THE IDEA OF ROMANCE IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL

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Ian Watt has shown us that the rise of the novel coincides with the great evolutionary shift in social structure from hierarchy to individualism, when, in seventeenth and eighteenth century England, religion moved from church to conscience, and "reality" moved from Ideas to items, from the general to particulars, from Plato to Locke. The daily life of the ordinary individual was the new focus of interest; the novel became the new camera and the new voice of everyday reality. Mr. Watt has thrown a broad clear light on the new novel, and all of us are in his debt.

But the novel was not altogether new. In pointing to what is new, Mr. Watt has somewhat turned his back on what is old. The new novel, I believe, drew far more extensively and deeply from preceding narrative fiction than Mr. Watt allows, and much more intimately and persistently than Ernest A. Baker and other traditional historians of the novel have noticed. The old picaresque impulses are still perceptible, and, more important, the very romances that the novelists repudiated continued to shape the ideas and ideals of the new novel throughout the eighteenth century and on beyond.

The new eighteenth-century novels were primarily success stories, suiting the new individualistic society in which each unknown person hoped to succeed to some high place of security and recognition. Watt has shown us how Defoe's autobiographical focus was "as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience

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in the novel as Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* was in philosophy "(*Rise of the Novel*, p.15). And it is indeed surprising to see how Defoe's "I" has replaced the Ideal, as Defoe instinctively follows his culture's common assumptions. But the "I", as Ernest Baker had indicated in his *History*, had for some centuries already been the mark of the picaresque tale, the story of the nimble outsider making his way successfully around the established order. This is the very viewpoint and mode of the new society too, by Watt's own splendid demonstration. Defoe—by whatever means, perhaps by sheer journalistic rediscovery—had adapted the picaresque tale for the new society of outsiders. That he changed it from comic to serious does not, contrary to Watt's claim, obliterate the old pattern nor its old social implications. Defoe took the picar's first-person report; Fielding and Smollett heightened the picar's satirical observations. The new novel simply found new social significance in the older kind of storytelling.

But adaptions from romances were deeper and more extensive than those from the picaresque. Even the active burlesques brought into the novel the forms they were attacking. And the central idea of romance was hardly attacked at all, even by Fielding. The central idea of romance, I think, is also a success story. It is the ancestor of the picar's adventurous successes, and probably the oldest story in the world. In fairtale or myth or romance, it is always the same: a young man of unknown origin turns out to be somebody after all. We need only to remind ourselves of Taro, mysteriously born from a peach, to illustrate its universality and antiquity. This shadowy story of success is also the central story of the eighteenth-century novel.

Indeed, eighteenth-century fiction and eighteenth-century life were permeated with notions inherited from the romances. We can distinguish three slightly different inheritances. First is the central daydream of success I have just described, as man continued to imagine himself starting low and ending high in the old romantic way, and as society, in a plebian way, began to make the old dream come true. Second, the romance's ideas of excellence in

conduct, even the very phrases of romance, began to shape both the daily life and the fictions of a society reaching for elegance. Third, the fancies of romance came in the novel to represent all fanciful illusions; if a novelist wanted to show man's illusions, in other words, he would put them comically into the armor of romance.

But the essential idea of romance is that of the unknown low ending known and high. It had remained a fairytale for societies with little hope of social rise. In chivalric times it had moved into formal literature as the story of the only socially mobile type around, the young man-at-arms with spurs and high-born ladies to win. The story comes directly into the eighteenth-century novel, and comically, through Fielding, gathering seriousness as it becomes the summative graph of a society demanding of each the upward push for place and identity, or, later, the upward refinement of feeling. Even Defoe and Richardson, whose characters know their origins, have traces of it. And the knight in shining armor is still a cliché, and a story, and a state of mind, though he now rides a Ford Thunderbird in *The Ladies' Home Journal*.

The novel became the dominant form, then, and continues to be the dominant form, not solely, as Watt suggests, in that it realistically represented what the new individual could authenticate from his own experience, and could re-experience after his daily life, but also in that it gave him the struggles he knew, rewarded with the status he needed in order to recognize himself, like the unknown knight—to see himself publicly recognized according to the secret excellence only he himself, in the new lonely crowd, knew of. The old romantic dream was active in the new society and the new novel alike.

II

In their inability to escape the commonplaces of romance, even as they denounced them, the new eighteenth-century realists were demonstrating something that was to become the central preoc-

cupation of the novel: the fact that the wishful daydreams of romance are one of the realities of life. The new realists began simply by looking for those things in actual life that fulfilled the romantic wish. Mrs. Aphra Behn, for instance, that most interesting pioneer of the new novel, declares that she will not entertain her reader with the story " of a feigned hero, " there " being enough of reality to support it. " She then writes of her royal Negro slave's French tutor, of his " nose . . . rising and Roman, " his mouth " the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. " Readers have smiled at her dishonest romancing. But Mr. A. J. Rumsaran has discovered (*N & Q*, VII, 1960) that slaves from the tribe Mrs. Behn names actually worked the plantations she writes of, and that they were a tribe noted for the very features, the independence, and the stoicism under torture she gives her hero Oroonoko. They did have thin lips and noses. She had actually found in exotic South America the hero and the quality of experience the romances had told her about. She uses the idiom of romance to describe what she saw or heard about, thereby transmuting reality back again into something like the old golden dream. And as she clothes reality in the language of romance she also imports conventional romantic fabrications. She gives her slave a name borrowed partly from the neighboring and fabulous Orinoco River and partly, as the spelling leads one to suspect, from Oroöndates, the popular hero of La Calprenède's famous romance *Cassandra*, to which some of her intrigues and dialogues look more than a little similar. She had found romance in reality, and filled it out again with romance.

The case for Defoe is similar. He too found romance in far-off actuality, in Selkirk's experience on a distant island. Defoe's circumstantial realism lets us feel exactly how it would be to live the anxieties of a romantic adventure. But there is more coloration from conventional romance than we at first suspect. Since Defoe's island is far away, he also moves his data a little toward the romantic long ago as well—as if the romantic syndrome could not be resisted—pushing Crusoe about a generation into the past (forty-

four years from Selkirk, twenty-eight from himself). Furthermore, he moves Selkirk's island from the Pacific Ocean over into the Caribbean, onto the actual island of Tobago, it seems, but also right into Mrs. Behn's romantic territory, in the very conflux of the " Oroonoko " river, spelled with the two " oo's " Mrs. Behn had acquired from the French romance (Raleigh, Defoe's geographical source, consistently spelled it " Orenoque "). And the man Friday, whose " nose was small, not flat like the Negroes, " certainly derives some of his noble savagery from Mrs. Behn's romantic description of the real slave.

But *Robinson Crusoe* takes a great step forward from *The Royal Slave* in treating romance as one of the realities of life. Defoe has widely and subtly romanced the facts, propelled, as it were, by the romance *in* the facts ; but he moves on to treat, as part of his wonderfully real memoir, man's propensity to romanticize. As Crusoe enters his second cave, for instance, he sees " two broad shining eyes," hears a groan and indistinct words, then, in a cold sweat, finds " a monstrous, frightful, old he-goat " dying. In this episode, Crusoe is making fun of his own romantic fancy, as any anecdotalist would, engaging the same romantic expectations of his audience to make his realistic joke. It is exactly the rationalized ghost story Fielding uses, for fun, on Partridge, and Ann Radcliffe rediscovers for pleasant terror. But Defoe, here as at the end of his book, offers his readers romantic consolation: the cave " reflected a hundred thousand lights . . .whether diamonds, or any other precious stones, or gold, which I rather supposed it to be, I knew not." Then further: " I fancied myself now like one of the ancient giants, which were said to live in caves and holes in the rocks, where none could come at them. "

Crusoe's mind, in other words, has the conventional coloring of boyhood fairy tales and romances, somewhat coloring the world in turn, sometimes recognizing its fancies, sometimes not. Likewise he wryly thinks of himself as king, absolute monarch of nothing, with his crazy court of cats, dogs, and parrot. But he also takes this fantasy seriously, with a saving touch of ironic awareness, in

his " castle," and " fortress," and " country seat," and " bower." Friday and his friends become Crusoe's " subjects." And Defoe manages a remarkable actualization of romance in making Crusoe's fanciful fortified kingdom function as if it really were so, frightening the mutineers, making them think " they were got into an enchanted island, " and allowing Crusoe to play public hero at last, acting out his fantasy of lordship and saving the ship that is to rescue him. Crusoe exchanges goatskin rags for the clothes of power and riches, disguising himself, true to romance, but in an inversion of the romantic pattern that has its princes disguised in rags. Crusoe does not become king, nor even governor, really, as he would have in romance. He has acted out the romantic apotheosis to his own and our satisfaction but stays real Crusoe all the time. He merely plays seriously at romance, and comes away with the realistic equivalent of glory: a new suit and a nest egg. Nevertheless, the idea of romance has played a central part in *Robinson Crusoe*, first as a vehicle for man's perpetual illusions, and, second, as a referent for Crusoe's rise from rags to relative riches.

III

As Lionel Trilling has said in *The Liberal Imagination*, and as Harry Levin and others before him have said, *Don Quixote* is the archetypical novel because it is the prime story of illusion and reality, the novel's primary business. This is exactly what Defoe had discovered for himself in *Robinson Crusoe*. But I should like to emphasize one point: it is specifically the stuff of romance that the novel, from *Don Quixote* on, has used to dramatize man's illusions. Crusoe has laughed at his illusions in the cave by seeing them in the garb of romance, and he has acted out his rescue and success almost as if dressed for romance. Samuel Richardson, writing Pamela's realistic palpitations, moment by moment, writing a novel that was taken as breathing realism itself and no illusion at all, nevertheless gives his illusion of reality a strong glow of romance. He has domesticated the ancient romantic fairytale of Beauty and the Beast—wholly by accident and psychological intuition, it seems—

just as he has built on the almost inevitable romantic pattern of having his person of low status end with high title and riches. But he has consciously borrowed from romance too, since he has named his serving maid not after any realistic Betty or Moll, as Watt has pointed out (*RES*, XXV, 1949), but after the lady Pamela in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, and he has named Pamela's Swiss jailor "Colbrand" after the Danish giant in the popular chivalric romance of *Guy of Warwick*.

The idea of romance, of the noble, elevated, ideal life, continues to shape Richardson's *Clarissa*. To be sure, *Clarissa* was influenced by the theater, but the theater itself was so steeped in the seventeenth-century French romances that the novel can hardly escape untinged, whichever way it turns. *Clarissa* seems much more nearly a fair copy of eighteenth-century life than *Pamela*, and yet in it, again and again, we hear the language and see the attitudes of the romances: "Hasten, O damsel, who in a happy moment art come to put it in my power to serve the innocent and the virtuous," for instance (Let. XLIII). *Clarissa* brings us to a realization of what Ernest A. Baker was first to recognize: that eighteenth-century culture had copied the manners of the seventeenth-century French romances.

Katherine Philips's Society of Friendship in the mid-seventeenth century actually attempted to converse in the language of the romances, calling each other by the names of characters from the books they imitated. And far into the eighteenth century, young men and women continued to fly high in the language of romances, and to sign their letters Parthenissa and Orinda and Antenor. The ideas of romance, then, poured into the eighteenth-century novel, even when it resisted them, and from three directions: (1) from the romances themselves, still read and imitated through most of the century; (2) from the theater, which had borrowed heavily from them; and (3) from genteel life itself, which had acquired its elegant manners and speeches from the romances and the romantic theater both.

Let me give an example for Fielding's *Amelia* (I borrow from my "Fielding's *Amelia* and the Materials of Romance," *PQ*,

April, 1962). Amelia's mother has turned the hero, William Booth, out of the house on a stormy night. As he passes the garden wall, he hears a female voice call, " Mr. Booth." Now, Booth does not answer in any ordinary way. He says, " Who calls the wretched thing that was Alphonso? "—as a line from Congreve's *Mourning Bride* bursts from his lips. And Amelia leaps into his arms crying, " O! it is indeed my Alphonso, my only Alphonso! " (II. vi). They are acting out instinctively, even under stress, the Spanish-romantic roles of the distressed lovers in Congreve's play, who had been captivating the English fancy for fifty years, quoting to each other the lines that apparently everyone quoted—or lines like them—in seriousness and play alike. The illusions of romance, the specific roles of romance, in other words, had so colored English life that they did not fade for another century and more, on through the Victorian world, indeed, and into the twentieth century. Clarissa and Amelia are domesticated paragons of that female excellence which can be traced, in books and out of books, from the courtly ladies of medieval romance and on through the eighteenth-century, on through Dickens and long after Dickens. The ideas of romance shaped both eighteenth-century life and life in the eighteenth-century novel. And the literary pictures of perfection continued to perpetuate the ideas of romance in daily life. The illusions of romance had become a part of daily reality.

IV

But I have outrun myself. The most significant milestone in the novel's exploration of illusion and reality, which has been the novel's business since Cervantes, is Fielding's application of Cervantes to English life in *Joseph Andrews*. As I have pointed out elsewhere (" Henry Fielding's Comic Romances," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, XLV, 1960; see also more recently Maurice Johnson's *Fielding's Art of Fiction*), Fielding's two great novels are best seen, not as " comic epics," but, in Fielding's own defining term, as " comic romances." Following Cervantes, Fielding has opened up for the eighteenth-century a

comic use of romance that can, like that of Cervantes, illuminate man's illusions by contrasting them comically against reality. Furthermore, the plot of both of Fielding's great novels is the oldest romantic story of all, the basic daydream of the dispossessed: a young man of unknown origin but of noble qualities turns out to be truly noble and rich in the end. And this romantic center of Fielding is not altogether comic. In *Joseph Andrews* it is playful, but not ridiculous. Fielding indulges our romantic wishes far enough to allow us to see Joseph happily identified and elevated after his trials. *Tom Jones* is somewhat more serious. Jones is of gentle blood; he is elevated to the position and the lady he deserves, in true romantic style. But he remains illegitimate; like a true modern, his qualities must depend essentially upon himself.

When we look at the work of Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, and their imitators, we can distinguish, I believe, an entire literary genre that has been lost from sight. I mean that of the Comic Romance. It flourished for thirty years, from *Joseph Andrews* in 1742 to *Humphry Clinker* in 1771. When Richard Graves labels his *Spiritual Quixote . . . A Comic Romance* in 1773, we can see the genre as accepted, defined, and demonstrated in a fine afterglow. In his first book, *Roderick Random*, Smollett had specifically set out to do what Fielding had done. He, too, had aligned himself with Cervantes, who, he said, had reformed a taste "infected with a spirit of knight-errantry, . . . representing chivalry in the right point of view, and converting romance to purposes far more useful and entertaining, by making it assume the sock, and point out the follies of ordinary life." Cervantes had made romance comic, in other words, and had used it to burlesque ordinary reality.

This, then, is the new kind of writing initiated by Fielding and pursued by Smollett, Sterne, and others: a modernized burlesque of chivalric romance and a mild romancing of the follies of ordinary life, an English rendering of Cervantes. To complete the definition, we might add that, like Cervantes, each of the master practitioners of the genre discovered beneath the satiric romancing of

everyday follies some deep and durable comic revelation of the human predicament. (I borrow here, and for subsequent remarks on Sterne and Smollett, from my "*Humphry Clinker* as Comic Romance," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, XLVI, 1961.)

Nobody carried the comic romance farther than Sterne. He seems to have borrowed Smollett's comic-romantic system of naming Tristram Shandy, his hero. A fine romantic first name, "Tristram," the name of a famous knight, is brought tumbling down by a comically low last name, "Shandy," a word from Yorkshire slang, according to Cross, meaning "crack-brained." Each of Smollett's novels had used the system: "Roderick—Random," "Peregrine—Pickle," and so forth. Sterne's quixotic romancing of illusion and reality is several layers deep. First, there is Tristram himself, the impotent storyteller who tilts with the windmills of authorship with comic unsuccess. Second is Parson Yorick, a more lugubrious self-portrait of Sterne in the lineaments of Don Quixote. But most important is the quixotic pair of Walter and Toby Shandy, a wonderful permutation of Don Quixote and his companion Sancho, the one locked in his illusions of rationality, the other in his illusions of sentiment, each comically blinded by his illusion, each thinking himself able while in fact impotent.

Smollett's last novel is a grand summary of the comic romance. Smollett continues the system of naming that Sterne had borrowed from him: "Humphry—Clinker." But he borrows in turn from Sterne the ultimate anti-romantic mockery of having the hero almost non-existent. Like Tristram Shandy, Humphry Clinker comes into the novel late—after a quarter of the book has gone by—and is merely a minor character. Nevertheless, in him Smollett follows the old comic-romantic story introduced by Fielding, that of the unknown foundling and servant discovered to be of gentle blood at the end of the book, properly elevated and married off. Smollett's mockery of romance is gay and impudent. As Clinker mounts his coach horse, when he enters the book, a rip in his trousers

reveals that his hindquarters "had a skin as fair as alabaster." No eighteenth-century reader would miss the joke. On a person of unknown origin, as with Fielding's Andrews and Jones, alabaster skin is the unmistakable mark of nobility, and Smollett puts that mark on the most ignoble part of Humphry's anatomy.

Smollett has brought both romance and mankind low by a slap on the posteriors, and any reader of *Humphry Clinker* will remember the insistent fun that Smollett pokes at man's pretensions to higher things, reminding man of the body that is constantly bringing him low. This is Smollett's version of the deeper comedy that each of the comic romancers discovered: the standard eighteenth-century view of man as a comic contradiction, a ludicrous compound of animal and angel. Pope's man had hung in doubt between god and beast; Swift's had run with the horse to escape the ape. For Fielding, sex is the comic leveler; for Sterne, impotence; for Smollett, the alimentary canal.

V

After Sterne and Smollett, the comic romance falls away. A new rush of serious romance takes over in the new Gothic thrillers and the sentimental novel. The Clarissas and Amelias ride a new sweet flood of daydream. "Romance" begins to mean "love story" as the knights and armor grow dim. But the idea of chivalry was far from dead. Jane Austen returns to the comic romance, burlesquing the illusions of life in delicate clichés of chivalry. The female quixote, the usual romance-reading girl of the eighteenth-century novel, becomes her central heroine, becomes the representative, indeed, of all human illusion, of the way the mind will inevitably generate its cloudy expectations, and of how the event will inevitably differ. This is the center of Jane Austen's comedy: this self-containing, self-deceiving mind, her legacy from Locke by Sterne. And the modes of romance are its embodiment. *Northanger Abbey* gives the comedy of romantic notions its most obvious treatment. In *Emma* the comic romance reaches perfection. *Emma* is Jane Austen's richest novel, and it uses as its base

the same ancient romantic story that Fielding had used in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, that of the unknown person who turns out to be noble. But Jane Austen uses this story to illustrate the comedy of our self-delusion. Emma's whole error comes down to her conviction that, since Harriet is of unknown origin, she must be a nobleman's foundling daughter. And this moves on, as a comic romance should, to a deeper disclosure of the comic contradiction between what man is and what he thinks he is. Emma, like a true comic character, never learns her lesson: her ultimate illusion is that she has learned it. She forswears matchmaking only to continue to matchmake, even for herself. The final delightful romance of it all is to find Emma rewarded by the dream man she did not recognize, her Knightley in fatherly armor. Like Fielding, Jane Austen dispells yet teases our romantic illusions, and specifically though delicately in the accoutrements of chivalric romance. Surely, she means " Knightley " to suggest a knight.

And so the idea of romance is remarkably persistent in the eighteenth-century novel, just as it seems to have been in eighteenth-century life. Taken seriously, it produces the Clarissas and Amelias in a social flirtation that saw all gentlemen vaguely as knights and all ladies as princesses gazing from unobtainable windows. Taken comically, it represents all human illusion, and laughs at people taking themselves as knights and ladies. Historians of the novel seem to have understood the word " romance " in the eighteenth-century merely as a loose generic term, roughly equivalent to the word " novel " that displaced it. Actually, the word " romance " throughout the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth seems to have had a much higher specific connotation of chivalry than usually conceded. The iron mask and gauntlet were not far from the writer's central awareness, especially in days when men still rode horses and wore swords on high occasion. The Romantic Movement has tended to obscure the armory for us—in spite of Keats's knights-at-arms and magic casements. But in the eighteenth-century novel, the word romance and the idea of romance are active and formative, whether presenting ideals or laughing at

illusions, with a distinct clinking of armor from the older romances in the background.