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reads
The Life of Daniel Defoe
(Oxford: Blackwell, 2005)
by John Richetti

IT WAS DEFOE'S UNIVERSALISING HUMANITY that Coleridge particularly admired: 'He who makes me forget my *specific* class, character, and circumstances, raises me into the universal man. Now this is De Foe's excellence. You become a man while you read.'¹ It was also, tellingly, Defoe's novels that Coleridge primarily understood to constitute his work: these words, like most of his other comments on Defoe, were written in relation to *Robinson Crusoe*. Coleridge may not have recognized much of the Defoe in today's cultural imaginary: a man intensely interested in the political and economic circumstances of the moment; a ready propagandist and satirical writer; an intelligencer and moralist.

John Richetti's critical biography of Defoe was published in 2005 as part of the Blackwell Critical Biographies series under the general editorship of Claude Rawson. At that moment, the reading public did not exactly want for Defoe biographies written by highly respected scholars with deep knowledge of Defoe's work and times: James Sutherland's of 1937, Peter Earle's of 1976, Paula Backscheider's of 1989 and Maximilian Novak's of 2001. Entering this crowded field only a few months ahead of another new biography by experts (P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens's *A Political Biography of Daniel Defoe*), Richetti's contributed to a flowering of contextually-informed Defoe scholarship which is still ongoing. Whatever the virtues or drawbacks of biography as a scholarly enterprise, Defoe has benefitted from highly qualified and deeply knowledgeable biographers: Richetti's book, for instance, comes after half a lifetime of writing and thinking about Defoe. It received a considerable amount of sympathetic attention and has evidently helped readers understand the connections, as Richetti sees them, between Defoe's non-fiction (particularly the *Review* and his conduct books) and his novels. It was one of the first studies of Defoe to work within Furbank and Owens's radical reduction of the ascertainable Defoe canon, and though Richetti does not always wholly acquiesce in their exclusions — *Due Preparations for the Plague* (1722) is treated as a Defoe piece in chapter ten, for example — the pared-down Defoe present here permits a sharpening of critical focus, and a clearer view of his political writings in particular.

One strong articulation of an approach partially shaped by Richetti is Ashley Marshall's contention that 'Our postromantic belief that imaginative writing is a projection of its self-expressive creator should not be unquestioning applied'

¹ Thomas Middleton Raysor, *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism* (Boston, 1936), 293.

to the work of Defoe.² Never mind Coleridge's view that reading Defoe can tell us about ourselves collectively: readers of Defoe should remain on guard to avoid being tricked into thinking that his writing can, in fact, tell us anything about him. Marshall praises Richetti's approach for avoiding unhelpful psychological speculating, and for the most part this is true. The book makes thorough and judicious use of the full range of available information about Defoe, but it is not the place to seek new archival or factual discoveries about Defoe the man and nor does it claim to be. Richetti's critical biography is one that is well-appraised of its literary, historical and political precursors (generous acknowledgement is made throughout of earlier biographies by Backscheider, Novak and Sutherland as well as numerous literary studies), deeply-read in the author's published work, and confident in its aesthetic, literary and interpretive judgments. Defoe is characterised as a writer by his 'remarkable fluency', his 'various voices', his 'enduring readability' but more essential even than that, his very existence is defined by 'his amazing life of writing, or rather his life *as* writing' (38).

While Defoe's energy is one of his strongest characteristics for Richetti, it is not always a purely positive strength: in 'For what if the Queen should die?' an excess of energy creates 'momentum he can't always control' which contributes to a 'manic quality' (140); *A Plan of the English Commerce* suffers from 'a kind of nearly demented pedantry' which 'illustrates the pitfalls of particularity' (159); in *Conjugal Lewdness*, 'Defoe's energetic satire runs away with itself' (354). These examples indicate the range of the genres and forms in which Defoe wrote, all of which are treated with easy confidence by Richetti. The novels do not attract this sort of critique, though: as a literary scholar and editor of *Robinson Crusoe*, Richetti is at his most appreciative when handling the prose fictions, and in these chapters Defoe himself slips slightly out of focus as the lives of his characters occupy Richetti's attention. At points in the analysis, it's not entirely clear whether Defoe's thoughts have been elided with his characters' or whether it's a case of self-effacement being effectively realised: Defoe the master of disguise willingly absorbed into his own creations.

This is no bad thing. As my teaching duties include presenting *Robinson Crusoe* to first-year undergraduates in their second week of university study and encouraging second years through *Moll Flanders* I was particularly interested in this section of the biography. I've found that its strong declarations about how to understand Defoe's protagonists and their narrative strategies are good for students to think with, and that insisting on the complicated relations between authors and their characters can be done effectively with reference to Richetti's treatment of both. Ashley Marshall has commented that 'A decade into the twenty-first century happens to be a good time to reconsider our assumptions about Defoe' (27), and in pedagogic terms I agree: the entire Pickering and Chatto 44-volume *Works* is available (though prohibitively expensive); Marshall's own work has helped us understand Defoe's satire of the 1700s

² Ashley Marshall, 'Fabricating Defoes: From Anonymous Hack to Master of Fictions', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 36 (2012), 1-35 (15).

better; and the growing presence of digital humanities in teaching is making it possible for students to engage more productively with some of Defoe's less obviously enticing works, for example by consulting a range of historic maps (freely accessible and searchable) and producing their own guides to Defoe's globe using Google Maps. Defoe's world, in all its religio-political complexity and problematic imperial triumphalism, is perhaps more approachable than it was even ten years ago.

As 'a man whose life consists of his own words' (viii) it's Defoe as a writer that's at the heart of this biography, but near the end Richetti confesses 'we'll never know what Defoe thought he was up to' (271). While this is surely the troubled heart of any biography, it's peculiarly impossible to get much sense of Defoe as he lived day-to-day. With Richetti's *Life*, though, we come pretty close to knowing how he lived in ideas and what it meant to be a moral and political writer in the first three decades of the eighteenth century.