

Formalism and Eighteenth-Century English Fiction

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WHEN THE editors of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* asked me if I would like to edit a special number of the journal, I readily agreed but then wondered what might be a timely topic. What had the study of the eighteenth-century English novel lacked of late? What would justify and unify a special number? In recent years, I had become uneasy about what I perceived as the drift in some of eighteenth-century studies towards an extreme version of cultural studies that struck me as indifferent or even hostile to what I think of as the main tasks of literary study. The tendency of this brand of cultural studies seemed to mandate treating literary texts as simply part of the larger ideological and cultural field. Perhaps unfairly, I thought of W.H. Auden's quip: "Thou shalt not sit / With statisticians nor commit / A social science."¹ At its most extreme, cultural studies can turn in the direction of a social science that denies or at least neglects traditional critical attention to literature as an imaginative and quite singular ordering of words distinct from other linguistic and cultural practices within its particular historical context. Indeed, a few years ago as president of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) I had written a piece for the society newsletter in which I expressed some dismay about the disciplinary confusion and methodological inadequacy that professors of literature in general faced as they sought to participate in an uncompromised brand of cultural studies for which they had no particular or rigorous training. Here in part is what I wrote in my president's column for the ASECS newsletter in spring 2009: "the essential part of the disciplinary and methodological profile of professors of literature is our intense

¹ W.H. Auden, "Hermetic Decalogue," *Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times* (Phi Beta Kappa Poem, Harvard, 1946).

attention to form and to style, to the medium used to deliver the message, to the shapings of the words and language on the page. If those who profess the study of literature are to be more than ill-trained or amateur social scientists or historians, they need to practice this attentiveness. The cultivation of such attention is not a part of the training of historians and social scientists. It follows ... that another and related aspect of our disciplinary identity involves judging the effectiveness of the text by observing the formal means it employs.”²

But of course English eighteenth-century prose fictions are resistant to what we usually think of as formal analysis, and when I thought about this topic I had no particular preconceptions about just what more strictly formal analysis of eighteenth-century fiction would look like. Eighteenth-century English narratives took many and distinct forms as some authors may be said to have improvised their work in response to the newly expanded literary market for print in general and for narrative in particular. Such improvisation and commercial exploitation are overt, for example, in Daniel Defoe’s narratives, but can also in another sense be seen in Samuel Richardson, who set out to moralize popular amatory fiction, or for that matter in Henry Fielding, who began his career as a novelist by parodying Richardson’s novels. The eighteenth-century novel, moreover, in its frequently popular or even ephemeral beginnings is very much a proper object of cultural as well as more strictly literary studies, since novels were part of an emerging consumer culture, a response to audience needs as they were perceived. So I thought why not pose the following challenges and questions to potential contributors to this special number. How can we talk in more or less formal terms about works of prose fiction that are opportunistic and improvisatory and do not seem to adhere to any particular formal pattern? What sort of critical terms might be employed to explain how such fiction possesses a sustaining structure that provides coherence and meaning? Or should we go even further and say that eighteenth-century English fictional narrative in its various manifestations defines itself by a subversion of form,

² John Richetti, “From the President, by John Richetti, ‘ASECS and the Disciplines: Thoughts on Professing Literature,’” *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Spring 2009 News Circular No. 147* (Winston-Salem: ASECS, 2009), 1–2. <http://asecs.press.jhu.edu/2009%20Spring%20News%20Circular.pdf>

by the explicit rejection of formal affiliations and generic traditions and decorum? In the most provocative and influential formulation of this subversion, M.M. Bakhtin identified the novelistic as a set of liberating linguistic energies that reached out through narrative to what he called a “zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness.”³ In this emergence of the novelistic spirit, Bakhtin wrote, narrative became “permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody ... an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality.”⁴

Although none of the contributors responds directly to the challenge posed by Bakhtin’s denial of formal properties in the novel, each of them in distinct ways and in different contexts seeks to develop a critical perspective that will extract a structure, an organizing principle that provides something like a stabilizing form for the fictions analyzed. What all the submissions I received made clear to me is that extreme cultural studies of the sort I worried about has retreated, that eighteenth-century studies at its best continues to ponder the place of form in understanding eighteenth-century imaginative writing and even in the novel from the early years of the century. The included articles have gone a long way to reassure me that a new, historically oriented formalism is emerging. This issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* may be said to epitomize (and to celebrate) a strong current trend in eighteenth-century studies that fuses cultural study with intense attention to form, the latter defined in various ways. Structure in eighteenth-century fiction in every case is certainly not the “organic” and self-enclosed form that some New Critics dreamt of finding, mainly of course in lyric poems. Rather, each of the contributors to this volume offers a version of form in fictional narrative that necessarily relates it to the various socio-historical circumstances that surround the emergence of the novel as a genre and that in many cases are its overt subject matter. Form in fiction, to hazard a generalization drawn from these essays, develops in response to a novelist’s struggles with narrative’s drift towards mere sequence or reactionary generic

³ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 11.

⁴ Bakhtin, 7.

reiteration; form is a subtle stay against the dangers inherent in narrative such as the diffuse enumeration of events and personages. What strikes me in the quite distinct, subtle, and original versions of form that each of the contributors develops is that each of them articulates a notion of form drawn from close attention to the texts in question and to the novelist whose works they are addressing. So that one might come away from reading this issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* with the interesting idea that each novelist can be said to develop his or her own sense of form. We must speak not of one principle of formal narrative organization but of many. Such diversity might well be predicted, since to move as the articles gathered here do from Defoe to Austen is to trace the emergence of something like a consensus, not about one formal approach to eighteenth-century English fiction but about the varieties of form or structure that such fiction inevitably contains and under critical pressure reveals.



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