As for the references in the book, there are not many. Each chapter contains none to twelve footnotes, but we often have to make do without specific sources of information. Mention must be made of the high number of internet references: many websites are listed, another sign that the book tries to reach those who are just becoming familiar with Milton (but are not obsessed enough yet to go to the library). The *Index* is helpful, if not always consistent. For example, the name of John Dury appears twice in the book, and accordingly, there are two references in the Index, whereas Samuel Hartlib, who is mentioned at least seven times in the book (always as a friend of Milton, a point some people would doubt), is not listed in the Index at all, and there are other omissions as well: Jean Bodin, Robert Boyle, Ephraim Pagitt to name but a few.

Altogether, Forsyth's book is something that had to be written on Milton: a short, easy-to-follow, accessible guide to the man and his works. In its two hundred and thirty pages it delivers everything it can, and more. The book is full of information, but it is also full of humour. The author is light-hearted from the first to the last sentence, and at the end of the day, one realises that he is not reading for Milton, but for the book itself. Many of the problems listed above arise from the reviewer's unjust position. This book should not be read at a desk, with full scrutiny, going from chapter to chapter, line to line, looking for all the mistakes and omissions. It should be read with a nice cup of tea in an armchair. And reading it that way, we come to realise that out of the battle mentioned in the beginning, despite all the losses, not only did the author emerge as a victor – he did it with a knowing smile on his face.

Csaba Maczelka

A Fresh Start

Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006)

To make one look at an often-discussed, thoroughly investigated, exhaustively catalogued, frequently trite-looking topic with a fresh pair of eyes; to introduce flexibility into a matter solidified to the point of rock-hardness over the centuries; to open an unseen horizon before the literary adventurer; and to initiate the inexperienced reader into a world all too distant in time but ever so close in everyday routines, apparently too difficult in language but ever so exhilarating in vividness of detail and variety of theme – these are the hallmarks of the truly lasting works of literary criticism. And these are the hallmarks, also, that one would expect of such an eminent, versatile, and prolific critic, nay, *reader*, of English literature as

former President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Patricia Meyer Spacks.[1] And one's expectations are not in the least frustrated by *Novel Beginnings*, her synthesis of all there is to be told in a guide to the origins and beginnings of the English novel, the experiments that preceded, caused, and accompanied its emergence.

It is only so far that one can proceed without entangling oneself in the guiding metaphor of Spacks' book: the polysemy of 'novels,' 'experiments,' and 'beginnings.'[2] It takes a fine sense of proportion not to push these terms beyond the meanings they can possibly carry, and Spacks is clearly in possession of that sense. Demonstrating this, she surveys the cultural, political, religious, gender, and financial changes and developments that took place in the period following the Restoration of the English monarchy and the Glorious Revolution subsequent to it. In this sense, she remains true to the notion of 'beginnings'; in her view, the 18th century had its beginning in the second half of the 17th, while some of its grassroots went back even further, to Tudor times.

It is the same organic view of development that pervades and authenticates Spacks' narrative of 18th-century English fiction. For it is a narrative about narrative fiction, combining the chronological view with a clear idea of evolution perceptible in all walks of 18th-century life, encompassing an extraordinary range of novelties. In doing so, Spacks creates a veritable *tour de force* that inexorably leads one through a story all too often seen or presented as impenetrable, complicated, dull, or irrelevant to 21st-century readers. *Novel Beginnings* underscores once more the (by now well-established) fact that there is far more to 18th-century fiction than a few works by Defoe and Swift, a pocket Fielding or a modernized Richardson, a selection of Sterne or the early Austen.

What often seems outdated today used once to be novel, Spacks argues, and that novelty in itself may affirm the instrumental role it played in later developments. But that is just part of the story. Namely, the first chapter proves that many of those innovations are valid even today, and later fiction – knowingly or not – builds on the fundamentals laboriously raised and established by the first, heroic decades of novel writing. Spacks' knowledge and experience of contemporary fiction lends further credence to her argument.

This chapter, "The Excitement of Beginnings," might almost be read as a separate treatise of the antecedents and early forms of the novel. These shared a common interest in the new phenomena concomitant with the rise of modern civilization. Spacks covers an incredible variety of such novelties, including but not limited to the change in epic directions and dimensions; the growing importance of monetary issues; struggles for literary and political

authority; expanding literacy among the lower classes, children, and women; shifting marriage models increasingly preferring money to property; (re)definitions of 'nature' and 'natural' facts and occurrences; transnational exchanges; and an alteration of what *reality* should be understood to be in the first place. Spacks here looks at the authors (mostly 'part-time') and the genres (awaiting 'emancipation'). She considers the gender roles both in creative impulses and character descriptions. She highlights differences in class, property, modes of existence, and levels of erudition – only to outline an evolutionary view that incorporates and transcends all those differences.[3]

Otherwise, the structure of the book is fairly conservative. It surveys the long-established categories of fictional genres and styles, proceeding from novels of adventure through the novel of development, novels of consciousness, the novel of sentiment, the novel of manners, and Gothic fiction, to the political novel.[4] The last chapter[5] is dedicated to *Tristram Shandy*, described by Spacks as "the most eccentric novel of the eighteenth century," which paradoxically "exemplifies the genre's developing resources and the sense of wide possibility that had accrued to it" (254). It is not only confirmed as "the most typical novel in world literature,"[6] but also as the grandest meta-novel. Once again, it is not the novelty of actual fact that prevails but its logical demonstration and organic placement in the contexts of English fiction.

Instead of having to break new ground, then, Spacks is in a much more rewarding situation: she needs only to a minor degree to rearrange the canon. Her amendments here and there (most importantly through the addition or promotion of a few lesser-known or more seldom researched women writers) merely serve to make the global picture more complete. The introduction of questions of gender, such as in the chapter on "Gothic Fiction" (191–221), also refine our received image of the era.[7] But it is not in this that the book offers the greatest amount of added value.

No, it is the graceful style, the synthesizing view, and the persuasive presentation that enchant the reader. Clearly, the purpose here is not primarily the academic treatment of a specific theme, as in so many of Spacks' other writings, though the book is, needless to say, profoundly researched through and through. Here, the scholarly narrative's persuasive power derives not so much from the author's intimidating knowledge of apparently all secondary literature as from a whole life dedicated to reading and rereading the greatest as well as the more modest, but still important texts of English literature. This volume is almost a literary autobiography or memoir.

I have called Spacks a reader, and her book a guide. As a reader, she is one of the most informed one is likely

ever to encounter; moreover, her experience of, and love for, the books she reads is not overshadowed by her vast knowledge *about* them. And as a guide, this is as fine an initiation as one is ever likely to get into the seemingly familiar, yet so distant and mysterious world of 17th and 18th-century English fiction. A book that not only relevantly informs the reader about an incredibly broad selection of texts but in fact urges one to go and get those works, to read them for oneself, and thus to join the ranks of literary adventurers who are not satisfied by second-hand data and prefabricated notions about their past.

Novel Beginnings is not merely a book *about* novels. One has the impression that it presents one with the novels *themselves*. And I believe that to be the greatest praise one can offer to a comprehensive work like this one.

Boldizsár Fejérvári

Notes

1. During the half century since her inaugural treatise on Thomson's *The Seasons* (*Varied God: A Critical Study of Thomson's* The Seasons [Berkeley: U of California P, 1959]), she has published extensively on eighteenth-century poetry (e.g. *An Argument of Images: The Poetry of Alexander Pope* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971]) and prose (e.g. Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-century England [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976], *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-century English Novels* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990], or *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-century Self* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003]), as well as editing crucial literary texts such as a selection from Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) and the Norton Critical Edition of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (New York: Norton, 1995).

2. This is by no means the first take, of course, on this theme. Another, very different but equally exciting rumination on the same theme can be found, for instance, in Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London & New York: Longman, 1988), 125–156.

3. Among numerous other sources, Spacks draws both on such classical surveys as Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1957) and on more recent works, such as John Richetti, *The English Novel in History, 1700–1780* (London: Routledge, 1999) or J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990).

4. These categories supply the titles of the respective chapters as well.

5. In fact, this 'last' full chapter is followed by a no less relevant "Afterword," which seamlessly ties the developments of the late 18th century to the *novelties* of the 19th.

6. Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, quoted 254.

7. In this, she capitalizes on the arguments raised by Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) and others.