# HISTORY AND THE EARLY ENGLISH NOVEL

*Matters of Fact from Bacon to Defoe*

ROBERT MAYER

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This new study of the origins of the English novel argues that the novel emerged from historical writing. Examining historical writers and forms frequently neglected by earlier scholars, Robert Mayer shows that in the seventeenth century historical discourse embraced not only "history" in its modern sense, but also fiction, polemic, gossip, and marvels. Mayer thus explains why Defoe's narratives were initially read as history. It is the acceptance of the claims to historicity, the study argues, that differentiates Defoe's fictions from those of writers like Thomas Deloney and Aphra Behn, important writers who nevertheless have figured less prominently than Defoe in discussions of the novel. Mayer ends by exploring the theoretical implications of the history-fiction connection. His study makes an important contribution to the continuing debate about the emergence of the novel in Britain in the eighteenth century.

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To Elizabeth

"it seemed to them that Fate itself
had meant them for one another"

When I go about a Work in which I must tell a great many Stories, which may in their own nature seem incredible, and in which I must expect a great part of Mankind will question the Sincerity of the Relator; I did not do it without a particular sence upon me of the proper Duty of an Historian

Daniel Defoe, *The Storm* (1704)

It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as a historian and his narrative as a history. It is only as a historian that he has the smallest *locus standi*.

Henry James, "Anthony Trollope" (1883)

She picks up the notebook that lies on the small table beside his bed. It is the book he brought with him through the fire – a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they are cradled within the text of Herodotus.

Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (1992)

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# Introduction

For a book that is a central text of Western civilization, *Robinson Crusoe* had a strange early history.[1] In the first edition (1719), the title page announced that the work had been written by Crusoe, and the editor's preface asserted that the book was "a just History of Fact" even as it obscurely acknowledged that some or all of the narrative might be fictitious. A number of the early readers of *Crusoe* read the narrative as a factual account; Charles Gildon's famous attack on the book was rooted in his belief that many readers had been deceived by Defoe. Thus, Gildon's "D—l" tells Friday:

> I did not make you speak broken *English*, to represent you as a Blockhead . . . but meerly for the Variety of Stile, to intermix some broken *English* to make my Lie go down the more glibly with the Vulgar Reader.[2]

Having been branded a liar by Gildon, Defoe offered two defenses of his text and his method. The preface to *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) observes that all efforts to "reproach" the earlier work "with being a romance . . . have proved abortive" and further argues that the "just Application" of the work "must legitimate the Part that may be call'd Invention"; the clear implication is that although *some* of the work might be invented, the account is essentially factual, "Contradictions in the Fact" having never been isolated. The preface to the *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe* (1720) also rejects the claims of the "ill-disposed Part of the World . . . That . . . the Story is feign'd" and counters "that the Story, though Allegorical, is also Historical." Thus, the several explications of *Robinson Crusoe* provided by Defoe do not so much shift ground as repeat themselves, and we are left with a paradox: though the work may be regarded as an allegory, it is nonetheless history. So in *Serious Reflections* the editor asserts

[1] To cite only two arguments as to its classic status, Samuel Johnson linked it with *Don Quixote* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and James Joyce called it the "English *Ulysses*." Michael Shinagel, ed., *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 285, 353.

[2] Paul Dottin, ed., *Robinson Crusoe Examin'd and Criticis'd or A New Edition of Charles Gildon's Famous Pamphlet Now Published with an Introduction and Explanatory Notes* (London and Paris: J. M. Dent, 1923), xvi. On the early reception of *Robinson Crusoe*, also see *The Lives of the Poets* (1753), signed by Theophilus Cibber but now attributed to Robert Shiels, cited in *Defoe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Pat Rogers (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 49–50.

that "when I mention my Solitudes and Retirements . . . all those Parts of the Story are real Facts in my History, whatever borrow'd Lights they may be represented by."[3] Note that Defoe does not simply argue that the work is "true"; it might well be thought both allegorical and true: Bunyan makes that claim in his defense of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.[4] Rather, Defoe insists not only that the text is true but also that it contains "Matter of real History" – matters of fact – even as he admits that it is a "Fable."

Not only Defoe's repeated, paradoxical defenses of his text but also its early reception suggest the strangeness of *Crusoe*.[5] Indeed it seems that at first no one knew what to make of this text – not Defoe, who wrote about it in such contradictory terms and explicated its generic status again and again without clarifying the matter; nor Gildon, whose charge that the book was a lie was wholly lacking in subtlety; nor the early readers who read the text either as a memoir or as a fable. Subsequent readers contained the work's strangeness, familiarizing it by classifying the text as a work of fiction, a "romance" or a "novel," generally without considering whether such categorizing was justified or whether it resolved formal questions about the text. The present study, by contrast, begins from the premise that we can learn a great deal about the nature of *Robinson Crusoe* as well as Defoe's other narratives and also about the novel in general by taking Defoe at his word and considering *Robinson Crusoe* as a "just History of Fact" and then asking how that "History" became part of the canon of English novels.

In order to take Defoe seriously, however, it is necessary first to determine what readerly expectations would allow a writer to present such a text as a history and also allow such a work to be read as a species of historical discourse. This study, then, is an attempt to delineate a crucial area of the "horizon of expectations" on which *Robinson Crusoe* appeared in 1719.[6] To describe that horizon one needs to consider both historical and fictional discourse, since from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, at least, writers persistently asked readers of fiction to situate their

[3] Shinagel, ed., *Robinson Crusoe*, 258–65.

[4] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. James Blanton Wharey, rev. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 4–5. On the difference between Bunyan and Defoe, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 80–84; Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 121.

[5] On the reception of *Robinson Crusoe* after Gildon, see Rogers, *The Critical Heritage*, 48–51; C. E. Burch, "British Criticism of Defoe as a Novelist, 1719–1860," *Englische Studien* 67 (1932), 178–98; and chapter 11 below. The concept of the "strangeness" of a literary work is from the Russian Formalists; see Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3–24.

[6] The term "horizon of expectations" is from Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, introd. Paul de Man, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22.

imaginative works in relation to the discourse of history, and the history-fiction problematic was, therefore, an ever-present preoccupation of writers and readers of the texts that we now associate with the early English novel.[7] This study arises from the view that Defoe's importance – his centrality – in the early history of the English novel derives from the fact that in the period from the publication of Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590) to the appearance of Scott's *Waverley* (1814), Defoe's narratives constituted the most pointed and significant statement of this history-fiction problematic. Crucial to the definition of the form, Defoe's famous texts laid the basis for a sustained attempt by subsequent novelists and readers to elaborate, comprehend, define, and domesticate the dialogue in the novel between historical and fictional discourse.[8] For this reason, my discussion of

[7] Aphra Behn presented *Oroonoko* (1688) as "the history of this royal slave" and asserted that she was herself "an eyewitness to a great part of what you will find here set down"; in *The Secret History of Queen Zarah* (1705) Delarivier Manley distinguished between the popular romances of the day and her own "little histories"; the "editor" of *Moll Flanders* (1722) acknowledged that "the World is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances, that it will be hard for a private History to be taken for Genuine," thereby indicating that Moll's narrative should be read as history; Richardson presented *Clarissa* (1747–48) as "a History," distinguished *Pamela* (1741) from romances, and indicated that he wanted *Clarissa* to be read with a "Historical Faith"; Fielding's narrator in *Tom Jones* (1749) took pains to say "what kind of a history this is"; Sterne likened *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) to Locke's *Essay*, which Tristram tells us is "a history-book . . . of what passes in a man's own mind," and Tristram addresses "the hypercritick" on the issue of the author's manipulation of time in order to avoid the critic's "rendering my book . . . a profess'd ROMANCE"; Smollett, as I have argued elsewhere, "presses us," in *Humphry Clinker* (1771), "to conceive of the novel as a fictional form that does the work of history"; the preface of Frances Burney's *Evelina or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) informs the reader that she or he should not "entertain the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance"; Maria Edgeworth presented *Castle Rackrent* (1800) as a narrative "taken from facts" – the kind of history one never finds in historiography; and Scott styled *Waverley* (1814) a "historical romance" and presented it to the reader, in the Magnum edition, with learned introductions and footnotes. See the prefaces or introductions to the works cited, except for *Tristram Shandy*, in which case see vol. II, chapters 2 and 8, and Richardson's comment on *Clarissa*, for which see *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 85. On *Humphry Clinker*, see my "History, *Humphry Clinker* and the Novel," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 4 (1991–92), 255.

[8] A fundamental assumption of this study is that fiction and history are qualitatively different forms of discourse. It has not been uncommon for literary theorists to claim that historical discourse is essentially fictive since the historian employs narrative techniques often associated with the fashioning of imaginative stories. See, for example, Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," trans. Stephen Bann, in *Comparative Criticism. A Yearbook*, ed. E. S. Shaffer (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3–20. The work of Hayden White is also apposite; see the discussion of White at p. 90. Recently, however, a number of theoreticians of history and of narrative have insisted upon the essential difference between history and fiction, and all have pointed in different ways to the fact that history-writing is based upon evidence drawn from the historical record while fiction is not. For three such arguments, from very different perspectives, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Rhetoric of History and the History of Rhetoric: On Hayden White's Tropes," *Comparative Criticism*, 267–68; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, trans. Kathleen Blarney and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1988), chapter 8; and Dorrit Cohn, "Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective," *Poetics Today*, 11 (1990), 775–804. Paul Ricoeur argues that "fiction . . . permits historiography to live up to the task of

"matters of fact" will entail first a fresh look at seventeenth-century historiography and then a reassessment of Defoe's texts – historical and novelistic – in light of a reexamination of both history- and fiction-writing in seventeenth-century England. All this is aimed at illuminating Defoe's crucial role in the creation of the English novel, which derives from his having made the nexus of history and fiction a key element in the theory of the novel elaborated by writers and readers in the eighteenth century. The argument of this study entails, then, a sequence of claims: that the historical discourse of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England (what I shall call Baconian historiography) featured a taste for the marvelous, a polemical cast, a utilitarian faith, a dependence upon personal memory and gossip, and a willingness to tolerate dubious material for practical purposes, all of which led to the allowance of fiction as a means of historical representation; that the novel came into being, in important part, because of a "sudden redistribution" within and among discursive fields that occurred in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, and in the process of which the novel hived off from history; that Defoe's most famous narratives – issued as histories, branded as lies, and eventually read as novels – were an important element in that far-reaching discursive realignment; that a key feature of the elaboration of a discourse of the novel was the shift in readerly expectations forced upon readers in the early modern period and after, in important part by Defoe's "novels"; and that the long and complicated history of the reception of Defoe's "novels" signals the fact that the history-fiction problematic in those narratives became a key feature of the emerging discourse of the novel.

## I

This study relies heavily on Hans Robert Jauss's perception that literary historians can use the study of reception to describe a form such as the novel as the sum of all questions posed and answers proffered by both the works themselves and the readers of those works. According to Jauss, readers as well as writers theorize forms, and the theory of a form *is* the

memory," and also that "fictional narrative in some way imitates historical narrative," especially insofar as fiction is "internally bound by its obligation to its quasi-past." Ricoeur therefore speaks of an "interweaving of history and fiction," or the

> fundamental structure, ontological as well as epistemological, by virtue of which history and fiction each concretize their respective intentionalities only by borrowing from the intentionality of the other.

Yet even as he argues that these two narrative forms are in important ways inextricably linked, Ricoeur insists on the fundamental difference of the two modes of discourse because "the quasi-past of the narrative voice [in fiction] is . . . entirely different from the past of historical consciousness"; 189, 192, 181.

history of the form "viewed . . . within the horizon of a dialogue between work and audience that forms a continuity." Jauss's call for "an aesthetics of reception" sought to provide a basis for relating historical studies and formalist inquiries: "to bridge the gap between literature and history, between historical and aesthetic approaches." Attention to reception *and* production, he argued, could overcome the limitations of historicist procedures that provided a clear view of the historical context of texts and careers but little means of saying how a work-in-its-historical-context is related to a work-in-its-present-context: "the thread from the past appearance to the present experience of literature, which historicism had cut, is tied back together" by an historical analysis of reception and production.[9] At the same time, attention to reception ensured that formal descriptions would not be severed from historical questions. Jauss's project amounts to the claim that the novel that we study today – the form that we theorize – has embedded within it, for example, Defoe's answers to questions embodied in the works of earlier writers as well as questions propounded within his works and the subsequent answers of Defoe's readers to the questions he posed. Delineating the horizon of expectations of writers and readers of texts associated with the tradition of the novel is a way of describing not only the history but also the theory of the novel.

How does one reconstruct the horizon of expectations against which a work appeared? Jauss has tended to concentrate on individual works as horizonal backgrounds to other works, most recently, for example, on *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as works that responded to the same questions and also as works that were related to each other as question and answer.[10] This method is problematic, however, when one is treating a body of work as initially undifferentiated from a large mass of popular texts as was the work of Defoe. The problem is further accentuated if one is using the equally inchoate set of statements and texts that constituted "history" in early modern England to delineate the horizon against which Defoe's works originally appeared. Faced with this problem of apprehending and describing such a crowded horizon, the discourse analysis of Michel Foucault has at times proved a more productive means

[9] Jauss, "Literary History," 19, 18. Writers are readers of earlier works, and thus Defoe's texts are acts of reception in respect to earlier works. As Felix Vodička has argued, the "biography" of a work consists of both its "genesis" and a "greater and more difficult part": the description of "how the work has changed in the minds of those following generations who have dealt with it, who have lived on it, and nourished themselves on it." Thus the views of other readers – critics and common readers – are also valuable evidence for an understanding of the history and theory of the novel; see "The Concretization of the Literary Work: Problems of the Reception of Neruda's Work," in *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929–1946*, ed. Peter Steiner, trans. John Burbank, *et al.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 105.

[10] Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, ed. Michael Hays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 148–96.