The Rise of the Novel

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The novel as a literary form came about in England in the early 18th century. Defoe, Richardson and Fielding are the pioneers, at least Watt chooses to focus on those three. What were the external circumstances which made the novel possible? And why did they first appear in England? Watt refers to the rise of individualism which had started in the 17th century, and can be seen as a logical consequence of the Reformation and the emphasis it put on the individual, in particular on his or her personal relationship to God, and by implication to the responsibility for your own life, not only morally and spiritually but also materially and economically, to the extent that poverty became to be seen as a moral failing and just reward. This can all be summarized in one word - Puritanism. This idea of putting the needs of the individual above that of society, as defined by the extended family and neighbors, is to be seen as an aberration of Western Society, and does not hold sway in traditional societies.

Secondly individualism led to economic individualism and the emergence of a middle-class, rising on their own efforts as opposed to accident of birth, creating a large reading public, including that of their servants, who tended to have the appropriate leisure[1]. A large reading public formed the economic basis for printers, also known as booksellers. Those were sensitive to the market, and tended to pay authors by quantity rather than quality, and also never losing the eye for what could be profitable or not. This lead to a degeneration of taste, much resented by the literary elite. It was this that paved the way for the novel, and the first pioneer was Defoe, whose ambition was not to create a new literary form, but to continue journalism, but with other means. Defoe was born deep back into the 17th century, in 1660 as a matter of fact. He came out of a family of trades people, and he early on learned to live on his wits, meaning essentially working as a journalist, but also as a writer of pamphlets and occasional essays. He started writing novels rather late in his life, Robinson Crusoe was not published until 1719, and Moll Flanders followed a year later. His most famous novel is with no doubt Robinson Crusoe, and Watt places it alongside Don Quixote, Don Juan and Faust as one of the archetypal myths of Western literature. I came across it as a child, getting a lavishly illustrated edition for children, which singled out his adventure on the deserted island. I do not

[1] Books were expensive, and thus out of reach by the majority of the population which was illiterate anyway. Then there were lending libraries, and one may surmise that servants in wealthier household may have had access to some books. One may keep in mind that cheap tickets to theatres were much more affordable, and you did not need to know how to read to appreciate a play performed. Thus the theatre must have played a much more important role as far as mass entertainment in the past than now, so maybe the plays by Shakespeare reached a rather substantial audience, plays which now belong to high-brow culture, as does opera, once for the masses. It is hard to estimate the size of the reading public, but Watt comes up with a figure of 200'000.

remember whether I even could read at the time, and if not it must have been read to me several times, later on I recall reading the name of the author - Daniel Defoe - on the cover, somewhat taken aback that such a fascinating text could be the work of a named author, somehow it bespoke a certain discrepancy, but I never forgot the name. The idea of a single individual, in isolation and solely on his own efforts could survive and build up a civilization in a deserted wilderness, excited my imagination deeply. About the same time my mother took me to a movie on Robinson, a movie I later realized had been directed by Bunuel, which further reinforced the story. When I some years later came onto the full book in a Swedish translation, I was somewhat disappointed, as the life on the island only occupied one part of his adventures, be it an extended one, the others, in my mind, being mere add-ons. And it is only by reading Watt I realize that Robinson had a sequel, with further adventures added on, including a revisit to the old island. I can only shake my head, and of course all this detracts and diminishes the book, if not the myth, which goes deeper than the intentions of the author.

The novel differed in essential ways from the narratives of the past, the main difference being that a novel does not address the universal but the particular. Rather than being the conveyor of general ideas, it focuses on the particular experiences (then of course the reader is free to draw his own universal conclusions from them). This focus on the particular means that the novel need to be realistic, in fact one can characterize the genre as one adhering to formal realism, meaning the inclusion of often inconsequential detail, that adds to the illusion of reality. With the advent of the novel, I would say that for the first time there was a need to invent the word 'fiction' to disclaim the ultimate illusion of reality, i.e. of having taken place in 'reality', which it is the business of a novel to create. Defoe was well-equipped to write in this way, as he had before produced a steady stream of journalistic reports, snatches out of real life, given an artful form in order to be more palatable to the reader. Also as a court reporter he was not a stranger to what a report addressed to a court of justice should contain. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In a novel you do that, or at least have the ambition of so doing, including also the apparently non-consequential details, in order to achieve the whole truth. In the novel the 'truth' should be redefined, but whether a novel depicts the truth or not, cannot be intrinsically determined by the novel by itself, but belongs to the meta-structure of a novel.

The narratives of the past could never be confused with reality, and hence there was no need to refer to them as fictions, as there was no problem of distinction. They never had the ambition to be mistaken for the 'real thing', meaning mundane reality. They were much more formal, with clear instructive, not to say didactic intentions. The characters were not meant to be specific individuals, but representative types[2]. Typical of classical narratives are the division into tragedies and comedies. Tragedies are exalted and involve typically people from the higher classes, while comedies involve those of the lower, and tend, as far as characters are concerned, stacked with stock characters, more intended to generate amusement caused by ridicule, than identification. Also the narratives of the past were written with considerable subtlety and often elegance, plots, as far as there were any, were

[2] What about Shakespeare? In the humanities, you can ever make categorical statements as you do in mathematics. Many of his characters are stock characters, but some like Falstaff possess more individuality.

completely subservient to the main message, tended to be well-constructed and thought out, with nothing superfluous, and as with stock characters, we could speak about stock plots [3] they had no interest in themselves. The art of novel writing dispensed with most of those strictures. As Watt writes: *Verbal grace, complication of structure, concentration of effect, all these take time and are likely to require a lot of revision.* Defoe was used to write a lot and at length and would never undertake any revision unless he was paid to do so, and hence he earned the opprobrium of being too verbose and circumlocutory. Watt agrees, his novels are very sloppily written, there are a lot of inconsistencies, needless repetitions, and glaring signs of forgetfulness. His plots are never thought out in advance, his writing is spontaneous, and the plots twist and turn according to his whims[4]. Yet the novels of Defoe are page-turners. you constantly are aroused by the curiosity of what will follow. He was also a deft writer, having written, no doubt almost daily, for forty years at least, before turning his mind to fiction. Moll Flanders I have not read, so I will not comment on her and her picaresque adventures, although they engage a lot of Watts attention; but with Crusoe I am definitely familiar, and hence his comments on him, are of encompassing interest to me. He faults Robinson for being too materialistic and economic in his relation to other people, maybe a consequence of being to individualistic, other people only being of interest to him as far as they are of use. He is content of making 'Friday' a slave, not a companion, of teaching him pidgin English, in order for him to be of service as an aid, not as a conversation partner or friend. Watt is skeptical about the psychological realism, could a man really be an island unto himself, in the words of Donne, without degenerating into inhumanity deprived of his fellow men? I recall as a child feeling instinctively sorry for Robinson, having, so to speak, lost the prime years of his life to his insulary isolation. Arriving in his twenties returning in his fifties, a time for all intents of purposes, having been spent in prison. But this was a meta-consideration, what engaged me were the everyday adventure of staying alive, and I read, as most people must have done, with fascination how he accomplished the daily chores of everyday living, reported on in great detail, to the delight of the uninstructed, because as Watt remarks, while people living in the country, did indeed live lives in fact not that different from Robinson as to self-sufficiency, a matron in a country household would know all the details of making bread, but a lady living in London was already a consumer and bought her bread in a bakery. Watt believes, and not unreasonably I would say, that Defoe was not really conscious about starting a new literary trend, there was no premeditation as to what he did, his lack of formal education and his experience as a hack writer, to put it crudely, stood him in good stead. He knew instinctively how to spin a good yarn, he used a relatively simple language, without any ornamentation, and he did indeed write as his fancy took him. His novels have glaring mistakes, but readers forgive him. He certainly knew how to start, but not necessarily how to finish. Had he had a better understanding of what he was doing, he would have concentrated his tale on Robinson to his adventure on the island (just as in the children edition I came across) after having written the whole thing, because writing

[3] Shakespeare never bothered much with plots, borrowing with no shame, they being incidental anyway

[4] This is actually how I envisioned writing novels in my childhood, the idea of following a premeditated plan seemed strange, if somewhat fascinating to me, believing just as a reader should lose himself in a novel, so would the author, and my own juvenile attempts naturally were of that nature

is not only a question of adding, that is easy enough, but to subtract, which is much harder; and he would definitely never have written a sequel, bound to be anti-climactic, but the financial rewards for that certainly were to sweet to ignore, after all he lived by his pen, and could never separate his subsistence from his writing, as somebody enjoying an independent income could. Robinson is a classic, and hence we tend to read it with the more exacting criteria of more sophisticated readers, thus papering over the glaring deficiencies, as signs of irony. There is in general no reason to adhere to such a reading unless we want to modernize him, and make him to accord more to modern sensibilities. Finally was Defoe a religious writer, after all Robinson is made to read the Bible regularly. Once can see this as either an expression of piety, whether genuine or acquired by habit or convention, or as a concession to the political correctness of the time, the burden of which is far from a modern phenomenon, or simply as a device to show that Robinson did throughout his isolation never lose contact with civilization, as encoded by the Bible, and thus never cutting the ties with the rest of humanity, in other words to maintain some connection with his fellow-men.

Richardson took off from Defoe. Many of the defects of Defoe are gone. He is more careful, but also more realistic, carrying the ambition of verisimilitude to real life much further than Defoe ever did. Defoe was content by reproducing fictitious autobiographies, so to speak, Richardson gives us almost the real thing, letting a story unfold not in retrospective but in real time. His first attempt is the epistolary novel 'Pamela' which has only two contrahents, the servant girl Pamela and her suitor Mr.B. whose intentions do not seem initially to be completely honorable. But Pamela has virtue and in the end she wins the hand of her suitor under favorable terms and her virtue is being amply rewarded. Who would be interested in the adventure and success of a mere servant girl? Other servant girls obviously, but not only those. According to Watt, British society saw in the 18th century the emergence of the idea of female virtue, typically middle class, and thus a symptom of its rising. Courtly love is a play, and low love is a sport, both in a sense doing away with the moral force of virtue. There may be virtue in courtly love by being untouched, but it has no potential. Middle.class virtue on the other hand makes marriages reasonable and practical, but not devoid of sentimentality. One is led to believe that this was the prelude to the Victorian age, when the inherent hypocrisy came to a fore, but in social life one should be wary of the categorical statement. By using the media of the letter, the author is able to probe the psychology and inner motivations of his characters more deeply and palpably than if he had resorted to conversation and authorial asides alone. But 'Pamela' is just the foreplay to 'Clarissa' billed as the longest novel in the English language. According to Watt about a million words, which translates into about 2500 pages. Who in this modern day would like to commit herself to such an undertaking as the perusal of all those. At the time, there were many, as the distractions were few, and there were not very many novels yet written, the 19th century being still ahead. In a way Richardson achieved, already at the beginning of the emergence of the novel, to produce a work that showed the verisimilitude to real life in its quotidian aspects carried to an extreme. There is no dearth to detail, even if there is not that much action, the climax being the rape of Clarissa by her reckless and rakish abductor. The psychology is subtle enough to maintain the interest, at least for readers with determination and stamina to match. Clarissa is not

altogether good, her bad sides being hidden though, and the same can be said of Lovelace (meaning literally 'loveless') where under his evil design and cruel thoughts, there are some genuine sentiments of love struggling to emerge. Pamela has a happy ending, Clarissa has a sad one with her death spun out in accordance with the obsessions of the time.

Finally Fielding in a way is a retreat from the advances made by the novel. While Defoe and Richardson came from humble backgrounds and lacked a formal education, Fielding, son of Feilding, was along with his sister Sarah, also a writer of some renown at the time, a gentleman, versant in Latin and, one gathers, some Greek. He did not want to abandon the old models of narrative. He started out with a spoof on Richardson's 'Pamela' titled 'Shamela', but his tour de force was 'Tom Jones' a novel I actually struggled through not yet of the age of seventeen during a vacation in the south of France. I was fascinated with the time and found reading about the past through the eyes of its denizens very fascinating, and I was also committed to the questionable discipline of finishing books into which I had penetrated a little bit. But what did I get out of it? It certainly was not 'Robinson Crusoe' and it certainly did not have the realism of presentation one can find in the former. In a way it reminded me of the somewhat crude pictures you see of previous centuries, liable to enhance the mystique of the past, without clarifying it (how modern do not the paintings by Vermeer appear in comparison? They are windows into the past which provide you with a direct view). There is no realism in 'Tom Jones' so much I could understand. There is a plot carefully worked out, probably in advance, none of the meandering of a Defoe, so much closer to my taste, and there is a message and there is instruction. Watt refers to 'realism of assessment'. Fielding paints a panorama of society at large, not confining himself to the love-problems of a couple, although there is no lack of the latter; and he is a wise guide who knows what is going on and cannot resist to tell the reader so in explicit ways. By so doing he takes great pain to distance himself from the novel at hand, to repeatedly point to its fictional character, thus the novel tries to incorporate in itself comments on itself. This is a big step away from realism of presentation, because after all you want to be engrossed by a novel, not be detached from it, because if so you will forego its essence. Fielding is unable, or at least indifferent to any attempts of showing inner feelings. If he wants to depict an emotion he can only do so by showing its external signs, and hence if he needs to depict a strong emotion, he has to exaggerated those to the point of caricature. Who can take this seriously? Still there is charm in that, just as there are charms in old pictures that give no illusion of realism unlike those by Vermeer just mentioned. I also recall from my reading more than fifty years ago, the introductory chapters of each of the books the novel is divided into. Those were contrived readings I recall, and I also remember that in the introduction it was stated that those chapters entailed much more work and effort on the part of Fielding than the actual narrative. Could well be true. But in spite of everything Fielding supplied inspiration to many 19th century novelists.

Watt claims that after the troika of authors he has studied, there were no major authors of the remaining part of the century, Smolett is good, but not of the same class, and Sterne is of course remarkable, but one surmises, far too bizarre to fit into any neat history of the development of the novel. 'Tristram Shandy' is indeed a clever experimental work, which would have to wait until the 20th century to be fully appreciated. Thus

I think that already in the first century of the emergence of the novel, it had attained most of the extremal points of its potential, addressing and formulating many of the problems 20th century writers have struggled with. Art and literature show development and improvement surely, but such trends are never sustained. There is not the same accumulation as in science, the past is never rendered obsolete. An individual artist can show remarkable development and improvement, but this is something to be found on the level of the individual, not society as a whole. The skill and sophistication of cave painting from past Ice-ages, more and more of which is being discovered, cannot said to be surpassed as of today. The capacity of an individual is limited, and not necessarily less limited today than it was in the past. Science is a communal quest, art seems more individual.

Thus one may mention, as does Watt, Jane Austen and her craft as in many ways constituting the perfection of the novel, if not in scope and interest necessarily, but in its artfulness. In Austen, Watt tells the reader, the realism of presentation, as practiced by Richardson, and the realism of assessment as pursued by Fielding, are harmoniously combined. No mean feat. In other words it is impossible to outausten Austen.

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