Providence and Profit
Speculations in the Genre Market

I

It should be stated at the outset that this discussion of genre brings no new materials to the field. It takes the form of an interrogation of familiar texts, a re-ordering of the known field with a view to signposting some possible paths through it.

This opening remark is more than just a modesty topos, however. It springs from the conviction that many recent discussions of genre have attempted to impose an order that is both too singular and too general on a field that is both variegated and unstable. Either these discussions construct a theoretical problem or "law" of genre that ignores the historical unevenness and specificity of the field, or they historicise it in a manner that is similarly incapable of responding to the sheer variability of the historical and discursive circumstances in which questions of genre are posed and addressed.

The present remarks represent a sketch of a set of topics more responsive to this instability in the surfaces on which genre appears as an object or a problem. This sketch is itself informed by two intersecting coordinates. The first derives from Foucault's genealogical method. This is used to adumbrate a historical reconstruction of a particular generic field—early "novelistic" books in England—in a way that is not mortgaged to a telos of origin or a mythos of essence. The second coordinate is provided by a running discussion of recent critical history. The object of this discussion is to indicate some of the historical parameters of our own interest in genre. In order to avoid disappointment, I should add that between the horizon formed by this latter interest and the very different generic horizon scanned by Daniel Defoe and his readers we shall not discover anything approximating "the whole world of genre," should such a thing exist. Instead, we shall find a fairly narrow set of topics designed to negotiate a path between the post-Romantic interest in genre that largely characterises the modern literary academy and the different, though still related, generic interests of early eighteenth-century "novelists."

We can set the scene for this topology by assembling a document from Charles Gildon's polemic against the author of Robinson Crusoe. Published in 1719, Gildon's attack on Defoe's reputation was fuelled by literary, religious and political rivalry. Our interest, however, is in what the attack tells us about (contemporary) genre-theory, the emergence of
the novel as a genre, and the relation between these two things and the
composition and reception of early novelistic writing.

We can begin with Gildon taking issue with the defence of Robinson
Crusoe that Defoe had published in the preface to the second volume of
Crusoe’s adventures. Here Gildon is concerned with lapses in relation to
certain stylistic canons, although he allows himself to treat these as signs
of Defoe’s low motives and the ignorance of his audience.

I cannot, however, omit taking particular Notice of the Editor’s
Preface [to The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe], because it
is not only written by the same Hand, but also very singular in
its Kind: you begin with a Boast of the Success of your Book, and
which you say deserves that Success by its Merits, that is, The
surprising Variety of the Subject, and the agreeable Manner of the
Performance. It’s well you tell us so yourself, the judicious Reader
else must have been puzzel’d to find out the Mystery of its
Success. For first, as to the Variety of the Subject, it will be a hard
Matter to make that good, since it’s spread out into at least five
and twenty Sheets, clog’d with Moral Reflections, as you are
pleas’d to call them, every where insipid and awkward, and in
many Places of no manner of Relation to the Occasion on which
they are deliver’d, besides being much larger than necessary,
and frequently impious and prophan; and always canting are
the Reflections which you are pleas’d to call religious and useful,
and the brightest Ornaments of your Book, tho’ in reality they were
put in by you to swell the Bulk of your Treatise up to a five
Shilling Book; whereas, the Want of Variety in your Subject,
would never have made it reach to half the Price; nay, as it is, you
have been forc’d to give us the same Reflections over and over
again, as well as repeat the same Fact afterwards in a Journal,
which you had told us before in a plain Narration. So agreeable is
the Manner of your Performance . . .

Another agreeable Thing in the Performance is, that every
Page is full of Solecisms or false Grammar. However, this may
be, for ought I know, a very agreeable Performance to most of
your Buyers.1

Gildon’s attack then focuses on Defoe’s ambivalence over whether
Robinson Crusoe is a “just history of fact” or a story “with a religious
application of events.” The instability in audience uptake signalled by
this ambivalence allows Gildon to exploit the concomitant genre instabi-
ity for his own polemical ends.

Your next Triumph is, that the Reproaches of your Book as a
Romance, and as being guilty of bad Geography, Contradic-
tions, and the like, have prov’d Abortive (I suppose you mean
ineffectual) and as impotent as malicious; . . .
However, I find that these Endeavours you seem to contemn as impotent, have yet had so great a Force upon yourself, as to make you more than tacitly confess, that your Book is nothing but a Romance. You say, indeed, *The just Application of every Incident, the religious and useful Inferences drawn from every Part, are so many Testimonies to the good Design of making it Publick, and must Legitimate all the Part that may be called Invention or Parable in the Story.* But when it is plain that there are no true, useful or just Inferences drawn from any of the Incidents; when Religion has so little to do in any Part of these Inferences; when it is evident that what you call Religion, is only to mislead the Minds of Men to reject the Dictates of Reason, and embrace in its Room a meer superstitious Fear of I know not what *Instinct* from unbodied Spirits; when you impiously profane the very Name of Providence, by allotting to it either contradictory Offices, or an unjust Partiality: I think we may justly say, that the Design of the Publication of this Book was not sufficient to justify and make Truth of what you allow to be Fiction and Fable; what you mean by *Legitimating, Invention,* and *Parable,* I know not; unless you would have us think, that the manner of your telling a Lie will make it a Truth. (111-13)

Finally, Gildon defends one of the piratical abridgements of Defoe's best-seller, which began appearing soon after the publication of the original. The grounds on which he does so remind us how thoroughly the authorial and generic integrity of the "original" text depend on the technology of mechanical copying and the rights to proprietorship over copying—conferred by the Copyright Law of 1709, but still not effectively policed in 1719.

One may say a great Deal in Answer to what you urge against the Abridgement of your Book, but it is too absurd to dwell upon, and against the Practice of all Ages and all Nations... indeed, there is this to be said, that most of these Abridgments have been of Books of a real intrinsic Value; but yours might for me have continu’d unabridg’d, and still retain’d all its brightest Ornaments, as you call them; but if the omitting of those be the only Fault of the Abridgment, I can’t but think his Work more valuable than the Original, nor do I see that he has done your Proprietor any damage, since he has left to your larger Volume all those Beauties you are so fond of, and may, indeed, be said to be only an Advertiser of them to those that have them not. If he has preserv’d the Fable entire, the Judicious will not want your clumsy and tedious Reflections to recommend it; for, indeed, by what you say, you seem not to understand the very Nature of a Fable, which is a sort of Writing which has always been esteem’d
by the wisest and best of Men to be of great use to the Instruction of Mankind; but then this Use and Instruction should naturally and plainly arise from the Fable itself, in an evident and useful Moral, either express or understood; but this is too large a Subject to go thro', and to shew that by the Rules of Art you have not attain'd any one End and Aim of a Writer of Fables in the Tale that you have given us. (114-15)

No doubt we are struck by the sheer diversity of Gildon's criticisms. Allegations of Defoe's money-grubbing motives rub shoulders with formal analysis of insufficiencies in Crusoe's grammar and style and reflections on the alleged moral and religious failings of the book. It is possible, nonetheless, to draw out some preliminary propositions pertinent to the question of genre.

First, as we have indicated, it seems clear that early novelistic writing emerged in a highly unstable generic field. So much is indicated by the fact that Defoe himself variously signals that the book should be read as a history (autobiography), a travel book and a homiletic parable. For his part, Gildon censures the presence of moral reflections and (elsewhere) biblical quotation as generically inappropriate. Furthermore, while claiming that the book is nothing more than a romance, he spends a good deal of time rebutting the moral lessons he has drawn from it.

Second, the role of existing genre theory and categories in this field was a practical and contingent matter. Gildon draws on genre theory in his claim that Defoe “seem[s] not to understand the very Nature of a Fable. "Crusoe's moral reflections and biblical citations are insufficiently motivated by its story, according to Gildon, and this shows "that by the Rules of Art you have not attain'd any one End and Aim of a Writer of Fables in the Tale that you have given us." Consequently, deprived of its claims to moral truth, Crusoe is to be consigned to the category of romance. Gildon does not seriously consider the book's relation to Protestant "conscience literature" where biblical quotations and explicit moralising are quite normal.

The most significant thing about Gildon's invocation of classical genre theory, however, is its brevity. Gildon spends far more time engaging in moral, religious and political skirmishes with the book. Apparently Robinson Crusoe fell to one side of the high-Augustan genre system and its theory, finding its initial home not in belles lettres but in the less regulated mix of ethical vigilance, travel wonder, and religious polemic that formed the milieu of popular journalism. This is not to suggest that true art always escapes system; only that the relation between kinds of writing and their formal institutes may itself be a practical and historically variable affair.

Third, the contingency of the generic field and the uncertainty of its theorisation both seem related to a more profound zone of instability: that of the occasion for a book such as Robinson Crusoe. For the moment
let us say that by “occasion” we mean the practical circumstances governing the composition and reception of a piece of speech or writing. Gildon gives us some sense of the occasion for Robinson Crusoe in the following exchange he imagines between Defoe and his hero.

D...1. hold, hold, dear Son Crusoe... You are my hero, I have made you, out of nothing; fam’d from Tuttle-Streets to Limehouse-hole; there is not an old woman that can go the price of it, but buys thy Life and Adventures, and leaves it as a Legacy, with Pilgrims Progress, the Practice of Piety, and God’s Revenge against Murther, to her Posterity. Cru. Your Hero! Your Mob Hero! Your Pyecorner Hero! on a foot with Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Southampton, and the London Practice!

(Robinson Crusoe Examined, 71-72)

This grouping of Defoe’s book with widely disseminated homiletic parables, devotional manuals and providence books tells us something about the circumstances of its composition and use in the field of “conscience literature.” On the other hand, the placing of Crusoe amongst popular heroes of the Dick Whittington type suggests that this field was neither immutable nor tightly bounded.

This instability in the genre-grouping of Robinson Crusoe can be linked to an expansion in the “public” for certain kinds of printed books. Gildon comments that “indeed, this book seems calculated for the Mob, and will not bear the Eye of a rational Reader” (108). Perhaps we can now recognise this as a confession that practices of interpretation and judgement are contingent on the variable distribution of particular cultural competences in a population. No doubt the eye of a rational reader would detect the presence of the “unmotivated” moral reflection and inconsistent use of the parable form that placed Robinson Crusoe as a failed fable. But this was because such an eye was informed by those “Rules of Art” through which a classically educated caste had organised the composition and consumption of letters in largely genre-systemic terms.

For the moment, let us say that something to do with popular piety and the spread of print and print-literacy had profoundly expanded and transformed the existing occasion for literature. The destabilisation of the occasion for “letters” meant that the generic borders of “literature,” and the circumstances governing its composition and reception, entered into a period of flux. It also meant that the critical codification of genres (itself part of the occasion of literature) lost the important creative and regulatory functions it had performed for the classically educated minority. It was in this newly expanded and unstable occasional zone that a kind of writing we now call “novelistic” first emerged. These preliminary remarks allow us to sketch in the limitations of a number of recent discussions of genre.
In the first place, they give us reason to be sceptical of accounts which attempt to anchor genre in a representational relation to “experience” or in a stage of “society” alleged to support such a relation. Ian Watt’s well-known specification of the early novel in terms of its epochal realism is such an account. In fact, despite its philosophical invocation of the Cartesian subject, Watt’s valorisation of individual experience as the basis of novelistic realism is thoroughly sociological and historical. The problem lies in the manner of historicisation, in which it is not difficult to detect the dialectical manoeuvres of Romantic historicism.

On the one hand, Watt makes individual reason contingent on capitalism and Protestantism, treated as historical vehicles for certain individualising and systematising conventions of economic and ethical calculation. This is the case, for example, in his account of the origins of individualised empathetic characters.

It would therefore appear that what are probably vestigial remnants of the Calvinist introspective discipline helped to provide us for the first time in the history of fiction with a hero whose day-by-day mental and moral life is fully shared by the reader. (Watt, 79)

On the other hand, individual reason is valorised as an absolute break with the collective conventions and traditional constraints of feudalism: the historical coming to consciousness of the experiencing subject for whom capitalism and Protestantism are mere historical props:

... the novel’s usual means – formal realism – tends to exclude whatever is not vouched for by the senses: the jury does not allow divine intervention as an explanation of human actions. It is therefore likely that a measure of secularisation was an indispensable condition for the rise of the new genre. (Watt, 87)

Transposed to the literary register, this entirely familiar yet opaque oscillation between “history” and “consciousness” produces a characteristic slippage in the generic marker of the early novel, its “formal realism.” On one side, Watt tells us, this realism is purely formal, deploying conventions of autobiographical address, individualised characters and circumstantial description in order to achieve verisimilitude. But at the same time he claims that the novel’s “primary convention ... is a full and authentic report of human experience ... presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms” (Watt, 33). In other words, the primary convention of novelistic realism appears to be the transcendence of convention!

More generally we can say that Watt’s historicisation of the early novel is one in which specific technically organised literary and cultural competences are perpetually converted into the universal forms of experience and representation. Hence, because the rise of the novel
ostensibly marks the birth of the modern, secular individual subject, the role of specifically religious and "non-rational" elements in the novel's generic and occasional matrix is erased, or reduced to that of historical midwifery.

Watt comments that "In Defoe's novels ... although religious concerns are present they have no such priority of status: indeed the heritage of Puritanism is demonstrably too weak to supply a continuous and controlling pattern for the hero's experience" (89). But Gildon's partial grouping of Crusoe with popular works of practical divinity, together with his own high-church polemics against its religious and ethical bearing, show that religious concerns could indeed have priority under certain historical circumstances. The lesson here is that the generic demeanour and meaning of a book cannot be read off from a general model of its representational function, even one aligned with the movements of a general history. If we are going to map the generic contours of early novelistic writing we will need a cartography cleared of all debts to the subject of experience and its alleged historical evolution in "society." Second, is it possible that we might cancel these debts and achieve our object through a philosophical meditation on the purely formal or ludic conditions of genre? Jacques Derrida begins such a meditation by imagining groups of words, a discourse, hanging in a space in which the generic determination of meaning has not yet occurred: a space, as it were, in which no particular occasioning of discourse has interrupted and anchored its continuous and limitless flow? No question here, it seems, of founding discourse in representation or its subject. Leaving aside questions of the location of this indeterminate space and its general pertinence (or otherwise), let us simply note its effect on Derrida's analysis of the category of genre.

Supervening on the radically indeterminate space of possible significations, genre categories take on a systematically paradoxical appearance and function. Belonging to the "code" that carves up the manifold into significant pieces, genre categories are necessary for the intelligibility of literature. On the other hand, because nothing absolute motivates the process of classification — any particular "genre-fication" could, apparently, always have been otherwise — the intelligibility imposed is never final, always marks a new stage in the unfolding manifold.

Derrida comments:

Let us take the designation "novel" as an example. This should be marked in one way or another, even if it does not appear, as it often does in French and German texts, in the explicit form of a subtitled designation, and even if it proves deceptive or ironic. This designation is not novelistic; it does not, in whole or in part, take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts. Nor is it simply extraneous to the corpus. But this singular topos places within and without the work, along its
boundary, an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general, as to an identifiable class in general. It gathers together the corpus and, at the same time, in the same blinking of an eye, keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself. This axiom of non-closure or non-fulfillment enfolds within itself the condition for the possibility and the impossibility of taxonomy. This inclusion and this exclusion do not remain exterior to one another; they do not exclude each other. But neither are they immanent or identical to each other. They are neither one nor two. They form what I shall call the genre-clause, a clause stating at once the juridical utterance, the precedent-making designation and the law-text, but also the closure, the closing that excludes itself from what it includes (one could also speak of a floodgate [échec] of genre). The clause or floodgate of genre declassifies what it allows to be classed. It tolls the knell of genealogy or of genericity, which it however also brings forth to the light of day. Putting to death the very thing that it engenders, it cuts a strange figure; a formless form, it remains nearly invisible, it neither sees the day nor brings itself to light, but as soon as there is this blinking of an eye, this clause or this floodgate of genre, at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins. (Derrida, 212-13)

Staring this paragraph straight in the face, let us note that it transposes a figure of thought – first seen in “Russell’s paradox” – into what we might call the register of aesthetic incitement. The designation “novel” is not itself inside the world of the novel, for this would rob it of all referential power. On the other hand, neither is it outside the novel, for this, apparently, would make it “extraneous” and arbitrary in relation to the corpus it purports to designate. So, it appears that the term “novel” is both inside and outside the genre that it names; that it both frames and renders intelligible the generic space of the novel and, through its exteriority, opens this space to indeterminate mutations; and so on.

How adequate is this meditation to the problem of the genre designation of early novelistic writing? Well, we have already noted that the use of genre categories may indeed be associated with practices of reading and writing responsible for giving books a particular kind of intelligibility. This has less to do with any philosophical paradoxes surrounding their referential status, however, than with their practical and historical role in particular cultural apparatuses and milieux. The fact that genre categories form part of practices of reading and writing that help determine the intelligibility of kinds of books does not bestow on them the paradoxical mystique of being neither inside nor outside the genres they name. It simply means that the concepts of “inside” (world of meaning) and “outside” (structuring meta-language) have no place in
the cultural practices and milieux that determine the role of genre categories.

Consider the use of the term "novel," for example. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that it was retrospectively applied to books like Robinson Crusoe. We have already seen that this was not simply a case of the object existing before the name. The terms "novel" and "novella" existed but were applied to a range of books including those that we would now call fables and romances. Moreover, Gildon's attack on Defoe shows us that what we might call the modern cultural topography of the novel had not yet achieved even a relative stability. The sorts of "truth" novelistic writing was capable of, its ethical demeanour, audience address and rhetoric—"In short, its occasion(s)—had yet to reach a negotiated settlement.

Gildon's polemics indicate that this instability stems not from a virtual continuum of meaning containing all possible genres, but from a particular historical matrix supporting a handful of actual genres. We have seen that Defoe and Gildon are able to deploy the book according to norms derived from history (memoir), romance, travel-adventure and conscience literature. Moreover, we have begun to suspect that this instability in generic address, far from being a general symptom of the indeterminacy of meaning, was a local historical product of the emergence and rapid expansion of new kinds of occasion for literature, at the expense of old. We need to look elsewhere, therefore, for an account that will do justice to the generic instability of early novelistic writing without ignoring its historical positivity.

Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature goes some way towards providing the materials for such an account. Fowler avoids the temptation to look for a (positive or negative) essence for genres by drawing on Wittgenstein's discussion of "family resemblances." It will be recalled that Wittgenstein, during his discussion of language games, argues that games resemble one another not through possession of a common defining property but through the existence of a loose group of features that we may be prepared to call "game-like," under certain circumstances. Similarly, Fowler argues that literary genres are not characterised by a defining common form but by a "repertoire" of features which may be variously present in various representatives of the kind (54-74).

There is no doubt that by insisting on the historical mutability of such features, and of the generic repertoires themselves, Fowler provides us with important insights into the genealogy of genres. But it is equally the case that his method imposes some unnecessary limitations. The most important of these is discernible in a certain epistemological levelling carried out across the various elements of the generic repertoire. This repertoire includes such familiar constituents as presentational mode (narrative, dramatic, discursive), external structure, metrical structure, size, subject, characterisation, value-system and style-level. But it also
includes elements of an (arguably) different order, namely, occasion, mode of address and reader’s task. Are we correct in suggesting that, by including the occasioning of literature (and the closely related phenomena of address and task) inside the generic repertoire, Fowler is in fact insulating genre against powerful currents of historical variation?

Something like this seems to have occurred on the evidence of Fowler’s account of genre change. The paradigm case of change for Fowler is invested in individual authors who, in selecting from the repertoire in which they ply their craft, improvise on and innovate in the generic elements, often to imbue them with “expressive” value (156-64). But this model is clearly inappropriate for understanding (someone like) Defoe’s role in the emergence of novelistic writing. Defoe is anything but the virtuoso improvisor or deliberate innovator. More importantly, the historical, discursive and technological circumstances occasioning the genre-mix from which *Robinson Crusoe* was composed operate not at the level of the individual author but at that of the institutional ensemble or cultural milieu. By locating the occasioning of literature inside the genre repertoire Fowler insulates it from the sorts of shocks generated, for example, when a new practice of piety and a new communications technology transformed what counted as “literature.” These changes induced a cultural field or cultural technology supporting new types of author and audience and informed by new practices of composition and reading. It was only inside this field that it became possible for a writer like Defoe to launch what looks to us like a Romantic career across the existing genre boundaries.

III

In the briefest and most schematic of presentations the argument here is as follows: that the composition and dissemination of those books that the English would eventually call “novels” emerged from the unexpected overlapping of two broad sets of historical phenomena. The first of these was a set of “practices of the self” initially associated with the spread of Protestantism. The second was the establishment of a new communications technology – the printed book – together with the development of the book trade and the expanded distribution of print literacy. Let us take a brief note of each of these.

Weber described the new relation to the self characteristic of early modern Protestantism as a “worldly asceticism.” Deprived of the sacramental certitude of salvation, the Protestant churches and sects adopted practices of self monitoring and self control. Through these, the signs of grace might yet be detected, in the more attenuated yet more systematic form of the individual conscience. Needless to say, the Weber we are drawing on here is not Ian Watt’s chronicler of an epochal rationalisation and individualisation of existence. Weber himself is
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careful to point out that it is possible to “rationalise life from fundamentally different points of view and in very different directions” (77). The practices of worldly asceticism are in Weber’s view sui generis, structured as they are by specific ethical techniques for systematising the conduct of the individual by referring it to an inner principle of watchfulness and control. These may indeed be quite irrational from other perspectives.

But, more importantly for our concerns, these ethical techniques were also in part literate techniques. Perhaps it is too much to say that an individualised relation to the book replaced collective participation in the sacraments. Nonetheless, it is clear that the techniques through which individuals scoured and shaped the self for signs of grace often involved specific kinds of reading and writing. Weber himself mentions the ascetic-homiletic use of the Bible as a source of exemplary character types and narratives for the shaping of the life. More recent scholarship—in works by George Starr, J. P. Hunter, and Elizabeth Eisenstein—has outlined the role of diary keeping, spiritual autobiography, casuistry and providence literature in those techniques through which individuals worked their selves into an appropriately ethical shape. In noting these kinds of ethico-literacy practice we are noting an important part of the generic matrix of early novelistic writing.

These practices, we might say, made the world and the life available as objects of ethical interrogation and stylisation, and in so doing made them available for, and as, novelistic transcription. Let us further observe that what we are dealing with here is neither the historical coming to consciousness of the subject nor an arbitrary incision in the discursive continuum. Our attention is focused instead on the contingent historical distribution of a definite array of cultural techniques and abilities.

This distribution was vastly magnified, however, by the spread of printed books and the trade in them. In remarking that people have to be given reasons to read and write—the mere existence of books is not enough—and that these reasons take the form of socially organised incentives and purposes, Natalie Zemon Davis has recently issued a useful corrective to both humanist and determinist accounts of the spread of print and print literacy. Protestant worldly asceticism gave larger sectors of the population a reason to read and write because, as we have noted, the techniques of this ethos were themselves partly literate. At the same time, Elizabeth Eisenstein reminds us that print and the book trade provided the cultural technology through which the new ethic could address a widely dispersed and often individualised “congregation” (Eisenstein, 129, 137).

Consider, in this regard, the composition of Defoe’s The Storm. Published in July 1704, some nine months after the catastrophic events it records, The Storm was part-written, and part-compiled by Defoe, using “eye-witness” accounts (mainly from the minor clergy) which had been
solicited through advertisements placed in the *London Gazette*. The writing and dissemination of the book is thus a good indication of the emergence of new literate artefacts under the combined pressure of Protestant literacy and the new communications network provided by print and the book trade. *The Storm* shows how new conditions of authorship and dissemination blurred old genre divisions and audience typologies.

On the one hand, the book exploits the techniques and conventions of factual and historical writing, particularly in its citation of written accounts and its appeal to signed letters as “authorities” testifying to the authenticity of the descriptions. On the other, the descriptions are full of apocalyptic imagery, and appeal to the providential tradition and providence books; that is, to the ability and propensity to decipher the hand of God in worldly events. Cut loose from their generic moorings in localised audience types—forced by the book-trade to negotiate a new and polyglot audience network—history and providential allegory form an unfamiliar hybrid. In this new relation it is just as easy for the writing of “factual” history to simulate the functions of providential allegory (as in *The Storm*) as it is for a providential “fiction” to simulate the “true history of fact” (*Robinson Crusoe, A Journal of the Plague Year*). Such exchanges typify the kind of reading and writing that we know as novelistic.

IV

Protestant worldly asceticism and the expanded dissemination of printed books provided new occasions for specific kinds of reading and writing. Moreover, these new occasions did not derive from authorial innovation in a generic repertoire but from the unplanned distribution of new ethico-literary techniques and cultural abilities: a distribution moving at a tangent to the high-Augustan genre system and its supporting educational and cultural milieux.

In the quasi-generic marketing channels of the eighteenth-century book trade—divided into categories of useful works, works of practical divinity and devotion, and romances and adventures—we can recognise the broad outline of the novel’s occasioning. On the one hand, the subgeneric matrix of worldly asceticism—autobiography, casuistry, conduct books and providence literature—provided the compositional forms in which writers like Defoe could address their “selves” and simultaneously engage the dispersed and uneven cultural abilities of an expanded audience. On the other, in moving down the channels of the book trade, through which they addressed this polyglot audience network, the ethical species met and entered into hybrid relations with other literary kinds: with travel literature, “history,” folk tales, adventure stories, criminal biography and so on.
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Is it too much to say that it was from such hybrid relations that those books later known as “novels” emerged? Is it possible to suggest that the novel is not exactly a genre – whether anchored in experience or carved out of the discursive continuum – but is the name for a hybrid occasional field? Is it a field formed when certain ethico-literary techniques of the self engaged with the uneven cultural abilities organised by a new communications technology, beginning a process of conditioned mutation whose end is not yet in sight? These at least are speculations that seem to me to be productive of further discussion and research.

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9 Extracts from which can be found in L. A. Curtis, ed., The Versatile Defoe (London: George Prior, 1979), 286-99.