John Richetti, *The Life of Daniel Defoe*


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Contrary to widely promulgated propaganda in Japan on the decline of literature and literary study, Anglo-American eighteenth-century English studies seem still to expand, as happened in 'the expansion of literary production in the early eighteenth century' (70), where Defoe was the main propagandist in forming public opinion. What may be lacking today to stimulate public interest in literature is a figure like Defoe, but were I to suggest one now, it would be none other than John Richetti himself.

It is no exaggeration to say that studies of eighteenth-century English literature, especially that of Daniel Defoe, pivot on John Richetti, who is the editor of *Cambridge History of English Literature 1660-1780* (2005). His biography of Defoe is rightly seen as the culmination of previously published works on Defoe, among which stand out Paula Backscheider's *Daniel Defoe: His Life* (1989) and Maximillian Novak's *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions* (2001).

Richetti's *Defoe* is not only the most scholarly and reliable biography of Daniel Defoe, but an unprecedentedly comprehensive criticism of almost all of Defoe's major works. This might sound strange to scholars of major novelists, but Defoe is a noteworthy exception to the other three eighteenth-century English novelists (Richardson, Fielding and Sterne) Ian Watt canonized in his *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), in that Defoe is the only one to whom this kind of comprehensive study has not been applied. What made such comprehensive biography possible is P.N.Furbank and W. R. Owens's epoch-making *The Canonisation of Daniel Defoe* (1988), which once and for all subverted previous bibliographies of Defoe, dramatically reducing the number of works attributed to him. It
was really a 'decanonization' of Defoe criticism, at which some scholars including Novak still cast doubt. Richetti, distinguished at the University of Pennsylvania, avowedly respects Furbank and Owens's *A Critical Bibliography of Daniel Defoe* (1998), based on the idea of *Canonisation*. I myself respect Richetti's judicious decision to align himself with Furbank and Owens. Furbank and Owens, who at first seemed to destabilize the eighteenth-century academics, has in fact activated the critical debate centering on Defoe and succeeded in giving enormous impetus to it.

The Owens and Furbank edition of all of Defoe's works is now to be completed for the first time in history, awaiting only the advent of *The Novels of Daniel Defoe*. The project of the Works, which is also unprecedented and comprehensive, started in 2000 with the series of *The Political and Economic Writings of Daniel Defoe* and is going to finish in 2008 with the final series of *The Novels of Daniel Defoe Part II*.

Richetti's readings are truly original independently of the new textual canon established by Owens and Furbank. He points out that what is missing in some introductions of the Works is the exploration of 'the rhetorical textures and strategies' (38). This book is a condensation of decades of accumulated scholarship, which defies summarization. All I can do is to discuss a few of the striking traits. For example, Richetti succinctly describes Defoe's talent as 'mimicking the language of his adversaries' and 'enjoying' himself, which is in some intricate way related to his talent of 'self-dramatization' in his satirical writings such as *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, where Defoe is 'not supposing all the Dissenters in England should be hanged or banished' (emphasis added). Even in such a work very likely to provoke people, leading eventually to his being imprisoned and pilloried, Defoe was 'in this dangerous game...enjoying an irony that only he or a very attentive reader of his previous tracts could see clearly' (46). During his development as a writer, Defoe sticks to his improbable talent of enjoying himself in his rhetoric and strategies.

Defoe, after being freed from Newgate prison by Robert Harley, the Speaker of the House of Commons, began to work as his secret agent, a period which lasted from the end of 1703 until Harley's fall from power in 1714. As a newly assumed persona in support of government, it is well known that Defoe continued tirelessly writing the *Review*. The publishing of a modern scholarly edition of this is also under way due to conclude in 2011, which will comprise of nine volumes (each with two parts), the total pages amounting to as many as 7,520, where any scholar fears to tread. But of course any biographers of Defoe are not allowed to divert, nor is Richetti. Richetti points out that Defoe, in contrast to the days when he was writing early satirical works, is in the *Review* 'speaking in propria persona'.
(84) Richetti, arguing that 'the main body of the Review seems aimed at a reasonably well informed and sophisticated audience that Habermas might recognize as the public sphere,' (88) but that, 'especially during the early years of the periodical, Defoe is ambivalent about this audience, hectoring and lecturing them unmercifully for their misconceptions and ignorance about foreign affairs,' shows a reserved attitude toward the idea of the 'bourgeois public sphere' proposed by the German political philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and insists that 'much of the Review is devoted to the raucous attack and counter-attack of those political polemics in which the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere is deeply compromised' (85). This is one of the instances where Richetti is somewhat skeptic about contemporary theories, though we should make much of the fact that he encompasses most recent scholarly trends in his Cambridge History of English Literature 1660-1780, and radically challenges the old-fashioned predominantly male Oxbridge dons who wrote the last Cambridge History of English Literature (1906-1917). This last invited criticism from Prof. Claude Rawson, who complains that '[t]he volume suffers somewhat from its flaccid programmatic pieties, some of them more honoured in the breach than the observance (March 8, 2006 TLS'). Though the two are not on antagonistic terms, given the information that Rawson himself commissioned Richetti to write a biography of Defoe (x), I want to put more emphasis on Richetti's challenge to the canon rather than lamenting its disruption.

Richetti seems to share Defoe's enjoyment in analyzing his writings as a secret agent in Scotland employed by Harley with a view to bringing the Act of Union of England and Scotland to a conclusion, and says that '[h]e clearly enjoyed playing the secret agent' (114). I agree with Richetti on this point because we well know from his fictional works that Defoe delights 'in disguise and concealment'. In discussing one of Defoe's best novels, Moll Flanders, Richetti himself says that Defoe 'had a compulsion to write, a manifest delight in articulation'. This is where Moll is about to finish her story, when she hesitates but anyway 'go[es] on with her Relation'. Defoe knows that Moll should at this point stop her story, but cannot do that simply because he clearly delights in continuing.

As Moll continues her story, Defoe cannot stop his Robinson Crusoe story and goes on with the relation of The Farther Adventures. The time has now come to reconsider The Farther Adventures (1720) and A New Voyage Round the World (1724) in connection with Defoe's commitment to the South Sea and 'southeast Asia and China,' which is exactly what Richetti is doing in this book. Another example is Robert Markley's The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730 (2006), which adjusts its focus on the same two works of Defoe from a new viewpoint of Far Eastern Imagination. It may be inappropriate to mention Richetti and Markley in one breath, because the latter 'challenge(s) the tendencies
within eighteenth-century studies to write the histories of modernity, identity, the rise of the novel, and the rise of financial capitalism in mutually reinforcing terms’ (Markley 20), whereas the former steadfastly insists that ‘the idea that identity is developed in experience rather than chosen by an act of moral will or somehow imposed by social status and destiny is a revolutionary idea, an Enlightenment notion’ (196). Backscheider, in her review of The Life of Daniel Defoe rather critically remarks that ‘Richetti ignores the recent outpouring of good post-colonial criticism’ (Eighteenth-Century Studies 40/1, 119-20). Richetti does ignore post-colonial criticism, but seemingly does so from a totally different motive from that which qualifies his approval of Habermas. This book The Life of Daniel Defoe is dedicated to ‘the memory of [his] dear friend, Edward Said’ (xi), which symbolically suggests that Richetti does not denigrate post-colonial studies. I may indeed gather that he is living too post-colonial a situation to become superficially involved. However, his sensibility to post-colonial problems is none the less deep.

In addition to his insightful dealings with the two works, he proceeds to position Defoe in a broad perspective of the history of English novel. Paraphrasing Martin Green’s Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire (1980), he posits that ‘the main tradition of the English novel after Defoe that begins in the 1740s disdains adventure and action in exotic, non-European locales, aggressively preferring as its serious narrative subjects the domestic world of courtship and marriage’ (216-7). He suggests that English novels’ homeward tendency occurs in allergic response to Crusoe’s centrifugal wanderings. Richetti’s following statement sheds an illuminating light on the history of English novel. ‘Crusoe’s agonizing over abandoning domesticity for global wandering is a prescient allegory of the English novel’s eventual (and in fact pretty rapid) rejection of adventure for domesticity, for marriage and money at home’ (217).

From quite different perspective, Richetti touches this problem again later in this book dealing with Defoe’s last moral book, Conjugal Lewdness (1727), which is ‘a polemic against marrying for money’ (352). Richetti urges us not to forget that the themes treated here ‘are the center of the many courtship novels to come after his death in the 1740s and 1750s.’ The humanistic episodes depicted in the work ‘make one think that if Defoe had lived longer he might well have become a sentimental novelist of the first rank in the next two decades’ (353). No scholar before Richetti dared to apply the concept of sentimental to the ‘realistic’ Defoe, but if we remember the stories and episodes Defoe tactfully weaves into the apparently matter-of-fact works like A Journal of the Plague Year, we are persuaded. The courtship novels and sentimental novels, in this respect, were propelled by, or began in sympathetic response to, their predecessor Daniel Defoe. This is truly a rewriting of the history of English novel.
Richetti’s ambitious wrestling with eighteenth-century issues set him apart from the self-contented conservative scholars targeted for criticism. No post-colonial theorist criticizes him as an enthusiastic panegyrist of Anglo-American dominance, because, even when Richetti admires *A Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-6) as ‘the triumphant culmination of his writing career, since in the end it delivers a vision of Britain as a national and economic entity…that offers a triumphant prophecy of the world domination’ (324), he emphasizes that the enthusiasm for British modernity is ‘tempered, surprisingly enough, by a classical, elegiac sense of mutability, of the grand, natural rhythms of nature and empire’ (328). In other words, Richetti seems to suggest that ‘the most flourishing and opulent Country in the World’ is undermined, or more correctly, endorsed by some instability. The example submitted here is the scandal of the South Sea Bubble (1720), which ruined some families in Suffolk County, whose fine Parks and new-built Palaces are fallen under Forfeitures and Alienations by the Misfortunes of the Times, and by the Ruin of their Masters Fortunes in that *South-Sea Deluge*’ (329). Even on the peaceable countryside of England dotted with country houses encroaches the ‘instability of commercial fortunes’ (330). Richetti, as well as Defoe, seems to be ‘at least occasionally the moralist and the satirist as much as he is the panegyrist’ (331).

When the narrator of *A Tour* tends to be controversial, Richetti says that ‘Defoe’s old polemical instincts come back’ (329). ‘Old Defoe’, mentioned several times in this work, means the Defoe before Harley’s fall from power 1714. It is a difficult task for a biographer of Defoe to assess his political activities after the ‘old Defoe’ retires. This is due to the fact that Defoe, no more responsible as a governmental voice for Harley, ‘enjoyed’ ‘[t]rue anonymity’ ‘working for Mist and Applebee’. To put it plainly, we can’t be sure exactly what Defoe wrote for these journals. The easy explanation of Defoe’s later career was that ‘with the fall of the Tories in 1714 [Defoe] had retired from political controversy, and it was this shift that we owed the great narrative works that began a few years later with *Robinson Crusoe*. Actually Defoe ‘stages his departure from the scene’ in *An Appeal to Honour & Justice*, published in 1715. But Richetti says that ‘[t]his may just have been a feint, since we know that Defoe was as busy as he had ever been in 1715’ (341). He is acute in pointing out Defoe’s shift of quality as a journalist. He is not contented just saying it is ‘a real pity that we can’t be sure exactly what Defoe wrote’, but interestingly argues that true anonymity ‘may just have given Defoe the kind of imaginative freedom he did not have as a writer who was caught up in his own self-dramatization’ (344). It is impressive indeed to know that Defoe is finally liberated from his ‘self-dramatization’.
As Richetti says, '[i]t is always rash to generalize about Defoe' (167), and his argument is far from being general. But, he is explicit in offering his own opinions, and never wavers before the 'elusive Daniel Defoe'. His subtle argumentation is at the leading-edge, while at the same time he is very kind to students in letting them know the meanings of such technical terms as 'occasional conformity' (21), 'pillory' (23), or 'Pretender' (342). In addition to being 'informative' and 'durable', this book, in strict accordance with the general objective of Blackwell Critical Biographies (this biography is one of the series), describes Daniel Defoe as a person who 'lived in particular times and places', and never loses hold of the real historical Defoe.

Works Cited

荻野昌利著『歴史を＜読む＞——ヴィクトリア朝の思想と文化』


2002年3月6日荻野昌利教授は、長年勤めた南山大学を退職するに当たり、「歴史に学ぶ——ヴィクトリア朝イギリスと現代日本」と題して、最終講義を行った。