

THE FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY : THE ART OF NON-FICTION IN MOLL FLANDERS

Kieran Mor e
Doğuş University

Abstract: This article deals with how Daniel Defoe, the pioneering 18th century novelist, used the emerging genre of autobiography as a socially acceptable springboard for his novel Moll Flanders. At this stage the novel was in its infancy and lacked social and literary credibility. Therefore, Defoe used the form and structure of autobiography as a basis for his fiction, while he also raised issues critical to autobiography, such as questions of objectivity and self-knowledge. In my article I first discuss the emergence of the autobiographical genre, and then examine the text of his novel Moll Flanders revealing how Defoe uses the genre to create a complex and ambiguous psychological profile of Moll, while simultaneously raising issues of self-knowledge and objectivity central to the consideration of autobiography.

Key words: *Defoe, Moll Flanders, autobiography, novel, objectivity.*

Özet: Bu makale 18. Yüzyılın öncü yazarlarından Daniel Defoe'nun o dönemde yeni bir tür olan otobiyografiyi, romanlarını kurgularken nasıl bir basamak olarak kullandığını açıklamaktadır. Bu dönemde roman hem sosyal hem de edebi açıdan henüz bebeklik döneminde olduğu için Defoe bir yandan otobiyografiyi nesnellik ve kendini tanıma açısından eleştirirken bir yandan da onu kurmacasının temeli olarak kullanmıştır. Makalede önce bir tür olarak otobiyografinin ortaya çıkışı daha sonra yazarın Moll Flanders adlı eserinin baş kahramanı olan Moll'un karmaşık ve belirsizliklerle dolu psikolojik yapısını oluşturmak için romanın metnini nasıl kullandığı incelenmiştir. Aynı zamanda Defoe'nun kendini tanıma ve nesneliği otobiyografinin merkezi olarak ele alan düşüncelerine yer verilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Defoe, Moll Flanders, otobiyografi, roman, nesnellik.*

Daniel Defoe is widely considered to be the first English novelist. Like Defoe's first novel, Robinson Crusoe (1719), his latter work, Moll Flanders (1722), was published as a 'private history', or what we would today call an autobiography. Defoe claimed only to be an editor who had helped to shape Moll's account of her life into a publishable work. To a modern reader Defoe's adamant protestation in the preface that the work before them is a true story seems peculiar. Rather than wishing to take credit for the artistry of his fiction he fervently denies the imaginative nature of his work. To understand his reticence in acknowledging the work as a piece of imaginative fiction one needs to understand that the novel as we now recognize it did not exist at this time. All writers use an inherited set of structures and conventions when they write within a particular established genre. But Defoe was a pioneer of the novel and the accepted imaginative form of the novel we take for granted today had no precedence, and no credibility in his time. Therefore, Defoe was forced into borrowing from other genres in order to create a new fictional form. Oddly enough, he did not borrow primarily from other fictional genres, but rather used a genre of non-fiction as the basis for his imaginative work. Defoe used the structure and form of autobiography in order to fictionally mimic a life story of surprising psychological complexity.

Every autobiography is a retrospective attempt to find meaning and pattern in the author's life. When examining past events the author interpretively reshapes them to coincide with the patterns of meaning which they desire to see in their lives. In other words the autobiographer reinvents the events of their life in order to find meaning which reaffirms the value of their life. The structure of autobiography thereby involves a separation of the event from the interpretation of the event. There are in effect two central characters in an autobiography; that of the person who experienced the event as it happened, and the older self retelling and reinterpreting the events later. Defoe uses the inherent dualistic nature of autobiography to artistically create Moll's state of psychological ambiguity. He in fact mimics the techniques and traits of autobiography to hint at incongruencies between Moll's youthful behaviours, and the motives which she subsequently attributes to them, and thereby reveals her self-delusion. In order to demonstrate this I will examine how cultural influences determined the form and content of diaries and autobiographies which Defoe in turn used as the springboard for his fiction. I will then proceed to explore how Defoe uses the form of autobiography to create a psychologically convincing profile of Moll, while raising issues relevant to this new genre.

One crucial cultural factor that influenced both the development of autobiography as a form, and Daniel Defoe's use of it, was that of religion. Since the reign of Henry VIII England had been a protestant land, although several attempts by the monarchs of the House of Stuart were made to reconvert it to Catholicism, including the armed uprisings in 1690 and 1745. However, generally speaking Protestantism was firmly entrenched in England by the time of William of Orange. Protestantism covered a whole range of sects from the official National (established) Anglican Church to small obscure cults. Those individuals who did not wish to belong to the Anglican Church were known as dissenters; and of these many belonged to the group that we refer to as Puritans. The word Puritan in the modern world conjures up pictures of

austere, extremely religious, black clad men and women, and has become a byword for a severe code of morality and conduct. This is not an all together inaccurate stereotypical description. The Puritans in the time of Elizabeth I were not satisfied with the reformation of the English Church begun under Henry VIII. They wished to rid the Church of any connection with the taint of Catholic ritual or hierarchy. They followed the precepts of the French reformer John Calvin which called for austerity and embodied a distrust of embellishment. Unlike Catholic Churches which were highly decorated, the Calvinistic-Puritan Church was unadorned. In the Calvinist Church there were no organs, no statues or crucifixes, nothing that might lead to what they saw as superstition (Adams, 1983: 145), as opposed to a true religious experience with God. The Puritan fetish for plainness and simplicity arose out of their fervent faith from which they did not wish to be distracted by worldly considerations. Their emphasis on austerity and truth led them to distrust any form of imaginative fiction, which since it was not literally true was seen as an outright lie. As the Puritans grew in influence they attempted to exert that influence to do away with imaginative literature. They especially mistrusted the theatre which they saw as actively immoral and detrimental to the salvation of the soul. When civil war broke out the Puritans were highly represented on the Parliamentary side. The victory of the Parliamentarians meant victory for Puritan values. With political power to back them up they closed the theatres during the Commonwealth Period (1649-1660). Eventually the monarchy was restored to England in 1660, and with it the Anglican Church as the official Church. As the Puritans had repressed the Anglicans during the Commonwealth, so after the Restoration were the Puritans themselves repressed by the Anglicans. However with the coming of William of Orange in Defoe's young adult life repression of dissenters decreased. The significance of these events to my argument lies in the extent to which Puritan thought still permeated English society, and the very specific fact that Daniel Defoe was a dissenter; that is a Puritan.

Given his dissenting roots it is surprising that Defoe wrote fiction at all. However although Puritans on the whole distrusted fiction there were exceptions where creative talent combined with Puritan religious practise. John Milton combined literary genius with a deeply religious Puritan devotion. However, Puritan thought had so entrenched itself in popular sentiment that in Defoe's day it was essential for any piece of writing, fiction or non-fiction, to morally justify itself. As Ronald Paulson has remarked, the description of everyday life for its own sake was considered frivolous (qtd. in Probyn, 1987: 16). It was the duty of a writer to edify and morally instruct the reader; appreciation of literature for the sheer experience of verisimilitude and vicarious enjoyment of a text was viewed with deep suspicion. Thus Puritan thought, and protestant thought in general, created an atmosphere in which literature for its own sake was not as yet accepted. Authors had to morally justify their work

One form of writing which was not only accepted, but actually encouraged by Puritan religious practise was that of the personal diary. The need for Puritans to record the self extensively and analytically comes from Calvinistic doctrine (Hunter, 1990: 304). Dissenters were encouraged to record their life experiences and

examine them in an attempt to find meaningful patterns. One Puritan publication exhorted believers to "Call your selves every Night to a strict account for the actions of the past day: ask your selves what you have been doing?...In a word, what progress you have made Heaven-wards?" (qtd. in Hunter, 1990: 305). Diaries proliferated, and with them ideas about self-hood, personality, and subjectivity. They also fostered a cultural climate which accepted self-revelation of personal details, which before had been kept strictly in the private domain (Hunter, 1990: 303).

Although diaries were initially the private records of clergymen or lay followers, in the early 18th century moralists decided that the 'lives' of others could provide useful moral examples to help people, in their modern urban lives, to deal with problems which were becoming increasingly complex. Therefore a great many spiritual biographies were published which used the diaries and private documents of clergymen or pious laymen. These were third-person accounts of the lives of persons already dead. However the common publication of spiritual biographies led to a development towards autobiography when people began to reshape their own diaries into spiritual autobiographies for their own use, or for private circulation among friends or members of their congregation. Some few people went a stage further when they published their own spiritual autobiographies in their life time. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* (1666) is such an example (Hunter, 1990: 313-315).

Bunyan's work is unusual not only for it being published within his life time, but also for the fact that it was explicitly written by its author for publication. Most spiritual autobiographies tended to involve an editing or reworking of one's diary into a patterned narrative account (Hunter, 1990: 319). Although published spiritual autobiographies were few, Hunter suggests that there is significant evidence that the unpublished circulation of such autobiographical materials played a significant role in the rise of the autobiography long before autobiographies were published in significant numbers (Hunter, 1990: 319). The increasing commonness of circulating spiritual autobiographies meant that cultural attitudes about privacy and propriety began to soften, so long as the personal history could be used to edifying effect (Hunter, 1990: 316). Although the number of published autobiographies of any type was small until the middle of the 18th century, English society had already accepted spiritual autobiography as an acceptable and respectable genre of writing for some time.

Thus Defoe created his novels within the context of a respectable non-fiction genre. But Moll Flanders is not a typical spiritual autobiography. Defoe intentionally makes his choice of protagonist ironic, in that he uses a person of dubious moral character in a spiritual autobiography to illustrate the dualism of autobiography, and thereby challenge the use of the genre. Rather than setting forth the life of some worthy clergyman for emulation Defoe presents the life of a lawless, morally bankrupt woman who retells her life story after she has repented of her sins. Ostensibly the purpose is the same as any spiritual autobiography: to show the virtues of goodness and the blackness of sin, and thereby provide a model of behaviour for the reader. However, the moral lessons in Moll Flanders are taught negatively rather than positively, by having the elder Moll reflect on her wicked youth and condemn it. I

believe that Defoe uses the character of Moll in an attempt to reveal an inherent weakness of autobiography. This weakness results from the discrepancy between the emotions and thoughts actually experienced at the important moments in our life, and the subsequent reinterpretation of these events which reshapes and distorts them, thereby hindering self-knowledge and true introspection. Any autobiography involves two stages of thought and feeling. The immediate emotions and thoughts associated with the event, and the retrospective reinterpretation of those events in an attempt to find patterns and meaning as in the Puritan tradition. There will always be a difference between the feelings and motivations of an individual at the moment they do something, and the meaning which they later attribute to it in recollection. In the case of some austere Puritan the difference may be difficult to spot because of their uniform behaviour, but there will always be one. In Moll's case her deeds are so out of joint with her later remembrances of them that it is possible to spot where the elder Moll has rewritten her history in order for it to fit into the pattern of sin and repentance which gives her life meaning and respectability in her old age. Because of these discrepancies we come to suspect that Moll's claim to repentance is hollow, that her attempt to claim moral and social respectability is merely a retrospectively applied framework of values which she imposes on her life, but which is totally unconvincing given her unchanged immoral behaviour at the end of the novel. Defoe thereby manages to reveal the self-deluding psychological nature of his protagonist, while also pointing out the possible pitfalls of the autobiographical genre when it comes to issues regarding the objectivity and self-knowledge of the writer.

As I have noted Moll Flanders is the obverse of a usual spiritual autobiography. Rather than holding up a religious and pious life for imitation it relates the life of a poor orphan who uses her body, and her ability to manipulate other people, to earn a living. Throughout her life Moll sells her body, steals and cheats people only to eventually 'repent' of her evil ways when she has acquired enough ill-gotten money to live comfortably. However material comfort is not enough, all her life Moll has craved social respectability. Therefore she writes her own spiritual autobiography in order to demonstrate her repentant state by condemning her former behaviour. Defoe states in the preface the moral purpose of the book, which is to show the horrible consequences of sin; he says "there is not a wicked action in any part of it, but is first rendered unhappy and unfortunate" (Defoe, 1973: 5). However, although the stated purpose of the novel is to show the dire consequences of an evil life, Moll ends up rather comfortably off, and we are left with a nagging suspicion that her repentance is in fact a cover which even Moll has convinced herself to believe in in hindsight. Defoe's unstated intention is to make us question whether the retrospective review of her life derives from a truly authentic repentance, or is rather an artificial attempt to impose Christian order and meaning on her life. By examining how Moll describes her past we can determine her post-repentance state of mind.

One of Moll's first misadventures takes place when she is living as a guest in a gentlewoman's family. One of the lady's sons seduces Moll with words and gold. The recollection of the event is not that of a young girl, but that of the seventy-year old, extremely sexually experienced penitent, whom years of cold calculating and self-degradation have hardened. She comments upon an opportunity which she lost

with her seducer "I might have made my own terms with him; and if I had not capitulated for an immediate marriage, I might for a maintenance till marriage, and might have had what I would; for he was already rich to excess" (Defoe, 1973: 21). Her recollection is not concerned with the sinfulness of her deed, but with a lost financial opportunity in not dealing more adroitly with her lover. Of course Moll tacks on a moral to the story saying "Thus I gave up myself to a readiness of being ruined without the least concern, and am a fair memento to all young women, whose vanity prevails over their virtue" (Defoe, 1973: 21). Moll's real regret is clearly in hindsight the loss of an opportunity of manipulating the man into a marriage which would have been financially rewarding for her. This hardly bespeaks a penitent heart, rather it clearly demonstrates that Moll's character has not changed, that she is still driven by greed and that her claim to penitence is quite hollow.

The younger Moll is not as skilled a bargainer as her older counterpart, but she does sell her chastity for a sum of one-hundred pounds that her lover gives her. At this point we must begin to mistrust Moll's retrospective remarks. When the brother is trying to seduce her he makes various promises of marriage and money in order to bed her, but Moll says she didn't realize what his aim was with these promises "I poor fool did not understand the drift of (what he was saying), but acted as if there was no such thing as any kind of love but that which tended to matrimony". She again says "I did indeed cast sometimes with myself what my young Master aim'd at" (Defoe, 1973: 20-21). However when he drops the hundred pounds into her lap she immediately understands what he is getting at "so putting the purse into my bosom, I made no more resistance to him, but let him do just what he pleas'd" (Defoe, 1973: 24). It is very hard to believe that Moll didn't understand what his desire was at first, and had a sudden revelation when she saw the money. It is far more likely that she was even at this young age trying to calculate what she could get out of him by playing the innocent virgin. The old Moll is reticent to reveal the cool machinations of her younger self; she would prefer her fall from grace to be seen as a momentary failing which precipitated a downward moral spiral. However if the reader realizes her fore-knowledge and dissembling in her dealings even at this early stage, she cannot maintain this idea of lost virtue. Her virtue was gone the moment she began to play the innocent in order to hold out for more money. This is a good example of how Defoe sets up inconsistencies in Moll's narrative to reveal the discrepancies between Moll's action and the motives she later attributes to herself.

Another instance when we must doubt the veracity of Moll's narrative comes soon after the loss of her 'virtue'. The son of the lady who has bedded Moll begins to grow weary of her, and tries to pass her on to his younger brother who is attracted to Moll, and is unaware of his brother's relationship with her. Moll opposes this and attempts to keep the man she has, but she soon realizes this is not possible. She still tells the elder brother "That I could never be persuaded to love one brother and marry another" (Defoe, 1973: 40), but then agrees to marry the younger brother upon condition that his parents will approve of the marriage. Moll asserts that this was not a serious acceptance of his proposal, rather that she only did it to put the younger son off because she was sure that his parents would never allow a gentleman of his wealth and status to marry a dowerless beggar. However the very act of being thus

compliant to the parent's wishes endears her to them, and they agree to the marriage. Moll states "All this was dreadful to me, for the mother began to yield" (Defoe, 1973: 43), however if she really had no intent to marry the younger brother why did she give him this proviso? Given the evidence of her calculating nature thus far it is far more realistic to assume that Moll was afraid of losing the elder brother, and therefore decided to hedge her bets with the younger brother, while appearing to stay loyal to the elder so as to make him stay with her. But the elder Moll does not admit this; she asserts that she was forced into it by a number of circumstances, when it is more likely that she was coldly and shrewdly weighing her alternatives. Here again we must doubt the truth of the old Moll's recollections. We should ask ourselves if she is even being honest with herself?

Through reinventing her history Moll tries to soften or hide the more ruthlessly calculating aspects of her character (even from herself). She also uses another technique of blaming other people in her moralizing way, thereby deflecting blame from herself while taking the moral highground of the penitent. One such example takes place when Moll has begun to steal for a living. She sees a little girl with a valuable necklace and lures her into an alley "Here, I say, the Devil put me upon killing the child in the dark alley, that it might not cry..." (151). Moll does not kill the child, but she does attempt to cast blame on the child's parents "I only said to my self, I had given the parents a just reproof for their negligence in leaving the poor little lamb to come home by it self, and it would teach them to take more care of it another time" (152). As Clive Probyn remarks, this is "...imputing motives and suppressing emotional feelings in retrospect which she did not experience at the time..." (Probyn, 1987: 40). Surely these were not Moll's thoughts when she lured the girl into the alley. She skips quickly over her contemplation of murder; her immediate impressions at the time are glossed over, while she justifies herself by casting blame on others. One wonders how long it took Moll to come up with this particular rationalization.

I will use one final example of incongruity in Moll's narrative to illustrate my point. After Moll is convicted of theft and sent to Virginia as a convict she meets a son from one of her many previous marriages. Although she has been transported as a convict Moll manages to buy her freedom due to the proceeds from her years of thieving. She is therefore comfortably well off at this point, and with financial security repentance has also come. However, despite her repentance she is not honest with her son. She gives him a gold watch "I made him one present...and that was one of the gold watches, of which I mention'd above, that I had two in my chest...I told him, I had nothing of any value to bestow but that, and I desir'd he now and then kiss it for my sake: I did not indeed tell him that I had stolen it from a gentlewoman's side..." (Defoe, 1973: 264). Moll is in fact quite rich, but she lies to her son about her financial status and her marital status (she has married but doesn't want the son to know). In this case Moll doesn't even bother attempting to hide her lying to the reader. This can only mean that she is so inured to manipulating, lying, and cheating that she does not see anything shocking in her behaviour, even though she has claimed to repent of her earlier sins. How can she claim to be morally penitent for her earlier deeds when she continues to act as dishonestly as she has done all her

life? The disparity between Moll's claim to repentance and her unchanged moral behaviour forcibly demonstrates that dichotomy of feeling and thought which is innate in all autobiography.

In the course of my article I have explained how Defoe used the contemporary genre of the autobiography to create a piece of fiction that achieves remarkable psychological realism by imitating the innate dualism of autobiography. The discrepancy between the self that experienced an event, and the self that later recorded it is revealed in Defoe's work. Moll's recollection of her life is shown to be influenced by her claim to have repented for her sins. Moll's desire to fit into the socially respectable role of a penitent Christian results in her reshaping past events in her life to fit into the pattern of sinner turned penitent. However this pattern which Moll wishes to see in her life is shown to be an artificial construct. I have demonstrated how Defoe reveals Moll's self-delusion by drawing the attention of the readers to incongruities between Moll's actions, and her subsequent recollection of them. In Moll Flanders Defoe masterly imitates autobiography in a creative fiction that raises issues of self-knowledge, and brings into question the reliability of the autobiographical perspective.

WORKS CITED

- ADAMS, Robert M. (1983). *The Land and Literature of England*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- DEFOE, Daniel. (1973). *Moll Flanders*. 1722. Ed. Edward Kelley. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- HUNTER, J. Paul. (1990). *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century Fiction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- PROBYN, Clive, T. (1987). *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1789*. London: Longman Group Limited.