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**Abstract**
Daniel Defoe--we keep saying, generation after generation-is not the man we took him for. People said it in his lifetime, as his activities and career unfolded in loose and unpredicted ways, and, over the centuries since, new Defoes keep emerging as readers find faces and minds that earlier readings and commentators had not prepared them for. Friends say it, or former friends, or those who believed they shared views and values with him, and so do foes or those who have been pushed to confront his restless and ambitious mind and pursue it in new and unexpected directions. The process of redefining Defoe--of trying to find some unpeeled self at the core of a project or text--has been vexed over the years by many things: the canon wars, the redefinition of what counts as literary, the reconfiguring of disciplinarities, and the foibles of intellectual and moral fashion. Trying to find the "real" Daniel Defoe has been a lot like the process of trying to trace a stable idea of selfhood itself in Western thought: we have not always known when we have found a new development or a genuinely changed perspective, and we have not always known exactly what it was we were looking for.

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# Serious Reflections on Daniel Defoe (with an Excursus on the Farther Adventures of Ian Watt and Two Notes on the Present State of Literary Studies)

J. Paul Hunter

Daniel Defoe—we keep saying, generation after generation—is not the man we took him for. People said it in his lifetime, as his activities and career unfolded in loose and unpredicted ways, and, over the centuries since, new Defoes keep emerging as readers find faces and minds that earlier readings and commentators had not prepared them for. Friends say it, or former friends, or those who believed they shared views and values with him, and so do foes or those who have been pushed to confront his restless and ambitious mind and pursue it in new and unexpected directions. The process of redefining Defoe—of trying to find some unpeeled self at the core of a project or text—has been vexed over the years by many things: the canon wars, the redefinition of what counts as literary, the reconfiguring of disciplinarities, and the foibles of intellectual and moral fashion. Trying to find the "real" Daniel Defoe has been a lot like the process of trying to trace a stable idea of selfhood itself in Western thought: we have not always known when we have found a new development or a genuinely changed perspective, and we have not always known exactly what it was we were looking for.


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Different as he may seem now from the *homo economicus* of Ian Watt or the Mr Everytext of John Robert Moore, the present Defoe seems more robust and durable than ever. His current high esteem relative to other more strictly belletristic eighteenth-century writers says much about the depth of changes that have occurred in literary and historical studies, changes that could be represented in terms of gender, genre, ideology, thematics, or quite a few other ways. I will settle for just one representation. When Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* appeared forty-three years ago, eighteenth-century literature was prominent in the curriculum in most of the major research universities in the English-speaking world, but the distinguished professors who taught it did their research on Johnson, Pope, or Swift (or occasionally drama) rather than on novels or other upstart genres. Lots of very good people worked on novels in those years—James Sutherland and Alan McKillop, for example—but you did not get to be George Sherburn, Bertrand Bronson, R.S. Crane, F.W. Bateson, Louis Landa, John Butt, or Maynard Mack by doing so, not even if you were Ian Watt.

I once had a colleague who repeatedly enlivened job interviews by asking candidates what academic book they would most like to rewrite and how they would do it. It brought out the best in some candidates (not in others), but I was always intrigued by its implications of contextual more than authorial difference, and this essay actually began in what I now regard as a misguided attempt to rethink what I tried to do in my first book half a lifetime ago, a would-be *Reluctant Pilgrim's Progress.* I say "misguided" because I came to see that, although I had accumulated a long list of omissions, complaints, and mistaken assumptions to correct, you cannot simply take a book conceived in one moment and wrench it into another without confronting how the whole river, the whole underlying set of critical and philosophical and cultural assumptions, has changed. So for better and worse my early work on Defoe is going to have to continue to shift for itself in its own inadequate 1966 assumptions rather than my present inadequate assumptions. Instead, what I want to do here is return to thinking about Defoe by asking how we are now able, in the present set of critical, historical, and intellectual circumstances more generally, to confront him differently. In effect I want to ask what some of the directions of scholarship for Defoe might consist in for the immediate future. And to do that, I have reconfronted an old model and nemesis, Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, a book that long ago jarred me and many others into

trying to sort out some appropriate conclusions and directions for then. But then was then and now is now, and my only point in bringing up the past—Defoe's, Watt's, and mine—is to see whether knowing the past can provide any insights into what is possible for the present and future. I propose two points about what rethinking Defoe might mean in the present critical and theoretical context, one about his rhetoric and ability to read readers, circumstances, and times, the other about his psyche, his loyalties, and his desires in the course of a long and complex life and career. For the first of these points especially, I want to draw on Watt's insights in *The Rise of the Novel* and, in order to provide a context for analysing what he lastingly accomplished, I would like to remind you of what the world was like when Watt burst onto the scene.

I first got interested in Defoe as a graduate student two or three years after *The Rise of the Novel* appeared, when it was still the shiniest new coin in the realm; and I found myself trying—through and around it—to sort out directions in eighteenth-century studies and, in particular, to define the way early English novels were then being aggressively rethought. There were two parts to what was then a small critical revolution: one was simply an extension of the close-analysis principle to longer prose texts, a taste that was producing, almost every new month, a new "reading" of every canonical novel. Standards were not especially high for those new readings, and it was pretty much history be damned if you believed you had an interesting thematic insight. Even at the time (the exhilaration of newness notwithstanding) most of what appeared did not seem all that good, and some of my graduate-school buddies and I counted and reckoned that only about one out of ten published articles in that strain was worth reading—a percentage, by the way, that seems to have stayed remarkably steady from the philological days of the early twentieth century to the theory and post-theory days now at the end of the century. The second direction was different, more diffuse, less talked about, and apparently contradictory: it involved a kind of rethinking of *history* in untraditional intellectual terms, and it blundered into some of the things that the so-called new historicism articulated twenty years later. We were a good bit less clear about what was at stake—except that the old literary history of dates, influences, and literary borrowings was inadequate—but we did value rigorous historical method, had few illusions about positivist dogma, and believed in reading texts as the products of a complex intellectual history of interactions and disagreements. This revisionary historicism, which now looks like a kind of proto-new-historicism, has never been much talked about, and its place in the formulation of more recent historicisms is yet to be

described. But several people in this special issue—Maximillian Novak, John Richetti, and I, among others—practised it in the 1960s as did several other untraditional students of the eighteenth century—Roger Lonsdale, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Ronald Paulson, Claude Rawson, Ralph Cohen, Aubrey Williams, Pat Rogers, and Kathleen Williams, for example. This historicism—which emphasized the interpretation of texts within a framework of an intellectual history that could be partly recovered from varieties of cultural texts and artefacts—was not always sure of its methodology or theoretical underpinnings, but it was rigorous in pursuit of comparative cultural accuracy and ruthless in its determination to locate texts accurately in a *variety* of historical debates and contexts.

Exactly what Ian Watt had to do with either of these governing directions is not immediately apparent. *The Rise of the Novel* was not a book of close readings by any stretch of the term; although it contained detailed treatments of six novels (two each by Defoe, Richardson, and Henry Fielding), even its biggest fans did not really revel in its treatment of individual texts, for while Watt was full of small points and *aperçus* about every text he touched, he was not especially adept at close analysis and seldom dwelt upon particulars beyond the need to make a self-conscious flying observation, often at the expense of a writer's intention rather than to explain or justify it—very much, at the time, against the grain. In fact, no Defoe expert then much liked the Defoe sections (but many thought perhaps Watt was better on Richardson or Fielding), and Richardson and Fielding students more or less returned the favour. And about history? Well, no one really thought that Watt's book was *about* history, certainly not about the historical directions I have just described, except in the sense that he did offer a kind of prefatory porch or pre-history to the more familiar nineteenth-century novel, which everyone then acknowledged to be not only the generic centre of the novel but its sole temporal province as well. I do not think I ever heard anyone at the time say anything historiographical about Watt; competing books, such as Alan MacKillop's *Early Masters of English Fiction*, were regularly described as histories, but Watt's was not. Instead, his work was often called literary sociology—sociology at that time being not so much a discipline of its own as what you called history when you thought it was not very historical. So Watt was, supposedly, according to these labellers, proposing different categories from the usual historical ones—which, I will go on to argue, he certainly was.

So what was the strong reception of Watt all about? And what was the book itself about? I propose two different answers to these two questions, for I think that Watt was a victim of his celebrity and that the present and continuing importance of his book has little to do with either its initial reception or its later lingering reputation. What most students of English literature initially liked best about Watt was its simple formulation of the early history of the novel; it offered a plausible if somewhat slippery definition of the novel ("formal realism") and reproduced an uncomplicated account of beginnings and early development through three novelists—with notes on a few other classic texts, but virtually no mention of other competing novels and novelists who helped create or challenge the tradition. Both Haywood and Manley are passingly mentioned three times, Behn and Dunton twice each, Burney five times; Aubin, Barker, Davys, Kidgell, Mackenzie, Goldsmith, and Gildon (except for his attack on Defoe) not at all. It was a wonderfully easy account to recount, very useful (we all noted at the time) for orals, especially because it actually shrank a canon that at the time still then included the novelists I have mentioned and many more.[1] It was a particularly easy and useful way to think about the eighteenth century if your interests were in later fiction because it offered a discrete and coherent account that did not get you into deep water by raising difficult questions about competing directions, lesser-known writers, or troubling subcategories. Besides, the book was wonderfully witty and witheringly condescending in several spots, exposing (for example) the rube-like infelicities of the high-minded Richardson in memorable ways that allowed more modern readers to feel quite good about themselves. (Hard to remember now that Richardson was once read that way.) Above all, Watt was sophisticated and well read and mentioned the right names and cited the cleverest passages; this was clearly literary criticism on a high plane at just the time that literary criticism seemed to general readers to be a pretty good thing.

If you have followed the critical fortunes of *The Rise of the Novel* over the years, you will recognize these strains and the several complaints that

1 The first half of the twentieth century actually produced a lot of scholarly work on novelists who disappeared from view completely in the 1960s and 1970s. Haywood, Manley, Gildon, and many others had their champions then and were important to discussions of novelistic direction. Some of that work was admittedly patronizing, and there was a prominent tendency to separate "major" and "minor" writers (though Burney was in the major category then), but at least there was a generally shared shame for not having read these texts carefully; it was my generation that jettisoned the shame. The *PMLA* bibliography of work in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s is especially revealing about the canon's width at the time. Forthcoming work by W.B. Carnochan will help put more recent revisionism in historical perspective.

echo them, for as far as they go they represent accurate descriptions of some aspects of what Watt does. What many continued to like about *The Rise of the Novel* was the apparent simplicity and single-mindedness of history—which is not what Watt actually argues—and the book came to fill a kind of niche for readers that was much like that occupied by the Oxford Histories of English Literature that appeared in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s or the redoubtable oral pony Albert Baugh's *Literary History of England*—pretty comprehensive, seemingly authoritative, and rather comforting in isolating a small number of great books one had to have read in order to pass examinations before going on to join the ranks of those offering multiple new readings of a small number of certified great books. Among eighteenth-century titles, not very many got certified, but the writers Watt concentrates on (plus Sterne and, curiously, Smollett) made the cut. There was a high correlation between the paperback availability of novels and those that inspired "readings" in the current journals.

Critics, including me, complained at the time about some of the weaknesses in Watt that I have mentioned, and many others: Watt was too Anglocentric; he was dismissive of lesser talents and did not represent competing and minor voices; some of his key terms (such as "realism of assessment") were hopelessly general and imprecise; there was nothing but empty time and space to connect these early figures to Jane Austen and her successors; the whole account was entirely too teleological. (I myself made a great fuss about the term "rise" in the title, and while the point was accurate enough it was hardly worth the commotion I tried to make.)[2]

But there were also things to praise extravagantly: the thickness of historical social observation, for example; detailed contextual examinations such as the ancients/moderns discussion of the 1730s and its assertions of epic irrelevance; the insistence that Defoe was who he was because he believed in writing over the vagaries of oral tradition; the rich sense of early eighteenth-century London as a vibrant venue of reading which created a "place" for writing; and (not least) the sheer pleasure it exudes in good writing and good reading experiences. Turning its pages now is like looking at pictures of old friends. No one can read *The Rise of the Novel* and believe that literary criticism does not humanly matter.

But the importance of *The Rise of the Novel* is not in its charm or incidental observations. It is in the claims it makes for the cultural complication of the creative process, specifically for the assertion of the power of readers in the making of texts. There is powerful history here of the expansion

2 J.A. Downie has recently provided a much more thoughtful analysis; see "The Making of the English Novel," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (1997), 249–66.

of reading as a phenomenon, of its diversified uses and possibilities, of why writers began to expand and define their horizons of possibility as they came to be aware of audiences and marketing sources previously unknown or non-existent. Watt does not get everything right about the particulars of expanded literacy, including its timing and class strata, but his sense of a deeply changed economy of information exchange has made a lot of subsequent work possible, including almost everything now gathered under the aegis of the history of the book and most good historical genre theory. For me, one of the most poignant moments in the book is the fervent early acknowledgment of Q.D. Leavis, a pointer to the deep roots of the book in cultural history of an older but still useful kind. Watt knew his debts, and he sensed his future.

Watt's insight about readers as makers indirect of texts—and especially as the designers of texts and the creators of the most meaningful sense of genre—is a crucial theoretical and historical observation, and elsewhere I have tried to draw out some of its ramifications for the directions of the early novel.[3] But the implications for Defoe as an especially talented reader of those readers have still not been fully worked out, and my first suggestion about what is now possible for students of Defoe involves working out this insight in terms of Defoe's seeking of audiences and matching them up with particular thematic and cultural concerns. For if Defoe had had the foresight and capital to husband his sense of readerly need, taste, and desire into a series of bookselling and proto-publishing ventures with a stable of his contemporaries, we might well be looking still today at a print control giant that would have left names such as Macmillan, Faber, Routledge, and the Oxford University Press aspiring to wedge themselves into some small place in the market.

To appreciate the power of Watt's reader-as-creator insight now, we need perhaps to modify terminologically his framing of his thesis. He uses, repeatedly, the term "middle-class reader" to encompass all the newly literate, or newly available, readers that Defoe and his contemporaries sought and often found. Besides the problem of anachronism in the use of the term, "middle class" has accrued far too much snobbish rubbish of its own over the years, by no means all of it historical. One of the issues

3 See *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1990).

is that literary critics have repeatedly used it smirkingly and patronizingly to describe tastes and values inferior to their own, the smug pleasures of the bourgeoisie. And those actual new historical readers are not adequately described by anything involving the middle. The creative would-be readers Watt discovers actually come from quite a variety of social, class, and economic groups—up and down—but seldom in the middle; and it is finally better to think of these additions to the reading public as alike or related in their aspirations of understanding and mobility of social location, rather than in being stuck between classes or eras. Defoe may perhaps himself be accurately described as middle-class, but the readers he wrote for were (some) above him, some below, and some just miscellaneously positioned in personal spaces that required new information, skills, and adaptability rather than a ladder to a new stratum.

Even if one accepts (as I do) the sparer, straitened canon of P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens[4] as the only basis for reliable assumptions about what Defoe wrote more or less by himself, Defoe still wrote a vast many things in a variety of kinds, not all of which have been adequately described or defined in terms of their assumptions, conventions, and developing rules. We tend to call him still a novelist, journalist, pamphleteer, projector, polemicist, and perhaps controversialist and poet; he was all those things, but how often do we find ourselves needing to cut narrower generic distinctions, and then modify them to cross traditional lines, in order to describe his textual forays? His genius in finding and addressing topics and issues that fascinated his contemporaries led to an astonishing series of personations, genre-invasions, genre-modifications, genre-takeovers, mixed generic addresses, disguises, cross-dressings, and genre-inventions—innovations based on new alliances of need as he responded to changing perceived concerns and desires. His sense of potential in that audience of curious, ambitious, and not-yet-surefooted readers was uncanny. Having himself grown up in a burgeoning Restoration London full of restless young men and women who found themselves in various kinds of brave new worlds of possibility and wonder, he sensed especially the needs of the young, the uprooted, the ambitious, the adaptable. He read their practical, prudential concerns, their sense of innocence about social conventions and developing urban habits,

4 P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens, *A Critical Bibliography of Daniel Defoe* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998).

their need for down-to-earth information about everydayness, and if that led him to help set important paths into the emerging quotidian narratives we now call novels, it also led him into many other developing and shifting kinds of writing. His insights into audience involved reading the needs of making do, getting on, surviving, figuring out how to cope with circumstances that hadn't been much written about yet. How are you to thrive in a tough world when you are orphaned, abandoned, homeless, poor, unemployed, broke, female, pregnant, in debt, involved in an incestuous relationship, estranged from your family, besieged by disease, arrested, imprisoned, transported to the colonies, surrounded by people from different cultures, adrift in a new place of any kind, or simply determined to make a new life in new circumstances? Defoe's addresses to such questions find their place in most of his fictional narratives, but they also take other forms in other texts that are still too little read and understood contextually—the *Family Instructors*, for example, and *Religious Courtship*—where generic bones and conscious hybridizations are more readily visible. It is now possible to write—the present context virtually demands it—a book or books on Defoe and genre; and unless I am very much mistaken such books in the next generation will also have a lot to say about Defoe as a *poet* reading audiences, for those who are now beginning to read eighteenth-century poetry with new and more rhyme-sensitive ears may be able to hear a Defoe that my generation has been deaf to. I would not argue that Defoe had Pope's couplet craft, but he read the lessons offered by creative readers, he understood the nature and function of public poetry as well as anyone in his time, and he could build with the best of them long arguments in two-line steps and paragraph blocks that cumulatively complicated the received binaries.

My second point is more about biographical and theoretical directions than critical ones, and rather than a presence like Watt it is enabled by an absence—that of Sigmund Freud, whose demise this time does not seem to have been very much exaggerated. I speak of Freud's recent "death" metaphorically of course, and also metaphorically of Freud: much of what has passed for Freud—especially in literary study—has little to do with what he or even his successors actually said. But the once-liberating suspicions of plain statement and sincerity have long since passed into easy doctrinaire presumptions of repression and inversion so that discussion of literary intention has become as simple-mindedly mired down in the

unconscious as it once was in the conscious. And an important issue at stake in Defoe studies involves intentions, conscious and otherwise, in literary texts and how those intentions relate to shifting, uncertain, or partial commitments in the mind and heart of an author.

Part of the Defoe identity problem has long involved his engagements with questions of belief and value—his religious commitments, his moral code or series of codes, his didactic aims, his political principles and loyalties. In the nineteenth century, worries were mainly about inconsistencies of action and direct duplicities; when his life as a double agent was discovered, for example, confidence in his integrity eroded quickly and his writerly as well as moral stock tumbled. In the twentieth century, dubieties have mostly been phrased in the wake of Freud and in terms of displacement, rationalization, and self-deception. On the question of slavery, for example, Defoe's unarticulated contradictions have opened his psyche to hostile takeovers, and questions of how to reconcile conflicting values, of politics or economics and religion, for example, have almost always been resolved in rather simplistic pyschoanalytic formulae: certainly he cannot be taken at face value, so therefore he is trying to fool us and, perhaps, himself. In critical discourse under this flag, there has been little room for internal contradiction, vacillation in views, or genuinely mixed motives, and little tolerance for both/and explanations.

My interest in this set of issues is not impersonal. In *The Reluctant Pilgrim*, I did not handle questions of intention well, trying to take Defoe's statements of aim at face value and thus risking outright inversion: could not be that, must be this. It is probably true that Defoe's own desires and ideas and values vacillated considerably, sometimes amounting to downright contradictions in any logical universe. Like a lot of other human beings in his age and ours, he could not always fully reconcile his sense of principle with contingent and situational needs. Indeed a lot of his most important work, in *Journal of the Plague Year*, for example, is exactly about that problem, and George Starr long ago argued powerfully that the impact of the modernized casuistical tradition on the novel is precisely about the attempt to reconcile rule and circumstance, implying that a central source of Defoe's power lies in his wrestling with, rather than solving, the issue.[5] To some considerable degree, Defoe's best biographers (as well as biographers more generally) have always slipped past the psychoanalytic noose of self-deception and produced subjects more subtle than any party lines would allow, while critical writing on Defoe and others (including

5 See G.A. Starr, *Defoe and Casuistry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

Watt's, I am afraid) has habitually and inexplicably been too easy in its ironies and knowing smiles. Economics trumps ethics, politics defeats religion. Either/or.

With today's changing models of intellectual analysis, can we not now have authors who are complexly at one with texts, whose mixed motivations include both what they wish sincerely to claim about their intentions and also other desires that may be partly incompatible, somewhat contradictory?[6] Can we imagine a *Family Instructor* of mixed intention, anxious to argue family values and achieve didactic closure even as it opens itself to fiction and fact intermingled, the mixed values of dialogue and drama and theatrical commerce along with hortatory and even coercive didacticism, rhetorics and representations of more than one kind? Can we imagine both a sure and unsure fabling in *Moll Flanders* and *The Fortunate Mistress*, a rhetoric both of repentance and reform and one of sociological reportage and uncertain directions? A *Journal of the Plague Year* sure in its narrative of local detail and deeply circumstantial in its working out of casuistical method at the same time that it charts a formal rise and fall of contagion, assurance, belief, and sense of formality about the city and the social fabric? The latter-day Puritanism of either/or, always more crabbed and constrictive than Defoe's liberally complex Dissent, may be moving beyond faction at last, and it may be that we are now ready to say to Defoe and many others, not "or" but "and."[7]

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6 At the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment in Dublin (25–31 July 1999), John Richetti, in a paper on "Defoe and Compound Interest," offered a fine analysis of *The Fortunate Mistress* through the very suggestive term "compound interest," which he enlarged from its traditional economic meanings to the more comprehensive ones that reflect my intentions here.

7 This essay is a revised version of a paper read at the Tenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Dublin (25–31 July 1999).