poovey; Roussel]. The necessary partiality—both the incompleteness and bias—of McKeon's literary history goes beyond the contingent inevitability of omissions, or the critical preferences with which other critics may tax his history: little mention of women writers, a defense of Fielding in response to the recent Richardson vogue. This partiality extends to the form and content of a realist literary history. McKeon's double dialectical schema for explaining the novel's emergence does not offer a singular adequate literal representation of the novel's origin. Instead, this illusion functions as part of that realist rhetoric—a "quality of being history-like"—which he discovers in the early modern narrative, but which I have argued also comes to shape the narrative practice of McKeon's own literary history. However, what will appear "like history" is as open to dispute, and as subject to historical change, as every other aspect of McKeon's literary history: the historical sources he "finds" (or selects); those novels whose origins he seeks to discover; his (dialectical) image of historical change.

The allure and conceptual authority of McKeon's realist literary history depends upon an uncritical acceptance of the representational means he uses to stage the novel's origin—most especially his use of a double dialectic of two "questions." But that the dialect appears at this moment as a realistic frame, method, and compositional structure for presenting these "questions" and their transformations does not mean it will tomorrow. We cannot be sure what needs are met by such a historical practice; but, we can be sure that the objects, motives, and forms of literary history will change beneath our eyes just as surely as every other aspect of our culture has and does. McKeon's literary history does not have any way to imagine this probability. If the plurality of the novel's origins are understood in a more fundamental and irreducible sense than the premises of McKeon's literary history allow, then one would be justified in retitling McKeon's text *A (Realist) Literary History of the Origins of the English Novel: 1600–1740, As It Can Be Published in 1987*.

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