

Chapter 2

Origins of the novel

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The story of the novel's emergence can be told differently depending on what you think a novel actually is. And depending on how you define the novel, you could attribute its emergence to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern empire of the ancient Greeks or to England over a millennium and a half later. So the divergence is enormous, both geographically and temporally: on the one hand, the novel is the product of a culturally hybrid classical antiquity, and, on the other, the outcome of Britain's transition into a capitalist modernity. This chapter surveys some very different accounts of the origins of the novel, and it turns in closing to a follow-up question: why do we want to be able to pinpoint when, where, and how the novel emerged?

Dates and definitions

"This book is the revelation of a very well-kept secret," Margaret Anne Doody writes in the opening line of *The True Story of the Novel* (1996): "that the Novel as a form of literature in the West has a continuous history of about two thousand years."¹ Doody goes on to offer a history of prose narrative which suggests that the novel is as old as Western civilization itself, beginning with ancient Greek fictions written around the time of Christ, among them those works that Bakhtin had considered when he sought to distinguish the irreverent novel from the stately classical epic. But are these all really *novels*? According to Doody's capacious definition they are, because a novel is a novel "if it is fictional, if it is in prose, and if it is of a certain length."² For many critics, though, this definition is too open-ended and inclusive, so generous that it tells us little about the novel as a form. But since definition is a project of

exclusion and containment, Doody's point is that when it comes to defining the novel our exclusions have often been arbitrary and our acts of containment driven by the critical desire to present the eighteenth-century English novel, very much a latecomer in the history of long prose fiction, as the first "real" novel.

So with its inclusive definitions and its massive historical scope, Doody's account of the novel's origins deviates dramatically from the received critical wisdom on the subject, a received wisdom that leaves out not much less than two millennia of long prose fiction. J. Paul Hunter offers a very useful but much more conventional definition of the novel in his study of the eighteenth-century context from which the English novel emerged. For Hunter the distinctive features of the novel are these: *contemporaneity* (novels tend not to be set in remote times and places); *credibility* (plots and characters operate in believable ways); *familiarity* (the world of the novel is a recognizably everyday one); *rejection of traditional plots* (unlike, say, Chaucer or Shakespeare, novelists tend not to reuse existing stories); *tradition-free language* (the novel eschews elevated "literary" diction in favor of everyday speech); *individualism* (novels care less about types than about individual subjectivities and their different ways of viewing the world); *empathy and vicariousness* (novels invite us to inhabit sympathetically the interior lives of characters); *coherence* (a narrative strand unites the whole); *inclusiveness, digressiveness, and fragmentation* (even if novels close by tying up their loose ends they also roam in unpredictable ways); and *self-conscious innovation* (in the eighteenth century, novelists had a strong sense that they were doing something new).³

Hunter's definitions are worth cataloguing at such length because, above all, they are so plausible and intuitive. What they also help to show, though, is how we habitually generalize about the novel on the basis of the most canonical eighteenth-century examples. You can probably think of many novels as counterexamples to Hunter's definitions (some gothic novels, for example, undermine the assertions about *contemporaneity* and *credibility*) but this criticism can be answered with the claim that these are not "mainstream" novels. The obvious problem, though, is that what constitutes the "mainstream" is an institutional judgment, its legitimacy conferred by its antiquity and by consensus, rather than an innocently descriptive fact. I said at the start of this chapter that your understanding of the origins of the novel depends on what you think a novel *is*; the biggest problem, however, is that what you think the novel *is* will depend on which historical moment in the long history of prose fiction you have decided to foreground. I have presented the choices as classical antiquity and eighteenth-century Britain, but it's more complicated even than that: after all, countries as different as England, France, China, and Spain

had produced long prose fictions – “novels”? – in the sixteenth century, and by then Lady Murasaki’s Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji* was already half a millennium old.⁴ So are you going to generalize about the novel on the basis of Apuleius or Murasaki, Rabelais or Richardson, Cervantes or Defoe? The definition of “novel” used to confirm that the novel emerged in the eighteenth century has, in reality, *already* presupposed that eighteenth-century emergence by virtue of having been reached on the basis of eighteenth-century examples (rather than, for example, ancient or Renaissance prose fiction). More succinctly put, your dating of the novel depends on your definition of the novel, but your definition depends on your dating.

The (eighteenth-century) rise of the novel

The book that did most to establish the conventional story of the novel’s emergence in eighteenth-century Britain is Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), a book of such rare critical importance that it continues to elicit elaborations and corrections over half a century after its publication. Focusing his study on Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding (and again you can see how much gets left out when critics address the emergence of the novel), Watt argues that “the lowest common denominator of the novel genre” is its “formal realism”:

Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel form in general: the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader 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.⁵

What characterizes the novel, then, is, first, a focus on the plausible particulars of individualized characters and their contexts (that **verisimilitude** discussed in my Chapter 1), and, second, the use of language in a primarily denotative or “referential” way, language treated as a transparent medium rather than used for its own rhetorical sake (this is what Hunter implies by “tradition-free language”). Very influentially, Watt argued that although there are moments of particularizing detail in the otherwise intricately stylized long prose fictions of classical antiquity and early modern Europe, these are anomalous, and it was not until the novels of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding that “formal realism” became the norm.

Watt and the many critics who have followed him have argued that Britain's early transition into capitalism made the novel possible. A print culture was emerging there for the first time: new technologies allowed for a wider circulation of written materials, and for the transmission of this reproducible, portable, and even purchasable commodity. Furthermore, although the eighteenth century was by no means an era of universal literacy, the novel differed from earlier literary forms because it was produced outside elite systems of aristocratic patronage, subscription, and private circulation. In his famous opening to *Tom Jones*, Fielding likened the novelist to a pub landlord: the novel is a democratic form, then, even if it's only the democracy of the pub, where your cash secures your welcome. The "patrons" of this new genre would be a much less select group: the booksellers, the new circulating libraries, and the novel's borrowers, buyers, and readers. Most critics agree that the new possibilities for publication and distribution must have played a massive part in the eventual ascendancy of an emergent literary form.

The wider culture of which these new publishing conditions were part would also be massively significant in shaping the concerns of the novel, Watt argued, because not only did the birth of capitalism make the novel *materially* possible as a print commodity, but it also created the powerful, literate, self-confident middle class from which the novel's writers and readers would come. From these social transformations emerges the characteristic worldview of the eighteenth-century novel: capitalistic, individualistic, and entrepreneurial. Watt takes as exemplary of this worldview the solitary and self-interested protagonists of Defoe's fiction: his restless pursuit of wealth is what lands Robinson Crusoe on his desert island, while the pickpocket Moll Flanders and the courtesan Roxana approach conventional morality with the dog-eat-dog attitude of the emergent entrepreneur. Traditional ideas of birth and status, notions of a person's supposedly "natural" station in life, are breaking down, and there is everything to play for.

Michael McKeon argues in his substantial extension of Watt that the novel worked to negotiate "questions of virtue" and "questions of truth" that appeared as the traditional belief in a divinely sanctioned order of things started to crumble in the transition from feudalism into capitalism, and from the medieval into the modern era.⁶ If your birth is no longer the measure of your worth, and if it is now possible to imagine honor as a matter of character rather than caste, then ideas of selfhood become newly interiorized and newly contingent. McKeon offers an evolutionary narrative with an important twist: that the erosion of aristocratic values fueling progressive **ideology** carried within it the means of critiquing progressive values themselves, because once status is no longer "natural" but a factor of economic accomplishment,

the inevitable question arises of why anyone should consider the new aristocracy of cash somehow better than the aristocracy of birth it replaced. McKeon's "questions of truth" work in a similar way because once you challenge "universal" truths with the relative truths of empirical knowledge (or what is learned by human experience and not known as, say, divine law), you create the conditions under which your supposedly "truer" truth is in turn subject to debate.

The novel emerged in England, scholars often propose, because this was a rapidly secularizing Protestant culture, and, anticipating the obvious challenge from readers of the Spanish Catholic Cervantes, McKeon suggests that *Don Quixote* was a false start because the arrival of the Catholic revival known as the Counter-Reformation terminated the skeptical lines of inquiry which Cervantes and others were advancing. Just as progressive ideas of individual self-making made possible their own undoing at the very moment in which they undid ideas of birth-as-worth, and just as empiricism unleashed the forces that enabled its own dismantling, Protestantism started by eroding the authority of the Church but ultimately eroded the basis of its own claims to religiously sanctioned truth. Because the middle class of eighteenth-century England was a Protestant one, the novel it produced would, in keeping with the Puritan tradition of individual self-scrutiny, be introspective rather than civic in its emphases, but what follows from that "Protestant" internalization of authority is a valorization of private judgment that ultimately renders religious authority superfluous because it inadvertently exposes the subjectivity and relativity of *all* knowledge.

In a historically relocated counterpart to Lukács's and Bakhtin's arguments that the novel, emerging out of epic, speaks of a world in which ideas of universal truth have been dissolved, critics like Watt and McKeon present the novel as the product of a Protestant-inspired but ultimately secularizing rejection of the traditional and timeless in favor of the contingent, circumstantial, and empirically and individually knowable. So the novel emerged within the intellectual climate that was also producing the empiricism of scientists and philosophers like Francis Bacon and John Locke – "the early modern epistemological revolution," is how McKeon characterizes this historical moment.⁷ Indeed, Watt argues that Defoe's focus on what the protagonist knows through *personal* experience, knows from the evidence of his or her senses, is "as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* [I think therefore I am] was in philosophy."⁸

That novels emerged with modern individualism makes sense in relation to how we actually read them. Whereas the reception of earlier literary forms reinforced communality – plays are watched with others, and poetry often

read aloud – the novel is consumed in privacy and solitude. And the novel is very much concerned with the interior lives of individuals, interior lives at odds with their social circumstances. You see this very clearly in the striking inwardness of the modernist novels of the early twentieth century, but perhaps theirs is only the continuation of a novelistic concern with interiority that has been distinctive of the novel since its earliest days; you might say that Robinson Crusoe's twenty-eight years on a desert island has an almost allegorical appropriateness, but the many hundreds of private letters that make up Richardson's *Clarissa* also tell us how interested eighteenth-century readers were in life as it is experienced from the inside. Or, looking back still further, there is Madame de Lafayette's wonderful *The Princess of Clèves* (1678), a psychological study of a woman trapped between marital obligation and adulterous desire. Married under duress to the Prince of Clèves, the Princess falls in love with the Duke of Nemours. The novel begins like a romance – the men are paragons of valor, the women of beauty – but ends up as something psychologically much knottier: duty clashes with desire, but the Princess cares as much for her reputation as her moral duty, while her desire for the Duke of Nemours is tempered by a suspicion that he is more interested in the chase than in her. This is a **historical novel** set in the French court of a century earlier, but the main “events” of *The Princess of Clèves* are more psychological than social.

However, although it is easy to catalogue examples like these to show that the novel is essentially an individualistic form, concerned primarily with questions of subjectivity, psychology, and interiority, any argument along those lines needs to register the fact that defining the novel in a particular way reflects reading habits and experiences consolidated long after those novels were written. If you have decided after, say, James and Woolf that the novel is about the subjective life then the subjective life is probably what you are going to see when you look back at Lafayette, Defoe, Richardson, and the other early novelists. The risk of anachronistic reading is always with us. You read Behn differently after reading Richardson, Richardson differently after Proust, and while Eliot makes Austen read differently, and Woolf makes Eliot read differently, Dickens sheds light on Fielding, and Joyce on Dickens. Successors shape our reading of precursors.

But is it a novel?

Indeed, even the designation of “novel” is potentially anachronistic. In *From Fiction to the Novel*, Geoffrey Day goes so far as to suggest that what we unhesitatingly think of as eighteenth-century novels “were not perceived as such by

the readers or indeed by the major writers of the period, and that, so far from being ready to accept the various works as ‘novels,’ they do not appear to have arrived at a consensus that works such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Clarissa*, *Tom Jones*, *Peregrine Pickle* and *Tristram Shandy* were even all of the same species.”⁹ A number of scholars have argued that it is only when you get to the very end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, and to writers like Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, that the novel has really taken shape as a single form. This is why, these critics explain, the stories we tell about “the rise of the novel” need to attend to the after-the-fact status of their terminology.

In view of the long tradition of reading their works as *the* “eighteenth-century novels,” it would be perverse to suggest that writers like Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding cannot be novelists on the grounds that our novelistic expectations did not exist when they were writing. However, one of the things their longstanding canonization *as* novelists tends to obscure is their books’ indebtedness to a huge range of preexisting textual forms: *Pamela* is part conduct book and part fairy tale; *Robinson Crusoe* recalls the travelogue and the spiritual autobiography; *Clarissa* aims at tragedy; Fielding thought that he was adapting the lofty epic into prose comedy. If you look back a little further than the eighteenth-century novel to some of its plausible antecedents in Renaissance prose fiction, Thomas Nash’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) and Thomas Deloney’s *Jack of Newbury* (1597) are, among other things, pseudo-biographies and jest-books, with a touch of the cautionary (Nash) or exemplary (Deloney) fable, and, in Nash’s case, confession, chivalric fantasy, and travelogue on top of all that. Unless you keep in mind those debts to other written forms, the interestingly mongrel quality of the novel in the eighteenth century and beyond threatens to disappear. “For the novel least of all forms of literature can boast a pure extraction,” wrote the critic Walter Raleigh in 1895: “it is of mixed and often disreputable ancestry.”¹⁰

Imposing total coherence on the novel would be disastrous if it meant flattening out either the rich diversity of its textual sources or the extraordinary capacity for transformation that it continues to demonstrate. Rather oddly, both Watt and McKeon conclude that the novel would spend the next few centuries just recapitulating what the major eighteenth-century novelists had already done. This is a strange conclusion because it obliterates the intellectual and formal variety of everyone from Jane Austen to James Joyce, making the novel sound a good deal less interesting than most of us find it, and because it ignores how subsequent writers have shaped our reading of their predecessors. The conventional story of the rise of the novel is least convincing when it presents the novel and its history as if they were sitting there waiting to be

discovered rather than constructed (and reconstructed over and over again) by modern readers. The massive differences in critical narratives of the history of the novel are an important reminder that all literary histories are put together in accordance with the particular interests of the periods in which they are being written.

You can see this most clearly when you contrast the insularity of the classic “rise of the novel” story with the globalized consciousness of the critiques and revisions that it provoked at the end of the twentieth century. The Ian Watt tradition picks out three English novelists and nationalizes the novel, sidestepping the problem of its relative belatedness compared to what was happening on the continent through what William Warner shows to be a critical sleight of hand: “if one understands ‘the’ (first real modern) novel as the expression of middle-class (democratic, Protestant) culture, then the novel is an English invention.”¹¹ England gets the credit for inventing the novel, and the English “invention” of the novel turns descriptive claims about the novel at a single stage in its history into prescriptive claims about the novel generally. Thus, Warner goes on, “empiricism, Protestant individualism, moral seriousness,” and other distinctive aspects of English culture at a particular historical moment, “are promoted from secondary characteristics of novels which happen to have been written in England to primary features of the novel’s generic identity.”¹²

This nationalizing of the novel would have been meaningless to eighteenth-century readers who read promiscuously, linguistic competences and translations permitting, across national boundaries. As importantly, one of the most striking aspects of Doody’s alternative history is in its reminder that prose fiction, “the novel,” predates the nation-state by many centuries. Even the “Greek” and “Latin” tags attached to these early works refer only to the languages in which early prose fiction has survived, and not to any easily predictable site of geographical origin. Translate their places of origin into modern-day geography and Apuleius (*The Golden Ass*) was born in Algeria, Achilles Tatius (*Leucippe and Clitophon*) in Egypt, Chariton (*Callirhoe*) was Turkish, and Heliodorus (*Aethiopica*) Syrian. “The Novel was produced in antiquity by people from non-Greek and non-Roman areas, by writers who came from the Near East and from Africa,” writes Doody:

The Novel, that is, is a “foreign” import – or rather, it is the product of combination, of contact between Southern Europe, Western Asia, and Northern Africa. And behind these regions, the regions of Greece and Syria and Ethiopia and Egypt, there lie other areas, hinterlands not without influence. We can assume the possibility of story and style filtering in from the Balkans and the Celtic lands in the West, from

Persia and India in the East, from the Sudan and Kush and Katanga in the South. The homeland of the Western Novel is the Mediterranean, and it is a multiracial, multilingual, mixed Mediterranean.¹³

The world opens up as a more capacious view of the history of a familiar-seeming form enables a more capacious view of the world, or, as Doody puts it in another context, “Multiculturalism begins at home.”¹⁴ So much for national claims about the novel: as we look back at the novel, its family tree, like our own, traverses countries, continents, and then recedes out of historical view.

Origins in the novel

When she titled her book *The True Story of the Novel*, Doody pointed to the *narrative* desires that underpin inquiries into where the novel came from. Does the novel have a “story”? Does it have a “true story”? The desire for a good story helps to explain why we read novels, and is a desire that the novel as a form has continuously fed: literary history, Doody’s title proposes, shares the novel’s narrative compulsions. As if the novel were the protagonist of a long and complicated plot, we have sought origins as if they will explain everything that followed. I want to end this chapter by outlining the connection between how we think about the history of the novel (“but where did it *really* come from...?”) and what novels have historically been about: questions of genealogy and origin.

Right from “the start” – what the canonical narrative designates as the start – the English novel has created mysteries around parental origins. The heroine of *Moll Flanders* is united with her long-lost mother when she unknowingly marries her own brother; at the end of the novel she inherits her mother’s estate. Although this is only part of rather than the climax to Defoe’s **episodic novel**, successors like Fielding with an interest in more tightly constructed plots will turn the story of origination and inheritance into their main story (a literally “stagey” plot, you might say, since drama had been using the discovery narrative for centuries). The full title of Fielding’s novel is *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling*, and the novel begins when Squire Allworthy discovers the infant Tom in his own bed and decides to bring him up himself. The locals speculate that Tom is no “foundling” at all, but the Squire’s illegitimate child – incorrectly, as it happens, but who can resist a good story about true origins? Fielding’s earlier *Joseph Andrews* likewise turns on the hero’s discovered origins.

The statistically remarkable population of orphans and foundlings in English fiction indicates how important the origination plot has been. It was certainly enough of a cliché by Austen's time to be worth deflating in *Emma* (1816) when the heroine befriends a local orphan. To Emma, Harriet is "the natural daughter of somebody"; to the wiser Mr. Knightley, she is "the natural daughter of nobody knows whom."¹⁵ Obscure origins mean creative opportunity because they allow Emma to speculate that Harriet must be of socially distinguished origins, and so she divides her from the man she loves because this local farmer must be too plebeian for her friend. As usual, Emma is wrong. Harriet turns out to be, in drab reality, the product of a tradesman's embarrassing indiscretion. Emma is mortified: "Such was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been ready to vouch for! The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed."¹⁶ The genealogical mystique founders on the most prosaic of origins.

But the origins of the most famous nineteenth-century foundling remain forever obscure. "Do you know anything of his history?" a character asks about Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847): "I know all about it," replies his informant Nelly Dean, "except where he was born, and who were his parents, and how he got his money."¹⁷ There is nothing to contextualize Heathcliff prior to his arrival at *Wuthering Heights* as the grubby toddler that Mr. Earnshaw picked up on the streets of Liverpool, "a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; big enough both to walk and talk ... yet, when it was set on its feet, it only stared round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand."¹⁸ Terry Eagleton proposes that Irish would be a likely origin for a dark, savage, "gibberish"-speaking Liverpool foundling, while there's a very longstanding critical suspicion that he is the illegitimate son of Mr. Earnshaw, and Cathy's half-brother.¹⁹ Like Fielding's nosy villagers, critics cannot help filling in the missing origins.

However, Nelly tries to console the young Heathcliff by focusing, like Austen's Emma, on the rich possibilities of the foundling plot:

"You're fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows, but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week's income, *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange* together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England."²⁰

And indeed he does eventually buy both houses up – *not* because he discovers an elevated birth but in revenge against those to whom the estates belong. In view of this novel's interest in the specifically environmental forces that make people what they are ("We'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another,

with the same wind to twist it!”), it is absolutely essential that Heathcliff’s birth remain unaccounted for.²¹

This shift from blood origins to environmental determinisms is immensely important for how we read the nineteenth-century novel, and especially one of its dominant forms, the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation. The differences between two Dickens novels about boy orphans, *Oliver Twist* (1837–9) and the much later *Great Expectations* (1859) are instructive because, although both novels are concerned with the question of origins and inheritance, they outline two very different views of what a person “really” is: a move away from nature towards nurture, and away from the recuperation of preexisting status toward a more evolutionary understanding of the relationships between self and society, where you become not what you “always” secretly were but what your situation makes you.

Born in a workhouse, abused throughout childhood, and captured by evil Fagin’s gang of thieves, the trusting, mannerly Oliver Twist is scarcely a product of these environments, the only ones he has ever known. So where does he really belong, and to whom? In the course of the novel, Oliver finds two pseudo-parents: the scholarly Mr. Brownlow and the kindly Mrs. Maylie, already an adoptive parent to the beautiful girl who turns out to be Oliver’s Aunt Rose (her equally shady origins also have to be vindicated in the course of the novel). These are the proper homes for Oliver, who has spent his entire life among criminals, prostitutes, and the abjectly poor, and yet has a thoroughly socialized sense of right and wrong. We know that Oliver will turn out to be the product of genteel parents, and predict an inheritance for him; as in Fielding (whose influence is felt through this novel), you can be illegitimate in the narrow sense and yet otherwise vindicated as a worthy heir. All the same, the real mystery of the novel, the unsolved puzzle that all critics remark, is the extraordinary resilience of Oliver’s practically *genetic* middleclassness: Oliver remains throughout what Oliver was born to be and not what circumstances ought to have made him.

Similar ingredients of an abused child, substitute parents, and how people are (or are not) made and remade by social circumstances are combined more darkly in *Great Expectations*. Like the character in *Oliver Twist* of whom Dickens jokes that he can “trace his genealogy all the way back to his parents,”²² the working-class orphan Pip knows where he has come from; indeed, it is in the cemetery where his parents lie buried that he meets the escaped convict who will transform his life with the “expectations” of the novel’s title. Pip’s beloved Estella, another adoptee, has taught him to despise his humble birth, but Pip comes to learn that his newfound gentlemanliness is more tarnished yet by the source of its enabling wealth. Both Estella and Pip have been “made”

by fake parents using them to get their revenge: Miss Havisham has brought Estella up to break men's hearts in revenge against the man who broke hers, and Magwitch has made Pip a gentleman to get his revenge on the gentry: "If I ain't a gentleman, I'm the owner of such. All on you owns stock and land; which on you owns a brought-up London gentleman?"²³ And these nightmarish manipulations of Estella and Pip are only the most dramatic instances of their status as hostages to fortune; both will change again as their treatment by others changes ("I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape," a humbled Estella chillingly tells Pip at the end of the novel).²⁴ Origins cannot predict outcomes, and there is no sense in which the destinies of Pip and Estella are already there in their beginnings.

If the novel has trained us to think genealogically – where did it come from? – it should also have trained us to think contingently. "Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning," George Eliot wrote in the opening line of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), another novel structured around discovered origins, but "no retrospect will take us to the true beginning."²⁵ For sure, Fielding and Richardson both had a sense of doing something new – Fielding called himself "the founder of a new province of writing" and Richardson felt he was founding "a new species of writing"²⁶ – but we do not conventionally think of theirs as the first novels. A whole range of novels from *The Tale of Genji* to *Don Quixote* to *Robinson Crusoe* have been proclaimed the true parent of the novel, and in a nicely ironic twist the designation *novel* used so disparagingly in the eighteenth century has now become a term of advertisement and approbation. Witness the case of William Baldwin's 1553 *Beware the Cat*. You could be forgiven for never having heard of this tale about a man who makes a potion that allows him to understand what the cats on the London rooftops talk about. It doesn't strike me as much of a novel, but in recent times the book has been republished as *Beware the Cat: The First English Novel* because up until then, its editor writes, "we can find no original work of English fiction of more than short-story length in which we see consistent character portrayal and a sequence of events that form a coherent plot."²⁷ So is this the first English novel? It depends – as always – on whether or not you buy the editor's definition of a novel.

But the un-answerability of the question may be no bad thing. Even if we could identify with greater assurance the point at which prose fiction turned into the novel, we would be making a serious mistake in thinking that the future of the novel is immanent in its conception, à la *Oliver Twist*, a form of determinism to which "rise of the novel" stories are notoriously liable. Rather, the novel may be more like Heathcliff because its origins can be enjoyably guessed at but never definitively explained, and because its identity is a

contingent affair, the product of circumstances. If we want to know where the novel really came from, it is in no small part because so many of them have seduced us with promises, sometimes deferred and sometimes broken, of an origin that would explain everything if we could only discover it. “What is clear,” Homer Obed Brown writes, “is that the linear history of the novel as having an ‘origin’ and ‘rise’, the history we have been brought up on, with its genealogies, lines of descent and influence, family resemblances, is itself a fictional narrative – a kind of novel about the novel.”²⁸ In literary history as in literature itself, explanatory beginnings and revelatory endings are as artificial as they are alluring.