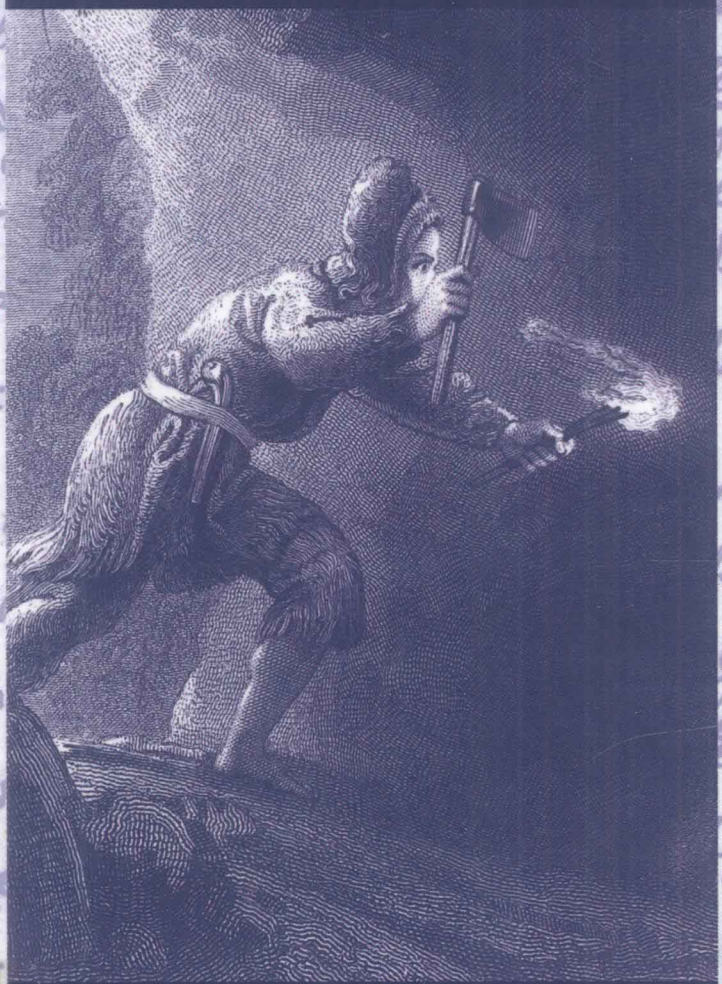
The Cure of the Passions and the Origins of the English Novel

Geoffrey Sill



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This new study examines the role of the passions in the rise of the English novel. Geoffrey Sill locates the origins of the novel in the breakdown of medical and religious dogmas prior to the eighteenth century, leading to a crisis in the regulation of the passions which the novel helped to address. He examines medical, religious, and literary efforts to anatomize the passions, paying particular attention to the works of Dr. Alexander Monro of Edinburgh, Reverend John Lewis of Margate, and Daniel Defoe, novelist and natural historian of the passions. He shows that the figure of the "physician of the mind" figures prominently not only in Defoe's novels, but also in those of Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, Burney, and Edgeworth. The "rise" of the novel comes to an end when the passions give way at the end of the century to the more modern concept of the emotions.

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Illustrations

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Contents

Introduction: the passions and the English novel

In the two decades that followed the appearance of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, the most popular form of literary discourse was not prose fiction, but conduct books that addressed what J. Paul Hunter describes as the "ethical issues of behavior in daily life."[1] One such conduct book was the Reverend Isaac Watts's *Doctrine of the Passions, Explain'd and Improv'd*, in which Watts sought to explain the necessity of regulating or "improving" the passions. The passions, Watts declared, are designed for "valuable Ends in Life, when put under due Government"; if, however, "they are let run loose without controul, or if they are abused, and imployed to wrong Purposes, they become the Springs and occasions of much Mischief and Misery."[2] Passions suffered to "run loose" would soon "break all the Bonds of human Society and Peace, and would change the Tribes of Mankind into brutal Herds, or make the World a mere Wilderness of Savages" (iv). Where, however, "these vehement Powers of Nature are reduced to the Obedience of Reason," they will "go a great way to procure our own Ease and Happiness, so far as 'tis attainable in this Life," and will "make our neighbours happy as ourselves" (v).

The art of regulating the passions requires some understanding of their nature. "It requires a good skill in Anatomy, and long and watchful Observation" to understand their workings, he cautions (10). The passions are a "sensible Commotion" of both the animal powers and the volitional soul of mankind. They arise "either from the Impressions or Commotions which the animal Powers receive by the Soul's Perception of that Object which raises the Passion, or from the Impression or Sensation which that Soul receives by this Commotion of the animal Powers, or perhaps from both of these" (3). These commotions may be accompanied by "some Ferments of the Blood, or natural Spirits, or some Alterations which affect the Body, as well as . . . special Impressions of the Mind," which leads Watts to conclude that the passions belong "partly to the Soul or Mind, and partly to the animal Body, i.e. the Flesh and Blood" (9–10).

What is most striking in Watts's doctrine of the passions is its ambiguities. Where a philosopher or physician in classical antiquity would have had little trouble determining the location, uses, and effects of the passions, Watts has many uncertainties: the passions may be part of the mind, the body, or both; they may be used for "valuable Ends" or for "Mischief and Misery," or both; they may form the bonds of affection between neighbors that bring peace and happiness to human society, or they may reduce the tribes of mankind into "brutal Herds" in a Hobbesian "Wilderness of Savages." Even the number and form of the passions are unknown: "The Motions of the Heart of Man are infinitely various: The different Forms and Shapes in which our Passions appear, the sudden and secret Turns and Windings of them through the Heart, with the strange Mixtures and Complications of them in their Continual Exercise, are innumerable and nameless" (i). And Watts has similar difficulties describing the mechanism by which passions are conveyed through the body: "What I call here *natural Spirits*, are sometimes called *animal* or *vital* Spirits, which are supposed to be the Springs or Mediums of animal Motions, both inward and outward: But whether these be some refined spiritous Liquids, or Vapour drawn off from the Blood, or whether they be nothing else but the elastick or springy Parts of the Air drawn in by Respiration, and mingled with the Blood and other Animal Juices, is not yet entirely agreed by Philosophers" (1 On).

My purpose in thus exposing the ambiguities in Watts's doctrine of the passions is not to diminish him as a philosopher, but rather to present textual evidence of the unsettled state of knowledge – or, as we might say, the *crisis* of thought and opinion – about the passions that waxed and waned through much of the eighteenth century. "Passion unbridled would violate all the sacred Ties of Religion, and raise the Sons of Men in Arms against their Creator. Where Passion runs riot, there are none of the Rights of God or Man secure from its Insolences," Watts warns – a sentiment that would resonate in the works of Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft before the century was over. The sense of crisis in Watts's doctrine is directly related to the uncertainties it reflects: the feeling that the nature, function, and ends of the passions, once thought to have been permanently settled (along with other anatomical questions) by the works of Galen, have been rendered ambiguous by seventeenth-century discoveries and innovations in science, medicine, and religion. And in his call for "good skill in Anatomy, and long and watchful Observation" on the part of those who would respond to this crisis, Watts identifies the essential quality that such novelists as Richardson,

Fielding, and Smollett would share with physicians, philosophers, and essayists in the collective effort to "cure" the passions over the coming decades.

Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett were of course by no means the first or the only novelists who anatomized the passions. Some four hundred "novelistic" works of fiction were published between 1700 and 1739, and nearly three hundred more in the 1740s.[3] Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Elizabeth Haywood, Mary Davys, Jane Barker, Penelope Aubin, and Elizabeth Rowe have all been scrutinized in recent searches for the origins of the early modern novel, searches that have confirmed William McBurney's observation, forty years ago, that "the main lines of eighteenth-century fictional development" were already in place when the male novelists named above were still apprentices in their craft.[4] Though the works of Behn, Manley, and the early Haywood gave their authors the reputations of being more interested in arousing the passions than in disciplining them, Davys professed that the correction of the passions informed the "whole design" of her work.[5] In her preface to *The Accomplished Rake* (1727), she argued that the advantage of the novel over other forms is its "invention," which "gives us room to order accidents better than Fortune will be at the pains to do, so to work upon the reader's passions." The work to be done is "to restore the purity and empire of love, and correct the vile abuses of it," a task of paramount importance because, "since passions will ever have a place in the actions of men and love a principal one, what cannot be removed or subdued ought at least to be regulated."[6] These sentiments, which agree perfectly with those in Watts's conduct manuals, provide a clear intersection between the perceived crisis in the management of the passions and the emerging mission of the novel.

After the success of Richardson's *Pamela*, which as Margaret Doody has shown was indebted to these "feminine love-novels" for some of its thematic if not its formal elements, the reformation of the passions was a secure part of the agenda of the novel.[7] The distortion of character by passion is the principal subject matter of such novels as Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), Eliza Haywood's *Life's Progress through the Passions: or, the Adventures of Natura* (1748), and Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), all of which demonstrate the necessity of restraining a predominant passion, while such later works as Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1811) present dramatically the importance of subordinating passion to manners or even of extirpating it from character

altogether. The confusion that marked Watts' treatises on the passions is replaced in these novels by a remarkably clearsighted sense of the dangers to which both heroes and heroines were exposed by errors and false opinions arising from passion, as well as of the equanimity and goodness of heart that alone could vanquish it. The ambiguities that remain only serve to assist the "invention" that, for Mary Davys, was the essential formal quality of the novel. As Doody has said, the "natural passion" of love in Richardson's work plays on just such an ambiguity, presenting itself first as erotic, next social, and then divine, teasing us to ask ourselves what form of passion the text arouses in us. "The 'answer,'" she says, "is the novel, in short" – that is, the novel is defined as a genre by the reader's imaginative exploration of passion in all its complexity and ambiguity.[8]

This book extends into new areas the debate on the origins of the novel begun in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) and often reconsidered, most recently in two published colloquia. For Watt, the defining characteristic of the early modern novel is the formal realism of its presentation, which reflects the philosophical realism of the age. This philosophical realism, in turn, is explained by the rising rate of literacy, the rising middle class, and the rising spirit of individualism in English culture generally.[9] Though critics have identified many problems inherent in this "triple rise" thesis, most important contributions to the theory of the novel since Watt have studied the transformation of the genre in a social context of some sort. Well-known books by Nancy Armstrong, G. J. Barker-Benfield, John Bender, Terry Castle, Robert A. Erickson, Jean H. Hagstrum, J. Paul Hunter, and John Richetti, among others, have shown that the novel emerged in connection with larger social and intellectual changes.[10] G. S. Rousseau, to take one example, suggests that, while developments in seventeenth-century science did not cause the rise of the novel, they "deflected" the complacent acceptance of the theory of humours and temperaments toward an empirical interest in the question of sensibility, a subject that the novel was eminently well suited to examine.[11] The connection between the rise of the novel and events in philosophy, science, and religion was one of parallel developments between loosely associated fields, rather than a directly causal relation, but philosophers, physicians, and theologians undoubtedly drew some of their knowledge of the passions from novelists, and novelists drew a sense of the urgency and legitimacy of their task from moral philosophy,

religion, and medicine. One of the premises of this book, then, is that the search for the "cure" – or the regulation and improvement – of the passions depicted in many novels of the period reflects a crisis that energized widely disparate fields of thought in the eighteenth century, which can best be traced through an interdisciplinary study of their relations.

Ian Watt extended his own thesis about the origins of the novel in his final book, *Myths of Modern Individualism* (1996), which examines the ways in which the myth of individualism has shaped Western civilization since the Renaissance. Four mythic figures – Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Robinson Crusoe – exhibit the distinctive qualities of individualism: "exorbitant egos," a desire to do "something no one else has done," a freedom to choose his own fate, and a single-minded will to pursue this choice at all costs.[12] The first three of Watt's mythic figures fall victim or martyr to the powerful forces of the Counter-Reformation, that league of Church and secular authority that, in regarding individualism as a threat to social order, created an intellectual climate in which the triumph of the individual was unthinkable. The last figure, Robinson Crusoe, is the first individualist hero to emerge intact; he is "an articulate spokesman of the new economic, religious, and social attitudes that succeeded the Counter-Reformation" (xi). Even the religion that Crusoe acquires during his twenty-eight years of solitude on the island is individualistic: the "collective and sacramental" elements of both Roman Catholicism and Calvinist Protestantism are absent from his forms of belief, which consist entirely in "trying to see how the most minute or unnoticed event of daily life may contribute to his place in the divine scheme of reprobation or salvation" (162). According to Watt, Crusoe is not even a Puritan, which would make him part of the collective response to the Counter-Reformation, but an entirely self-sufficient entity, the first representative of the modern myth of individualism.

Watt's description of the rise of individualist ideology is similar in some respects to the account of the Protestant Reformation given by Roland Bainton, who sees it as a product of "the philosophy of individualism undercutting the great unities" of the Roman Catholic Church.[13] Foremost among these unities was the dogma of the Holy Trinity, which had been adopted in principle at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. The Nicene Creed held that the deity consists of three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost – in one substance, a paradox that is at once a test of faith and an emblem of the corporate nature of the Church. This doctrine was undercut, according to Bainton, when some fifteenth-century

theologians accepted the principle that reality consists of unrelated particulars, because "if reality consists of unrelated individuals, then the three persons of the Trinity must be three gods" (16). Despite the loss of the Trinity's philosophical underpinning, the Church maintained the doctrine on the basis of authority alone, thus prompting struggles over the rights of the individual to believe or not to believe in the Trinity that continued throughout the eighteenth century.

According to J. G. A. Pocock, the process of individuation that broke the unity of the Christian church had a comparable effect on the teaching and practice of medicine. As Pocock observes, medicine had since the time of Plato been subject to the charge that it was unphilosophical – that it was based not in universals, but in particular cases, which could be learned only through empirical experience.[14] Galen had endeavored to systematize this body of empirical knowledge, showing how the uses of the parts of the body could be comprehended in terms of a unifying teleology, though he emphasized the value of observation and experiment in the practice of medicine.[15] By the fifteenth century, the aspiration of medicine to prove itself a system based on rational principles had led to an emphasis on Aristotle and Galen in medical education to the exclusion of empirical knowledge, with the result that Galenism had become a dogma comparable in some respects to the doctrine of the Trinity for the church.[16] In medicine as in theology, the discovery that reality is not subject to a unifying teleology, but consists of unrelated particulars – or at least, that the particulars are related in ways not consistent with rational theory – led first to cracks in the structure of the institution, and then to a reformation according to new principles. This anti-Galenist reformation was the work of many hands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, among whom Paracelsus, William Harvey, Thomas Willis, Thomas Sydenham, Herman Boerhaave and others are often counted.[17] It was not accomplished without some severe penalties for the prophets of reform; what Roland Bainton said of Roman Catholic theology also proved true of scholastic medicine: as the philosophic undergirding of the institution weakened, there was a "recourse . . . to authority when the grip on truth relaxed."[18] One such prophet of individualism who suffered the severest penalties was the sixteenth-century heretic Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician whose writings challenged the dogmas of both the church and the medical establishment. This book will repeatedly examine eighteenth-century references to Servetus as a way of invoking this problematic tension between individual passion and institutional authority which lay at the origins of the novel. In this way, Servetus

figures as the godfather of the novel, even though, so far as is known, he neither wrote nor even read one.

The question of the novel's origins – rather than its rise – has previously been addressed most systematically in Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987), which describes what Alistair Duckworth has called an "elegantly simple model of [the] epistemological and social crisis" that prompted the transformation of the genre.[19] McKeon examines two major questions (or as he variously describes them, "instances of categorical instability") that together compose a dialectic in the period of his study: questions of truth, and questions of virtue. The instability of truth – which is, in effect, the narrative problem of choosing among different ways of *telling* the truth – posed an epistemological crisis, while the instability of virtue – which presented "a cultural crisis in attitudes toward how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members" – was essentially social in nature.[20] The genre of the novel, in his view, was adapted from earlier literary materials in order to mediate this crisis. As we have seen in Isaac Watts, however, there was a third category of instability that was of equal importance to truth and virtue in the eighteenth century: the question of passion, which resulted from the uncertainty of the age over the nature, function, and uses of mankind's irrational, individualistic self. The chapters that follow this introduction assume the proposition that McKeon's thesis should be broadened to include another primary category (despite the damage thereby done to the notion of a dialectic), which is the question of passion.

Passion appears in *The Origins of the English Novel* as an aggravating factor to questions of truth or virtue, but not as a category of instability in itself. For example, McKeon discusses Robinson Crusoe's capacity to understand the signs given him by God in the form of "secret Intimations of Providence" as essentially an epistemological and cultural problem, complicated by Robinson's passions – in this case, a complex of guilt, fear, and desire centered around his hope of physical deliverance from the island (*Origins*, 330–33). Though Robinson had previously enjoyed the "Calm of Mind" that came with resignation to the will of Providence in placing him on the island, his obsession with leaving the island brings about a "transvaluation of desire" that allows him, through a dream, to re-signify the language of God to accord with the "logic of inner conviction" that would authorize his escape. By this means, the will of Providence, which he previously understood as counseling resignation, becomes transvalued into a command to engage in "impassioned activity" directed at

leaving the island. Many readers see religious hypocrisy in Robinson's manipulation of the meaning of Providential signs to suit inner desires, but McKeon defends the passage as ironic, arguing that Defoe's intent is to show through the incident the contradiction between the religious forms of language that Robinson uses and the underlying basis of his actions. For McKeon, the passage exhibits Defoe's "unparalleled penetration and candor" in exposing the "absurdity" of Robinson's effort to make an epistemology based in religion consist with values derived from an expansive, exploratory, entrepreneurial age. But it might very well be argued, on the basis of other works written by Defoe before and after *Robinson Crusoe*, that no irony is intended: that the principal "instability" that concerns Defoe in this book is neither epistemological nor social, but what we would now call psychological – that is, the conflict between desire and restraint. Robinson's goal, in writing the history of his life, is to show his readers how he accomplished the task of mediating that conflict – in effect, how he cured his passions. For Defoe, the passions are a category of instability in human nature that must be addressed *before* questions of truth and virtue can be raised. *Robinson Crusoe*, like *Moll Flanders*, *Roxana*, and his other fictional biographies, is an experimental laboratory in which Defoe worked out the operations of fear, anger, and desire, and considered the ways in which they may lead us to good as well as betray us into the hands of the Devil. Robinson Crusoe's history might well be discounted as hypocritical if that book were meant to define a standard of either truth or virtue, but if its purpose was to provide a guide to conduct through Hunter's "ethical issues of behavior in daily life," it succeeds on purely pragmatic grounds. Learning to know the difference between passions and the will of God, as McKeon has shown, leads eventually to questions that are epistemological and moral in nature. The origins of the English novel, then, are to be found not only in the generic transformations through which questions of truth and virtue are worked out, but also in the question of passion that raises and problematises them.

Of the nine chapters in this book, the first three establish a historical and intellectual context for the "cure" of the passions. We begin by examining one such cure, that of Matt Bramble in Tobias Smollett's last novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, in which the novelist pays Dr. John Arbuthnot the compliment of using him as the model for his fictional physician, Dr. Lewis. Smollett's reader soon learns that Bramble's maladies are mostly mental, and that Lewis is a physician for the mind as well