Crime and Defoe seeks to recover something of the original excitement, challenge, and significance of Defoe’s four novels of criminal life by reading them within and against the conventions of early eighteenth-century criminal biography. Crime raised deeply troubling questions in Defoe’s time, not least because it seemed a powerful sign of the breakdown of traditional social authority and order. Arguing that Defoe’s novels provided ways of facing, working through, as well as avoiding, certain of the moral and intellectual difficulties that crime raised for him and his readers, Lincoln Faller shows how the “literary,” even “aesthetic” qualities of his fiction contributed to these ends. Analyzing the various ways in which Defoe’s novels exploited, deformed, and departed from the genre they imitate, this book attempts to define the specific social and political (which is to say moral and ideological) value of a given set of “literary” texts against those of a more “ordinary” form of narrative.

Moll Flanders, Colonel Jack, and Roxana are given extended readings in individual chapters. Other topics considered at length include the vexed question of Defoe’s realism, his own version of reader response theory and how he deploys it, the novels’ structural imitation of providential design, and his recurrent, almost obsessive effort to blunt or deny the commonly held notion that trade was somehow equivalent to theft.
Crime and Defoe
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THOUGHT

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Crime and Defoe

A New Kind of Writing

LINCOLN B. FALLER

Professor of English, University of Michigan
For my mother and father,
EVELYN and LINCOLN A. FALLER

and in memory of my grandparents,
LOUISE and ERNST STAHL
BERTHA and ALEXANDER FALLER
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Preface

Perhaps the major problem in attempting to place Defoe in his time involves a more precise definition of Defoe's relation with his audience ... we may never discover in the fragmentary records we have what enabled Defoe to find a style which his contemporaries recognized as original and exciting and which brought the end of the romance and the beginning of the novel.


To understand the true Meaning of any ancient Writing, we ought to be acquainted with the Usages and Customs of the Time and Nation in which it was wrote, those Accidents and Circumstances which occasioned the writing of it, and (since the Sense of Words is continually changing), the Meaning in which such and such Words were used at the Time when the Author flourished.


Discourse in the novel is structured on an uninterrupted mutual interaction with the discourse of life.


Poetry ... is perpetual confrontation of lexicon with the world of things.


Defoe lived in a period notably troubled and greatly fascinated by crime. Jailed several times, he likely knew criminals on intimate terms and, after his great success with Robinson Crusoe, turned to writing their lives. This book will say little about the biographies of actual criminals attributed to him, which of their kind are not all that remarkable, nor of the rather anomalous, indeed nearly sui generis History of the Pirates; its main object is the criminal novels.¹ Though there is nothing quite like them in English

literary history before or after, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* offer the first full or at least ponderable characters in all its prose fiction, and even *Captain Singleton* and *Colonel Jack* have to be allowed their special virtues. But what these virtues are, or may be, has been a topic much debated. How ironic is *Moll Flanders*? How well is it structured? What does it say for the level of Defoe’s social consciousness, or its bent? With the increase of scholarly publication over the last several decades such questions have been turned on Defoe’s other novels as well, making it all the more apparent – even before “theory” established this as a general principle – that the texts by themselves will never yield up definitive answers. Critics who read Defoe’s fiction because of its undeniable historical importance but without close attention to its original context can easily misvalue it, reading into it, among other things, meanings (or absences of meaning) it could never have had for him and his original audience.

For that audience the experience of reading Defoe’s four novels of criminal life would have been shaped as much by centripetal as centrifugal pressures. His narratives spun their meanings out against the force of the discursive conventions they denied or put to their own use. No text comes innocent into the world. There is always, as literary theorists have almost tiresomely come to insist, a text *avant le texte*. Each act of reading is committed under the influence of previous acts of reading. If not the sum total or “construct” of all they have so far read, readers must nonetheless ply their craft within the boundaries of certain historically determined “formations,” “fields,” or “horizons,” must accept, reject, chafe at, be soothed, shaped, or chivied by the “reading positions” the texts before them provide. As scholarship of a very different kind has made clear, Defoe’s audience came to his fictions equipped with habits of reading shaped by a variety of genres, each with its characteristic themes and techniques, its particular patterns of thought and expectation. These included not only the usual works of philosophy, theology, law, and political history, but also “secret” history, spiritual biography, conduct books, travel literature, picaresque novels, women’s novels, projectors’ pamphlets, advice columns in weekly papers, and journalism or “popular writing” in general.2 One aim of this book is to continue this line of study.

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In situating Defoe’s pseudo criminal biographies within and against the forms and conventions that governed the writing and (presumably, too) the reading of actual criminals’ lives, it will speculate on what, or rather how, they may have meant to their original audience – an audience whose needs, values, concerns, and habits of reading (for readers, too, play a role in the creation of literary genres) encouraged the “rise” of what we’ve come to call the novel.

In a previous book I’ve argued that the two earliest forms of criminal biography owed their wide popularity as well as most of their distinctive features to a powerful array of social, political, religious, and moral concerns specific to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Criminals raised deeply troubling or at least deeply troublesome questions, and the function of criminal biography within the larger culture was to provide means for addressing, allaying, ignoring, even obscuring the impact or import of such questions. Defoe’s novels, too, provided ways of facing, as well as avoiding, certain of the moral and intellectual difficulties crime could raise for him and his readers, but – exploiting, deforming, and in a variety of ways departing from the genre they purported to represent – they sought to better its “work.” Written at a time, moreover, when the authenticity and social effect of much criminal biography had come under attack, Defoe’s novels sought also to deal with the problems the forms themselves presented, with all their distortions, constrictions, and obsessions, their willful ignorance and special pleading. In shaping and ordering actual criminals’ lives, both forms employed fictions masquerading as truth. Each had its special structures, ironies, and sympathies, as well as its special subject matter. Defoe shared their subject matter, but against their structures, ironies, and sympathies he proposed his own. Ranging his overt but seemingly more authentic and “truer” fictions against, particularly, the fragile, often dubious assurances offered by the one – and, too, against the other’s jokey, sometimes grotesque whislings of hanged men down the wind – Defoe took an already remarkably complex reading experience and made it still more complicated, producing, I shall be arguing, novel readers as well as novel criminals. Coming upon his fiction when it was new, the tensions animating it so much more apparent, so much more present, must have been exciting, challenging, and – I’ll confess this bias right now – in some ways edifying.


Recovering something of that challenge, excitement, and edification—or, rather, recreating them as plausibly as possible—is a major aim of this book. As Defoe and his readers cannot themselves be examined directly, what will actually be attempted here is a limning out of something of the shape of one (just one) of the “discursive formations” within which his novels were written and first received; this involves drawing inferences (and sometimes quite indirect inferences) from an assemblage of carefully chosen collateral texts as well as the novels themselves. From the very first, then, it ought perhaps to be specified that the “Defoe” who appears in this book and the “audience” I’m supposing he had are, neither of them, anything more in the vast scheme of things than hermeneutic constructs, the one an “author function” or “utterance position,” the other a “reception position” or “reading formation,” and that I’m situating both within a “horizon of expectations,” a further hermeneutic construct.4 This is meant by way of explanation, perhaps I should further add, not apology; as history itself is necessarily a hermeneutic enterprise, literary history must especially be so.

Given the taint (formalism having become an F-word) that can nowadays attach to the close reading of texts, I want also to make it clear that in arraying Defoe’s “art” against the forms, concerns, and strategies of a “popular” literature I am not trying merely to reproduce “aesthetic” or “literary” categories. When Hans Robert Jauss speaks of determining the “aesthetic value” of a literary work by taking its measure against its “horizon of expectations,” I would hope he does not mean to leave room for the supposition that a literary work (however defined) might somehow be extractable from its surround, that it can somehow exist independently of particular social, historical, and political contexts. I believe with Bakhtin that “literary scholarship is one branch of the study of ideologies,” that “poetic structures [are] social structures,” and that “the language of art is only a dialect of a single social language.” In literary studies there can be no hard divide between the aesthetic and the pragmatic, which, however, is not to say (again following Bakhtin) that the one is wholly collapsible into the other. For too long Defoe’s novels have been read as relatively simple indices to the concerns and problems of the “rising” middle classes in early eighteenth-century England, as vehicles for an

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emerging, particularly “bourgeois” ideology. Such “sociologism,” to cite Jauss again, actually diminishes the “specific . . . historicity of literature” by ignoring the forgotten mass of works that once surrounded the now canonized text, works far less interesting than the “great work” in its “solitary novelty” but at least equally (if not more) valuable for their “social index.”

Though I’m not about to make any elaborate argument for the “greatness” of Defoe’s novels, their “literariness” seems to me of the utmost importance, for it was only as “literature” that they were able to deal with social and political problems in ways that other, more obviously ideological texts were not. I put “literature” in quotes, by the way, to mark the problematic status of the term, especially in relation to Defoe. To my way of thinking, the term indicates a “use-category,” a “literary” text being a text read in some ways and not others, according to a more or less elaborate set of conventions or protocols, which of course themselves are historically determined. Defoe’s novels are not “literature” except retrospectively; they stand as objects of study because they’ve come to be included in the category of “literature,” not because they were considered “literature” to start with. Still, I will be arguing, even in their own time they invited being read in “literary” ways, i.e., in full awareness of their fictiveness and with considerable attention to their novelty of form.

As a wide variety of critics and theorists have pointed out, one of the most significant features of literary discourse is its ability to connect ideas up extracognitively, through metaphor, symbolism, even mere patterns of imagery, or by attaching them together along a narrative line, more or less allegorically. It can do this because, by convention, it stands at something of a remove from reality (this is a function of its self-evident fictiveness), because it is not tied to the “logic” of more “rational” or “practical” forms of discourse, and because it may come to closure in ways other discourses cannot (e.g., through weddings, deaths, having its protagonist go home or light out for the territories, all conclusions in which, as Dr. Johnson might say, nothing much is concluded). Literary texts are thus able to escape or smooth over strongly felt contradictions in belief or practice that other kinds of texts have difficulty dealing with. This can make them powerful instruments for “solving” social and political problems (for the moment at least), or, alternatively, for exposing the insufficiency in the face of such problems of other, supposedly more reality-oriented forms of discourse – e.g., philosophy, theology, the various forms of moral and political economy, the “human” sciences generally, all sorts of “common-sense” analysis, description, argument.

5 Jauss, Aesthetic of Reception, p. 25; P. N. Medvedev / M. M. Bakhtin, The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics, tr. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 1, 30, 36 (though originally published under Medvedev’s name only, this work is now assumed to be entirely Bakhtin’s); Jauss, ibid., pp. 12–13.
It is the problem-solving, problem-creating dimension of Defoe’s novels that interests me most. I see them as remarkable instances of how thoroughly literary discourse can be implicated by the socially and politically problematic, and how, too, such problematics can provide an “occasion” for literature, starting it off and spurring it on, sometimes in quite new, even “novel” directions. For all its pointing to vanished attitudes, values, and structures of feeling and thinking, Defoe’s criminal fiction is still more interesting for the ways in which it diverges from and resists, contends with and against mere ideological simplifications. Inasmuch as the vast body of surviving criminal biographies allows those simplifications to be defined independently of Defoe’s novels, this book can get beyond the large, fuzzy questions of whether or not they are “representative” of their age, of whether they “reflect” or “refract” (and to what extent) the world in which they were written. Because it can be, this book hopes to be more solid and precise. In gauging Defoe’s criminal novels against a particular “discourse of life” – their closest, collateral non-literary form – it will attempt to define in one concrete instance, at one historical moment, the specific social and political, which is to say moral and ideological value of a “literary” discourse vs. a specific kind of “ordinary” or “standard” discourse.

This last juxtaposition of terms – “literary” vs. “ordinary” or “standard” – derives from the Russian Formalists and the Prague Structuralists. We do not need them or Bakhtin, however, to tell us the novel was born in opposition, or that it gains its peculiar power by marking out its difference from seemingly similar kinds of narrative. The novel’s great practitioners from Cervantes onward have always known this, and – a particular source of comfort, given this project’s “historicist” ambitions – it was nowhere more clearly understood than in eighteenth-century England. Insisting, thus, that Clarissa was no “light Novel, or transitory Romance” but “a History of Life and Manners,” Richardson quite explicitly played his great work off against all three of these narrative genres, for he was concerned to make the point, too, that his text was not actually a history but only to be read like one, i.e., with a “Historical Faith.” Fielding was still more self-conscious about the peculiar status of his “new Province of Writing” vis-à-vis other, less special kinds of narratives, repeatedly encouraging readers of Tom Jones to compare it to biographies, romances, or the sort of stories that appeared in newspapers. Such comparisons, he appeared to hope, would show how much more closely his own text conformed to the “Book of Nature,” that ultimate and (we post-modernists might cleverly think to add) ultimately unwritable text of “Facts as they are.”

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Fielding here is as good in his own way as Bakhtin commenting on the “mutual interaction” of novelistic and real-life discourse. As he is, too, at a point in *Tom Jones* when he expects readers might object to a seemingly implausible turn of events: “I am not writing a System, but a History,” he says, “and I am not obliged to reconcile every Matter to the received Notions concerning Truth and Nature.” This is to speak, according to Bakhtin, as the artist should, wanting “nothing to do with prepared or confirmed theses,” nor with “the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed.” Truth and Nature, exceeding received notions, stand beyond or at least resist systematization (thus the culpable stupidity of Thwackum on the one hand, Square on the other). There may be “Philosophers, who can reduce all the Matter of the World into a Nut-Shell,” but the novelist, wiser than this, knows better. The value of his “new Province of Writing” – not history actually, as Fielding points out elsewhere, nor romance either (though he allows at times it might be) but some third thing he sets against them both as well as against the “Book of Nature” – its value is that it is peculiarly suited to raise a similar knowledge in its readers.7

Not so much inventing as stumbling on his version of the “new” kind of writing, Defoe shows nowhere near the narrational self-consciousness of Fielding or Richardson nor anything like their solicitude for readers. Still, by disturbing, displacing, deforming, and opening up the complete and ready-made “aesthetics” of criminal biography, by failing to advance the “prepared theses” it typically confirmed, he, too, explored the ways words relate, or fail to relate, to “the world of things.” And he, too, encouraged new forms of reading. The English novel (and if not a founding father Defoe was certainly its midwife) may be said to have been born when English prose fiction entered into and enlarged “poetry” as Mukafovsky defines it, which is to say literary practice, which is to say reading as well as writing. If, as once again we’ve come to suspect, “reading” does indeed “maketh the man,” the advent of the novel may have brought with it new modes of consciousness. Not the least of Defoe’s contributions to “novel reading” then, might have been the boost his fiction gave to characteristically modern forms of subjectivity. Though it is not possible to speak of these matters as concretely, as precisely, or with as much certainty as I’d like, they, too, will from time to time form a major concern of this book.

Most of what follows was first drafted out between 1980 and 1982. The intervening years of rethinking and rewriting have been spent awaiting the appearance of its predecessor, a protracted and at times agonizing process; the author was also distracted by Africa. All this bears mention only because in the meanwhile something of its original impulse and some

few of its ideas have been anticipated by other writers; more than one of us were breathing in the same zeitgeist. I have gained a great deal from these writers in revising and rethinking earlier drafts, and I hope my notes sufficiently indicate this as well as the ample contributions of other scholars and critics to the substance and shape of my thinking. Some debts, however, are best indicated here.

First, I wish to express my gratitude to the Horace G. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan and to its Dean, John D’Arms, for a most timely contribution to the publishing costs of this book. For permission to include as part of chapter 2 material that appeared in *Comparative Literature Studies*, I thank the editors of that journal and the Pennsylvania State University Press. For her continuing love, faith, and financial generosity (until close to the end she was the only foundation supporting this book), I once again celebrate my wife. Tom Toon and John Richetti are owed special thanks for wading through this text in some of its more unseemly manifestations, Richetti at least twice and Toon despite far more compelling interests in French cookery, skindiving, and the sociolinguistics of Old English dialects. And, too, I continue to owe more general debts to friends, students, and colleagues at the University of Michigan, to the libraries of that institution, and to the British Library. I need to thank as well my students and colleagues at the University of Yaounde for all they taught me about the specific social and political importance of literature in West Africa, Western as well as African, at and in this highly particular, highly interesting historical moment; I suspect I have a better knowledge of eighteenth-century England and its literature as a consequence. (In the at first unconscious pun appearing chapter 4, note 7, they – and only they – will detect the depth of their influence.) Finally, at the threshold of this book – something else learned during my year in Africa – I pay tribute to the ancestors and greet (oh, how you suffer for me!) those who are owed more than any praise singer might sing.
Abbreviations

The following abbreviations and editions have been used when citing works by Defoe in the main text and the notes:

FI  The Family Instructor, The Novels and Miscellaneous Works (Oxford, 1840–1), vols. 15, 16
RC  The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, ed. J. Donald Crowley (London, 1972)
SRC Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe, ibid., vol. 3
CS  The Life, Adventures, and Pyracies, of the Famous Captain Singleton, ed. Shiv K. Kumar (London, 1973)
MF  The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, ed. G. A. Starr (London, 1971)
R  Roxana, the Fortunate Mistress, ed. Jane Jack (London, 1969)
CEG The Complete English Gentleman, ed. Karl D. Bülbirng (London, 1890)