The Emergence Of Novelistic Discourse In English Literature

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The aim of the present paper is to reappraise some of the theories on the emergence of the novel in eighteenth-century England and to try to identify the point of convergence between the views according to which this literary species was the outcome of a gradual transformation of the epic discourse into novelistic discourse and the ones stressing the fact that its emergence owed mainly to the increase in readership following the Reformation and the subsequent demand, among readers, for ever more plausible life stories.

Keywords: epic, novel, middle classes, Protestantism, prescriptive realism

In trying to track down the origins of the novel, many critics and theorists veered from the assumption that the novel as a literary species emerged and imposed itself, as per traditional accounts, in eighteenth-century England. While the fact that it was on the English literary scene that the first novels proper were published in the first half of the eighteenth century remains indisputable, there has been debate on the origin of novelistic discourse, inclusive of both the novel and of narrative elements conventionally not ascribed to the novel as literary species. Thus, there are critics who have claimed that the roots of the novelistic discourse go further back in the history of literature, more precisely, that it is closely linked to the four great literary genres defined by Aristotle, especially to the epic creation; the novel, on the other hand, is, in their opinion, the product of a long and elaborate blend of narrative elements, intertwined with social and historical ones, each specific to a particular phase in Medieval and early modern Europe.

Epic and Novel

Gerard Genette (1993) analysed the way in which Aristotle defined literary practice and fiction, namely by using two terms: *poiesis* and *mimesis*. *Poiesis*, initially meaning 'creation', refers to the way in which language can be, or become, a means of creation; in this sense, Aristotle distinguished between the two functions of language: its ordinary function, which is to speak (*legein*) and its artistic function (*poiein*), which is to produce works of art. The first function belongs to rhetoric (pragmatics), while the second belongs to poetics. (Genette, 6) According to Genette, Aristotle's fundamental question in this respect was,

how can language, which is normally a mere instrument of communication and action, become a means of creation [...] Aristotle's response was that there can be no creation by way of language, unless language becomes a vehicle of mimesis, that is, of representation, or rather of the *simulation* of imaginary actions and events; unless language serves to invent stories or to transmit stories that have already been invented. Language is creative when it places itself at the service of fiction. (Genette, 7)

In this sense, he suggested the translation of 'fiction' as '*mimesis*'. According to him, "for Aristotle,

the poet's creativity manifests itself not at the level of verbal form, but at the level of fiction, that is, the invention and arrangement of a story." (7) The field of fiction was subdivided, in Aristotle's scheme, into two modes of representation, narrative and dramatic, and into two levels of dignity of the subjects represented, namely noble and vulgar. Hence emerged the four great literary genres: tragedy – noble subject, dramatic mode of representation, epic – noble subject, narrative mode of representation, comedy – vulgar subject, dramatic mode of representation and parody - vulgar subject, narrative mode of representation - "for which the modern novel has quite naturally become a substitute" (Genette, 9)

In that line of thought, a number of other literary theorists (with Northrop Frye as an outstanding example) have, over the course of time, favoured the idea that the novel has roots in the epic creation, with the focus on the oral rendering of events in their temporal linearity. There are elements that recur in the epic creation and, under a completely different form, in the novel. In the epic creation, the ceremonial of telling a story and listening to it (the bard and the audience) was invested with a symbolic meaning. Epic creation was focussed on uttering, it involved the ceremonial of telling a story by a bard who was metaphorically sacrificed for his listeners, for his community. The role of memory was essential in the epic creation, as the bard was supposed to re-tell stories of prowess and bravery, in the precise order in which they happened, in order to preserve and pass on the history of his people. Unlike the modern author, the bard had to rely solely on his memory, he was literally a walking library, but he was not allowed any play on the imagination, hence his symbolical 'sacrifice' for his listeners. In this sense, Frye recalled the Homeric myth and the symbolic meaning of blindness and of the 'inward glance' into one's past and history. (Frye, 248-9) It is a glance that remakes, recreates, or recovers a world that remains unchangeable and adamant to external influences. The bard is symbolically trapped, by and into this glance, as he cannot look at the world by himself, he cannot provide any personal perspective or point of view on it; therefore, he is symbolically sacrificed as a potential creator of fiction.

What Fry called 'epos' was based on "the convention of recitation and a listening audience." (Frye, 248) In English history, an early figure in this respect was that of Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (871-899) who, unlike his predecessors and even successors, undertook the task of educating his people by telling them stories of prowess and bravery and who thus became the epitome of the ninth-century bard in the Anglo-Saxon cultural space. As embodiment of the bard, Alfred the Great was a rather singular figure for, during the Early, even Late Middle Ages, education was derided by aristocrats and regarded as incompatible with the ideal of manhood. Dominated as they were by the concept of primogeniture, according to which a monarch's eldest male heir inherited both the estates and the throne, English noblemen saw education as a second-hand solution reserved for the second male heir, who inherited nothing. Regarded as activities that were incompatible with men of action, education and the act of reading were initially confined, in the English cultural space, to monasteries, monastic schools and later to universities.

According to Frye, "*epos*, [with] "the immediacy of effect before a visible audience [...] is episodic, while fiction is continuous." (Frye, 249) An early instance of 'epos' turned into fiction was the heroic poem *Beowulf* which, albeit set in a Scandinavian landscape, became known as an English epic poem of courage and prowess. It was first appropriated in its oral version in the ninth century and it was an example of how texts were influenced by the literary standard – even if there were texts from the Old English period written in four major dialects, most manuscripts, irrespective of the dialect in which they had been produced, were copied by West Saxon scribes in the major monastic centres of learning and rendered into the West-Saxon dialect, the literary standard at the time.

M. M. Bakhtin also endorsed the idea that the novel had roots in the epic. In 'Epic and Novel' (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981) he brought arguments for the emergence of the novelistic discourse in the epic creation. According to him, the novel did not emerge with Cervantes or with the English novelists of the eighteenth century. He regarded this as an arbitrary taxonomy and claimed that the origins of the novel were to be sought in the epic creation, the 'constitutive features' of which he regarded as being in direct relation to the elements of the novel: the 'absolute past' as subject, 'national tradition' vs. personal experience and free thought and the 'epic distance' that separates the epic world from contemporary reality. (Bakhtin, 13)

In this line of argumentation, the world of the epic is essentially a world of the past, but it is not that the past makes up the content of the epic, as this is generally valid for any other literary genre/form, but that the represented world is transferred into the past. Thus, the epic is never a poem about the present, and the bard always speaks about a world that is remote and inaccessible to him. In the past, Bakhtin claims, everything is good, "all the really good things occur in the past" (15); it is never personal knowledge, but the memory of the bard that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. The epic discourse is a discourse handed down by tradition; "by its nature, the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience: it cannot be analysed, approached from a different point of view … it relies on impersonal, sacrosanct tradition". In Bakhtin's words, there is a certain "piety towards the subject described and towards the language used to describe it", a reverence towards

a world that "cannot be touched, that is beyond the realm of human activity". (13 *et passim*) The epic past is, therefore idealized, officialised, it has authority. It is also "completed, locked into itself, isolated, immutable, [...] finished and closed like a circle." (16)

By contrast, the present is "developing, incomplete, subject to re-evaluation and re-thinking" (16-17), therefore the novel is determined by experience, knowledge and practice. In Bakhtin's view, "contemporary reality does not figure in as an available object of representation in the high genres. The events and heroes of the high genres withdraw from the present, from its inconclusiveness, its openness, its potential for re-thinking" for, in the epic creation, the past is the source of authentic reality and value. (16 *et passim*) 'Contemporaneity', based on personal experience and personal knowledge, is "flowing, transitory, the life without beginning or end" and was initially the subject of representation only in the "low genres" - comedy and parody; moreover, it was "the basic subject matter in the common people's culture of laughter" (20-21), a world that, according to Bakhtin, had a huge impact on the formation of novelistic language. He believed that the roots of the novel should be sought precisely here: in the present, contemporary life as such, - "I myself", "my time", "my contemporaries". These were initially the objects of "ambivalent laughter, at the same time cheerful and annihilating." This 'ambivalent laughter' engendered a new attitude towards the world, as the 'absolute past' was "turned into parody, it was represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in the low language of contemporaneity", it became subject to "derision and desacralization." (20 *et passim*) Bakhtin mentioned, as early novelistic genres, the satire, the fable, the bucolic poems, the early memoir literature and the Socratic dialogues - "the novels of their time". (24-25) Even where the past or myth still serves as the subject of representation, there is no longer any epic distance, because the point of view is provided by contemporary life.

It was, according to Bakhtin, what he called the "free experimental fantasy" that functioned as the prerequisite for the emergence of novelistic discourse. With it, the role of memory was minimized and epic distance was destroyed. On the other hand, laughter and irony allowed, for the first time, a truly free investigation of the world, of man and human thought. "Anything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity: laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object and allows us to turn it upside down, break it open, doubt it, take it apart, expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it." (35) A new relationship with the represented world became possible: "as a starting point, there are the living people who occupy contemporary reality and their opinions. This diversity of speech and voice allows a new orientation to come about through personal experience and investigation." (25)

The modernity of the novel is granted, according to Bakhtin, by its coming into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present. The novel develops on the kind of diversity that the epic excludes. (27) It can include elements of other genres but it nevertheless retains its status as a novel. It will always steer away from generic monologue, but it will insist on the dialogue between different systems of value. Unlike the epic creation, the novel has an all-inclusive structure, occasionally mixing with other genres, allowing for shifts in the spatial and temporal structure, for shifts from one type of discourse/ narrator to another, for intertextual references.

Species of Fiction and the Novel

According to Wallace Martin (*Recent Theories of Narrative*, 1986), American and British views of the novel in the first half of the twentieth century were based on a clear-cut set of assumptions. Martin quoted H. G. Wells who, in the tradition of Charles Dickens, saw the (realistic) novel as "the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas." (Martin, 20) As a rule, traditional accounts of the realistic novel, referring in particular to the English novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, insisted on the accurate transcription of events or of the workings of the mind and consequently, the realistic novel was the desired form of novelistic discourse.

The Canadian critic and theorist Northrop Frye (*The Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957) claimed that the realistic novel should not be regarded as the only form of prose fiction: "The literary historian who identifies fiction with the novel is greatly embarrassed by the length of time that the world has managed to get along without the novel." (Frye in Martin, 21) In his opinion, the novel was only one species of fiction. According to Frye, "we have no word for a work of prose fiction, so the word 'novel' does duty for everything, thereby loses its only real meaning as the name of a genre. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction, between books which are about things admitted to be true and books which are about everything else, is apparently exhaustive enough for critics." (Frye in Martin, 31)

Frye classified the 'modes' of literature according to the nature of the worlds and the characters that they depicted. He distinguished between myth, romance, high mimetic (in which the heroes were superior in kind to others and, in the first two instances, to their environment) and low mimetic and ironic (in which the hero/ character was superior in degree to others

but not to his environment, if not inferior to both, in the case of the latter). According to Martin, the novelty of Frye's scheme was that "it [broke] down the barriers that had separated verse from prose, oral from written, short from long narratives." (Martin, 32) It also revealed "the relationship between the course of history and certain changes in fiction" (for instance, the progression from myth to irony corresponded roughly to the evolution from medieval Europe to the twentieth century, whereby he inferred that society and literature can change in a cyclic, rather than a linear pattern, considering the fact that changes in twentieth century fiction may suggest a return to myth). (32) As far as the novel was concerned, Frye's classification implied that 'narrative' "is a certain mode of writing and that a particular prose work such as the novel need not be narration from beginning to end. […] – hence a shift in the emphasis in discussing fiction from the evaluation by fixed standards to a more flexible assessment of how works differ in meaning and composition". [In his scheme], "the novel is a realistic genre that achieved its characteristic form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." (Martin, 35)

Wallace Martin also recalled Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog who, in their jointly written book, *The Nature of Narrative* (1966), replaced Frye's classification of modes and genres of prose fiction with a more unified theory and history of narrative. In their scheme, the epic creation, characterized by allegiance to *mythos* (the story as preserved in the literary tradition), and exemplified with works such as Homer's, *Beowulf, Chanson du Roland*, gradually evolved into 'empirical' narrative (characterized by allegiance to reality-truth), and 'fictional' narrative (characterized by allegiance to ideal – beauty and goodness), each of which had, in turn, two subdivisions – biography/ history, autobiography/ mimesis and romance and fable, respectively. Scholes and Kellog claimed that there was a reunion of empirical and fictional narrative, more exactly, the four types – history, mimesis, the romance and the fable combined in the Middle Ages, producing the novel. (Martin, 36 *et passim*)

The Social Causes of the Emergence of the Novel

An assessment of the emergence and evolution of the novel and of the novelistic discourse cannot neglect the social causes that contributed to the emergence of this literary form. In her book *The True Story of the Novel* (1997), Margaret Ann Doody investigated the evolution of the novelistic discourse from ancient literature, but she also explained the social framework that had made possible, ever since the sixteenth century, the emergence of this literary form. The basic tenet of her theory is that the evolution and development of the novel was closely linked to the emergence, in Europe, of the middle-classes, characterized by new expectations, new tastes and new worldviews. Also characteristic of the emergence of the novelistic discourse was what

she called "a new nationalism", namely "a way of organizing one's individual identity and of centralizing the State and its powers". This new individualism was based on Aristotle's ideas of the state and of the civic idea of 'public' life. (Doody, 226) These converged, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in "the sense of the civic", a distinct desire of the individual to participate in public life. (226)

Historians (Brinton 1963, McDowall 1997) agree that sixteenth century England saw the beginning of a generalized idea of literacy, with the growth of the newly emerging middle-class, the members of which shared an interest in both town and country. "This literate class questioned the way in which the Church and the state were organized, for both religious and practical reasons." (McDowall, 61) At the same time, Doody argued that the spread of Protestantism in sixteenth century Europe was a powerful force in creating a political sense in the individual's mind. Lutheranism and Calvinism were religious movements that insisted on the respect for the secular, which also entailed the respect for the 'ruler' and the fact that people should not interfere with a ruler already in authority. It was Calvin (1509-64) who argued that one could not be a member of the *civitas* (and thus enjoy authority in the public space) unless one had a household and power to govern one's property. Thus, individualism could be thought of only in male and property terms. Based on Aristotle's image of the authoritarian household, in the sixteenth century this concept developed into the idea of a society run by men of substance and property (the ruling of the elite males). Therefore, "the very civic ideal crystallized around the individual man, with property, family and servants around him". (Doody, 226 *et passim*)

In sixteenth century England, there were signs that "the authority of the father was increasing partly because of the increase of the authority of the Church following the Reformation. On the religious side [there were] members of this new middle-class who believed it was their right to read the Bible in the English language." (McDowall, 105) As McDowall argued, it was the pressure on the head of the family for spiritual welfare (evinced in Bible readings) that led to the idea of absolute obedience from the family members, namely the wife and the children. It was at this time that the idea of separate spheres, which would dominate Victorian mentality and would set such sharp divides in English literature, gained shape, visible in the marginalization, even exclusion, of children and women (who were allowed no legal rights) from the ideals of civic life. At the same time, Protestantism made it possible for ever more categories of people to have access to the written word. After the printing of the *King James Bible* (1611), several other translations of the Bible into English were published in order to make Protestantism acceptable and religious service

more accessible to the people. Moreover, Protestantism brought about an ideal of universal literacy. If, in 1396, the Oxford scholar John Wycliffe had not been allowed to publish the translation of the Bible because private thinking had been regarded as a threat to Christian authority, as of 1476, Caxton's printing press made possible both a more standardized spelling and the circulation of books, which became cheaper and more accessible to an avid middle-class readership.

Protestantism also dissolved the authority of the Church and, by the fact that it split into a number of religious groups and sects, brought about religious skepticism. (Brinton, 106) As a result, "the Anglican Church […] was strong politically, but it became weaker intellectually." (McDowall, 99) It was within this framework, where a number of contradictory beliefs rendered religious absolute truth irrelevant, that "the great religious writers of the period" (McDowall, 99), John Bunyan and John Milton wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Paradise Lost*, respectively. Protestantism, with what Max Weber subsequently coined as the "Protestant work ethic" was, according to Niall Ferguson, one of the "six killer apps" (Ferguson 2012) that gave Western civilization its enduring power:

Protestantism made the West not only work, but also save and read. The Industrial Revolution was indeed a product of technological innovation and consumption. But it also required an increase in the intensity and duration of work, combined with the accumulation of capital through saving and investment. […] The literacy that Protestantism promoted was vital to all of this. On reflection, we would do better to talk about the Protestant *word* ethic. (Ferguson, 264)

However, according to Doody, within this auspicious general framework, but under the impact of Puritan mentality, 'fiction' was nevertheless regarded with suspicion, unlike the previous era of the Renaissance. Fiction was considered a waste of time, as it entertained idle thought and it was even considered subversive to the ideas of public order. Doody therefore considered the novel a form of fiction "grounded in the political activity", deeply influenced by the political and social framework. In this respect she mentioned Thomas More's *Utopia* (1551), regarded, in the course of time, as philosophical fantasy, picaresque tale, satire or coded political allegory, but, which, despite these various definitions, was primarily a work of fiction that maintained interest in people's lives in relation to power and society. (Doody, 232)

Therefore, Doody argued, the novel emerged "during the rise of the civic ideal, parallel to the rise of the mercantilistic middle-classes", but it was, from the very beginning, in "partial tension with the civic ideal, [as] it gave voice to those who did not represent it." (232) In this respect, Doody referred to the immense influence of Puritan mentality in the seventeenth century, when reading fiction had to be justified "against the pleasurable principle", stories were treated as bad examples and fiction about love was accepted only in order to provide a model of how bad love really was, or as a model of what one should avoid. The Protestant/Puritan insistence that everyone should be 'guided' into reading properly generated fierce debates about reader-response. Novels had already become an important site of debates upon ideas and behavior, but, as individual literary forms (Sidney's *Arcadia,* 1590 or Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678), they were still rejected. (232)

Wallace Martin also saw a connection between the shift in the religious paradigm in Europe and the increase in realism in the novelistic discourse, which eventually led to the emergence of the novel; he mentioned "social and cultural historians [who] provide a simple story of how the Reformation, empirical philosophy and individualism produce the Protestant work ethic and the rise of the middle class, thus giving birth to the novel." (Martin, 40) This view was endorsed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in their assessment of the role of women in literature, saw "the rise of the novel [as] dependent not only on the new empiricism and the cult of sentimentality, but also on the formation of a new middle-class reading public, a development which reflected the extraordinary growth of capitalism in the late eighteenth century." (Gilbert and Gubar, 48)

Scholes and Kellog, on the other hand, suggested that "the novel appeared more abruptly, through the grafting of fact into fiction" (the novel was regarded as the modern counterpart of the epic). They also suggested that the novel is an "unstable compound", a "shifting zone of mixed kinds with no fixed nature". In their opinion, the novel does not exist except as a mixture, hence the paradox that the essence of the novel is that "is has no essential identity." (Scholes and Kellog in Martin, 37)

But, in Martin's opinion, the shift in theoretical perspective advanced by the Scholes and Kellog redefined the traditional accounts of 'social realism' related to the emergence of the novel and considered one of its defining features. Martin referred to traditional accounts of the emergence of the novel, according to which romances gradually became more plausible and typical, increasing in realism, until a new literary kind was born in eighteenth century England – the novel. In this sense, Martin mentioned Rene Girard (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 1961), according to whom members of traditional societies patterned their lives according to the role models provided by their culture. It was the gradual loss of transcendental models –of religion and myth – that led to the imitation of heroes found in books. "The idea of selecting a pattern to imitate instead of having it imposed by the community is related to the change from a religious

to a secular society". (Martin, 40) In the same line of thought, Wallace referred to Marthe Robert (*Origins of the Novel*, 1972), who reiterated the idea that there was a fundamental tension between the ideal and the real underlying modern narratives: "Fictional illusion can be achieved in two ways: either the author acts *as if* there were no such thing, and the book is said to be realistic[…]; or else he can stress the 'as if', […] in which case it is called a work of fantasy, imagination or subjectivity. Thus, there are two kinds of novel: one purporting to draw material from life, the other acknowledging openly that it is only a set of figures and forms." (Robert in Martin, 41)

The 'feminization of the novel'

The idea that novels included too much play upon imagination lay at the heart of the powerful criticism against the novel. The idea of 'character' became subject to the same type of criticism and the critics of the time urged writers to depict exemplary characters with which the readers should identify. In contrast to the heroes of epic literature, the novel character emerged as a "new and monstrous being, […] an artificial hybrid, an alternative self." (Doody, 268) Therefore, much of the criticism of the novel derived from the possibility of the reader's identification with such a character and it was addressed at the male readers who might project themselves into the experience of a fictional character. Therefore, the end of the seventeenth century was, according to Doody, a time when "authorities, cultural monitors had to seek not only what abstract ideas a novel inculcated in readers, but also what characters were like and what emotions they elicited." (268) It was a time when, as Martin put it, "storytellers, having been accused of indulging in idle fancies (this accusation was common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), know that they are guilty as charged and attempt to produce more believable narratives." (Martin, 41)

As a result of the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns (with the latter acknowledging the presence of women on the literary scene) in France and England (Brinton 1963), the beginning of the eighteenth century witnessed a change in the perception of the novel in England. The shift in perception was gradual and it involved primarily the readers – it was a phenomenon that Doody called 'the feminization of the novel' – "the need to attach a gender to the novel arose from the desire to attach a gender to the novel's readers, widely assumed to be women." (Doody, 277)

In the seventeenth century, a book's preface contained advice about who should read a particular novel and what emotions one should elicit from it. In the early eighteenth century, readers were still assumed to be male and novelists were urged to write their novels in a sufficiently 'masculine' manner. At the same time,

with the emergence of women on the literary scene, the idea that women, not men, were the target readers of novels gained ground and was embraced by critics, particularly because "women were, at the time, unable to propagate the novels' ideas into social currency, … as … they were endowed with a limited degree of public functioning." (Doody, 277-78)

The eighteenth century saw, therefore, a link between the novel and a new way of conceptualizing society – the invention of the 'public' and 'private' spheres of life. The eighteenth century has been credited with (or blamed for) inventing the 'private' sphere, the realm of the 'domestic'. 'Public' and 'private' are new ways of conceptualizing the civic. The private is what cannot be the civic, but ought to support it, as home is the nucleus of the system. The novel is now urged to become, at least officially, both 'private' and 'domestic'. [These were] more or less official pronouncements, even if this is not what really happened to the novel … [because] novel characters refuse to keep enclosed in a narrow private world, but keep dashing aside in all directions. … Before the end of any novel, the home and its women (the 'angel in the house' included) will have touched multiple aspects of the community, the culture and history. (Doody, 278)

Thus, women became the official target readers of novels (Doody mentioned Samuel Richardson who, in 1747, had to advertise his novel *Clarissa* as "dealing with the most important concerns of private life." (278) According to her, this shift in the perception of the novel was crucial: the 'feminization of the novel' (in England and France) made it rather unimportant, but at the same time allowed it to continue. It was thereby that women were encouraged to write. "Even if feminine characters playing central roles were not an invention of the eighteenth century, with the average reader imagined to be a woman, male novelists were urged to write about female characters." (Doody, 278-79) Women were, according to Doody, more interesting to portray, as they were the cultural repository of feeling and imagination, while men (consequently male characters) were still regarded as strong, rational and successful, and failure, emotions or anxiety were feelings denied to them. (278-79) This view was shared by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who, while acknowledging that women were excluded from the Puritanical view (particularly in Milton's work), admitted that it was John Locke, with his "psychological model of the mind as *tabula rasa*", who "paved a way to the realism that would allow many eighteenth century women to record in letters and journals the private experiences that had shaped their development." (Gilbert and Gubar, 48)

The rise of 'prescriptive realism'

A literary phenomenon that occurred parallel to the feminization of the novel was, according to Doody, the 'rise of prescriptive realism', which became dominant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of its causes was, in her opinion, the fact that, "whether imagined to be man or woman, the reader is always troubling as social entity." (Doody, 281) Therefore, the critical discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries showed an implicit resistance to the idea that literature might have an impact on the 'creation of reality'. A writer should not point to social change, therefore critics praised and emphasized the "private and exemplary nature of the novel." (281)

The rise of realism was marked by the 'probable' and the 'verisimilar' as key concepts. These had emerged in the early seventeenth century in France, when 'romance' had been discarded in favor of the new concept of the 'verisimilar' ('*vraisemblance*') which, although a largely abstract term, discarded 'romance' and 'fancy'. It was, according to Doody, in England that the demand for fidelity to a very close physical and social reality became the recommended norm. Prescriptive realism, defined by 'probability' and 'verisimilitude', was introduced "to discipline the form and make it acceptable." (Doody, 283) Consequently, she regarded the rise of prescriptive realism as a political event since, as of the eighteenth century, English fiction became wary of experimentation:

The culture of the novel, the true 'Great Tradition' stretching back to Boccaccio … was still the literary heritage of Europe and English readers and writers born at the turn of the 18th century. The inheritance included Spanish novels of the 16th century and French novels of the 17th. The rise of Prescriptive Realism put an end to it and made the Great Tradition largely invisible. … It may be argued not that a devotion to the realistic led incidentally to the loss of much fiction, but that a devotion to realism was invented by the English as an efficient excuse for shedding the tradition. (288)

As Martin also argued, most of the eighteenth century writers denied that they were writing novels or romances. "They entitled their works 'histories', 'lives' or 'memoirs' to dissociate themselves from the frivolous, fanciful, improbable, sometimes immoral aspects of the former." (Martin, 43) Thus, the emergence of the novel in England may be regarded as the outcome of a smooth transition from medieval romances to family (in a narrow or broad sense) narratives that gradually increased in realism in response to the expectations of the reading public, editors and critics alike.

As Doody claimed, realism had a certain idealistic aspect, as it insisted on the writers' dealing with the humble or ordinary aspects of life, but there were also prescriptions: a writer should only write about familiar things and not step away from the civic sphere. Therefore, in English literature, "realism emerged as a kind of ideology, [...], [with] the cult of the normal and of the real [having] the strongest hold in English fiction, at least at a prescriptive level." (Doody, 289) It was evinced in what she called 'domestic fiction', dealing, on the one hand, with "the home, the drawing-room, the woman's domestic sphere" (292) - stemming from what Martin called the "family romance" (Martin, 42), and, on the other hand, in fiction with an inward turn towards "the capital or the provinces", a type of "nationally in-turned" realism that coincided with the rise of British imperialism. (Doody, 292)

Prescriptive realism was dominant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But, according to Doody, "as soon as the novel seems to be tied up in prescriptive realism, authors have to rescue it."(293) It was here that she identified "the paradox of English literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: namely that, in rescuing the novel from prescriptive realism, writers appeal to other narrative forms" [and that] "the eighteenth century, the first in which the novel was supposed to deal with domesticity, excelled in creating forms that were not dignified as novel" (the Gothic novel, the modern historical novel, children's fiction, the romance and detective stories). (290)

Paradoxically, the increase in readership brought by Puritanism and the rise of the middle classes also suppressed the great tradition of the Renaissance literature in England. In an ironic twist, it was the very identification of the novel with a middle-class, at times targeted female, readership that made possible the emergence of the novel in eighteenth century England and ensured not only its survival, but also its proliferation.

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