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MOLL FLANDERS: THE COHESION
OF THE PICARESQUE

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Moll Flanders' narrative structure has often been regarded as lacking a coherent plan,¹ the novel has been considered a patchwork of loose episodes held together by the mere fact that they share the same protagonist. "Defoe paid little attention to the internal consistency of the story", contends Watt,² and on the same page the critic adds "Defoe did not plan [*Moll Flanders*] like a coherent whole, but worked piece-meal, very rapidly and without any subsequent revision".

Such a harsh statement is supported mainly by the consideration that in the novel several hints can be found to episodes that are never described. This is a fact, but, a certain amount of carelessness for details taken for granted, I would like to suggest how Defoe had probably a general plan in his mind, when he began to work at *Moll Flanders*. Although a search for a self contained structure in the plot itself would lead to nothing, I would like to suggest that a sort of organization can be found in the relationship between characters and plot.

In the development of the plot there are at least eighteen main episodes, that is eighteen diegetic nodal points, which could make up as many chapters, if the novel had this form. These points may be

¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Los Angeles, 1957, p. 69.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

grouped into three parts: I Part: Preface, birth of Moll, gypsies and "motherly nurse", Colchester Family, seduction by the elder brother, marriage with Robin, marriage with the tradesman who escapes, life with the widow and search for a husband for her friend, marriage with her own brother, journey back from Virginia and Mistress in Bath, (then the sequential pattern becomes slightly more complicated) banker, Jemmy, Mother Midnight & banker. II Part: Life as a thief, prostitution, arrest; III Part Newgate, journey, arrival in Virginia & first meeting with her son, settlement in Virginia, journey back to England.

Even if some of these episodes might be divided in a different way, this scheme shows how Jemmy embodies a central position in the narrative economy. Such a peculiar position is stressed by two extraordinary facts, namely: Jemmy's return when he hears Moll's voice twelve miles away, and Jemmy's apparition the very night of Moll's marriage with the banker. Besides, in the Penguin edition, the novel has 316 pages and Moll marries Jemmy at page 149, thus establishing the central role Jemmy is to play. Jemmy competes with the banker not only as a rival in love, but also as structural figure who appears alternatively with the banker according to the following scheme: banker, Jemmy, banker, Jemmy, banker (who suddenly disappears), and again Jemmy at the end of the novel, after her life as a thief. Jemmy is the only character who appears in different phases of the novel, apart from Mother Midnight; but the latter has such different roles the first and the second time that she appears—as Mother Midnight and as Governess—that, at least from a structural point of view, we can as well consider her as two distinct characters.

A peculiarity of almost all the sections mentioned above is that they are linked only with the previous and following ones. There are only a few, rather negligible exceptions; e.g. when the son left in Virginia comes back quite actively at the end of the novel, like Jemmy and Virginia itself; but the fact is rather unique, Moll does not have any further contacts with her brother-husband, her mother is long time dead, like the whole family in Colchester, when she happens to pass by as a thief. On that particular occasion Moll asks tidings about her first lover, but forgets to enquire after her children. The only relevant exception to the rule is Jemmy.

All the episodes mentioned so far take place in chronological order. In formalistic terms we can say that the *fabula* does coincide with the *subject*, or, in narratological terms, that the narrative organisation (or the plot) follows the diegesis. This feature can be traced throughout the novel but in one single circumstance, *i.e.* when Moll stops pretending that she is a man because she is chased by a mob and makes a narrow escape. Immediately after this adventure, by way of a sort of methonimical recollection, Moll narrates a similar adventure in which her comrade—this time a woman—had been arrested and was willing to report her, which was prevented by her foresight. At the end of this second episode Moll explains that it had happened before she disguised herself as a man. There might be a reason for this chronological discontinuity to take place in this part of the novel, to account for which we shall move to a closer look at the single episodes.

Each episode follows more or less the same pattern and namely:

- Recognition of a difficulty and Moll's doubts.
- Choice of a new identity.
- Help from a friend.
- Successful action.
- Achievement of a new order.
- Catastrophe which brings back to the initial situation.
- Among the above mentioned items, mostly at the beginning,³ Moll inserts her own commentaries.

Moll herself is born in a rather difficult situation, whereas the novel ends after reaching a sort of new order. A very interesting—though not always completely convincing—hypothesis has been formulated by John Warner in his book *Joyce's Grandfathers*.⁴ Warner starts from the idea that the time of the myth (and of history for the Greeks) is

³ As we shall discuss later in this paper, the fact that we find Moll's commentary at the beginning of the episodes tends to increase the distance between the narrated and narrating character.

⁴ John Warner, *Joyce's Grandfathers*, Athens and London, University of Georgia Press, 1993.

cyclical whereas the time of modern history (in the Hebrew and Christian tradition) is linear, teleological. According to Warner, Defoe's novels are set in a mythic and cyclical time, in which the adventures follow one another without an end. Actually, Warner bases his study more on *Robinson Crusoe* than on *Moll Flanders*, a reasonable choice, given the fact that Robinson, rather than Moll, has become one of the myths of the modern era. In *Moll Flanders* a conflict stems from a sort of nostalgia for the cyclical, seasonal time of myth⁵ and the ideological superiority attributed by Defoe's century to the linear time, or to history. Thus the last episode of the mostly cyclical novel does not end with a catastrophe, but with Moll's ageing in the religious-teleological perspective of a death which brings no evil, but the utmost good.

In the second part of the novel, when Moll becomes a thief, the reader witnesses a *mise en abyme* of the pattern described. The general effect is that Moll's enterprises are numberless – actually the robberies described are nineteen, but very often Moll states that she has committed many more: when Moll speaks of the comrade who first introduced her to the art of stealing, she states that they possessed up to 21 gold watches at once. The pattern of Moll's adventures as a thief is more or less the following:

- Disguise.
- Robbery.
- Escape from danger.
- Account of the money she got.
- Reckoning to the governess.
- Commentaries of the writing Moll.

In the second part Moll dives completely into a timeless perspective, or into a circular time. Initially it is poverty which compels her to "go abroad", later a search for welfare; she decides that she would give up stealing when she gets to the sum of five hundred pounds, but, in fact, she does not. Stealing becomes a vice, Moll loses any te-

⁵ A nostalgia which reminds us of Lukács' *transzendente Obdachlosigkeit* (transcendental homelessness) of the middle class novel.

leological perspective, until the catastrophe obliges her to come to terms with historical time and with the civil society from which she had stepped out. The episode mentioned above, in which Moll breaks the chronological order, can be accounted for in terms of loss of the historical and teleological dimension, which find its climax in the second part of the novel.

On the contrary, the recurrent pattern described becomes rather loose in the third part, i.e. in the last part of Moll's life. Since Moll's transportation, in particular, we still have the protagonist puzzled by the obstacles she encounters, but the usual catastrophe fails to reset the process. In the third part the problems (getting the proper tools, accommodation in the ship, fee to pay the liberty, inheritance etc.) are all set up in a teleological perspective to achieve the condition of gentility.

We can clearly see that the general pattern of the novel can not be dispensed with as picaresque, on the contrary the structure of the different sections follows the narration highlighting the development of the character.⁶ From a thematic point of view the three main sections show as many ways to see one's life: 1) marriage as a means of social achievement, 2) dishonest work, 3) honest work and love marriage. Defoe does not really care that Moll's "fortunes" are based on robbery and a marriage of convenience, but he cares for the (amoral) narrative logic which allows the character to develop herself. The novel is not only a catalogue of more or less extraordinary adventures which might go on *ad libitum*; such adventures do have a pattern and an aim. Further elements of complexity, exposed hereafter, could support the idea of a coherent plan.

There are two basic ways to bind together different episodes: the first is based on the time contiguity, which works according to the logic device of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. The second and more complex way works according to the principle of the *propter hoc*, which makes

⁶ Also Watt distrusts the idea that *Moll Flanders* be a picaresque novel, but his opinion is based on the fact that *Moll Flanders* is much more realist than the picaresque narrative of the time.

each episode the consequence of germs already mentioned in the previous pages. The chronological organisation of *Moll Flanders* seems to follow the *post hoc* logic, but often there are more elaborated causes to justify an event than the mere time contiguity. Such causes are to be found in the character of the narrated Moll, whose temperament and whose set of values are the efficient cause of several narrative actions.

Following Culler,⁷ we can distinguish between narrative and discursive logic: the former is the subordination of the events to an internal logic, whereas the latter is the presentation of new elements for which there is no justification. The death of Moll's husbands is an instance of discursive logic since nothing foreshadows it, while her arrest relies on the narrative logic – the reader is almost compelled to cry out "they got her, finally!".⁸

The discursive logic is resorted to when a catastrophe occurs, every time that Moll loses what she had earned. When she describes the banker's death, which ends the matrimony phase, Moll speaks of "a sudden blow from an almost invisible hand"⁹ which blasted her sober and happy life. Of course Moll is talking of God's hand, but in fact it is Defoe's. Although the author reveals a certain inventiveness in creating variations on the catastrophe theme,¹⁰ the fact remains that the narration does not justify such a harsh fortune. Nowhere the fact is mentioned that a husband was of an unhealthy complexion, nor is any disease described (apart from the case of the gentleman of Bath), and such disease is never contagious, since Moll never gets sick. At the beginning of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe speaks of his "wanderlust", a characteristic which is enough to justify the hero's behaviour. Moll's temperament and behaviour seems to stem from the education she re-

⁷ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981. See also, *Structuralist Poetics*, London, Routledge, 1975.

⁸ See also Carl R. Lovitt, "Defoe's 'Almost Invisible Hand': Narrative Logic as a Structuring Principle" in *Moll Flanders, Eighteenth Century Fiction* 6:1, October 1993.

⁹ *M.F.* p. 187, Penguin Edition.

¹⁰ Marriage proposal of the younger brother, Robin's death, escape to France, discovery of the incest, heavy conscience after an illness, poverty, death of the banker etc.

ceived by the lady who first gives her a roof. Such a lady used to be a gentlewoman who had lost her fortune, but retained a sort of *bon ton*, so that Moll detests dirt and the forsaken people of Newgate, though they are her own peers, a fact she hardly realises.

If the succession of catastrophes follows a discursive logic (though not always: the arrest, for instance does not), the beginnings of the episodes depend, on the contrary, on the narrative logic. In fact Moll's reaction to catastrophes has a narrative justification in the character of Moll herself. Even at the beginning of the novel, when Moll is still a child, her temperament is the reason for the action that follows after her initial discouragement: by crying and working Moll touches her mistress' heart in order not to go to service. Later on, as she entertains the relationship with the elder brother (with whom she is rather passive) she is concerned with a possible pregnancy, and immediately she obtains the assurances she asks for, together with some money, that she takes as a sign of good will. As Moll gets older, she becomes more expert in dealing with other people for her own good. Initially she must only hide from Robin her relationship with his brother, but later she becomes much more resolute: as she is left a widow for the first time, she asserts: "I would have a tradesman, forsooth, that was something of a gentleman too".¹¹ Eventually that turns out to be the wrong choice, but the error is not due to the acceptance of a compromise, but rather to her lack of experience in the human nature – in Moll's words: "I was caught in the same snare that I laid for myself". The following marriage, with her brother, is a true piece of *bravura*, of which the narrating Moll is justly proud; in fact she describes in details the whole courtship scene, where the two "lovers" write on the window-pane with a diamond ring. A similar attitude toward her own cleverness can be noticed in the second part of the book, where Moll, now an inveterate thief, uses her talent to bend her fate to her own will. The juxtaposition of the different episodes is not casual at all, Moll could not become a thief before she failed with marriage, in fact she would not abandon "a sober and happy life" for the sake of robbery:

¹¹ *M.F.* p. 78.

she must be compelled to do it. The narrative logic brings sturdy Moll on the edge of poverty, with one only possible way out: becoming a thief. On the other hand, the discursive logic would not accept a novel entirely based on successive marriages.

Another element of structural complexity is associated with Moll's temperament: the narrating Moll. In order to study the role of this narrating-I we should analyse every single paragraph of the novel labelling it with a short name, such as "marriage", "considerations on the wives' market", "approaching Mother Midnight", etc. For each frame thus determined, we can consider the disparity between the time of the action and the time of narration, or the time of the *fabula* and the time of the *subject*. We can distinguish four different degrees, considering "very fast" a sentence which sums up a lot of time in a few words and "very slow" a sentence whose reading time is longer than the action time. The underlying idea is, of course, that the narrating-I spends more words on what she finds of particular interest and skips what she finds unimportant. Eleven of the twelve children mentioned, for instance, are dealt with in the most rapid way, thus revealing a fleeting interest on the part of the writer – the climax of disinterest for the offspring is reached when she mentions the son of the Gentleman from Bath, she only once says he was a boy, and later always refers to him with the indefinite pronoun "it".¹² On the other hand of the scale we find direct speeches or relations so detailed that they seem to go as fast as Moll's thought.

A latere it is interesting to note that Defoe almost never uses anything slower than direct speech, that is, he does not consider the possibility that the time of the *subject* may be slower than the time of the *fabula*. There are no slow motion scenes, nor scenes that take place simultaneously, but this is not unusual in an autobiography. The slowest episode in the novel is at the point when the banker asks Moll to marry him: the dialogue is interrupted by two events, *viz.* she blushes and he gives her a ring.

¹² See Michael Shinagel, "The Maternal Theme in *Moll Flanders*", *Craft and Character Library Journal*, 1991.

The sequence of fast and slow actions, often interrupted by timeless comments, gives an original form to the novel and provides a guide to the reader by stressing what he must particularly notice in order to understand the plot. The narrating Moll is not only the glue that keeps the episodes together; the choice of alternating slow and fast frames does not follow only a discursive logic (once the seduction has been described the reader only needs to be told that it happened again), but can be read as a particular set of choices on the part of the narrating-I. Such a set reveals a code of values, the same code that will enable Moll to leave Newgate and start a new life. We have already mentioned Moll's relation with her children, we should consider now the wooing scene between Moll and her brother.¹³ The narrating Moll admires the wit of her narrated self, so she reports all the verses written on the pane and calls the reader's attention on the fact that those lines answer different needs of the protagonist, namely that of entertaining, flirting with the future husband, declaring her patrimonial status. In this scene Moll's actions are described more slowly than those of her suitor. When the discourse turns on the subject of money, the description of the husband's speech slows down.¹⁴

After a paragraph that describes at length the brother's patrimonial situation, the scene ends with a rather laconic sentence: "In short we were married".¹⁵ This is followed by another very slow paragraph in which Moll shows her just married husband her patrimony, endeavouring to create fewer expectations than she can actually fulfil. Lingering on this scene means, for the narrating Moll, stressing both the importance of money and her own ability in dealing with people. The same pattern is repeated at the time of the marriage with the Lancashire husband.¹⁶

An analysis of the disparity between the time of the narration and the time of the action, shows that Moll describes at length:

¹³ *M.F.* p. 93.

¹⁴ *M.F.* p. 95.

¹⁵ *M.F.* p. 96.

¹⁶ *M.F.* p. 149.

1. Account of her own misfortunes, whereas the happy moments are hardly mentioned –about her marriage with the banker she says “I never lived four pleasanter days”,¹⁷ but we do not know what she actually did in those days.

2. Money and gentility, which are quite close in Moll’s *Weltanschauung*.

3. Her work, her industry and her prudence. Moll skips the misfortune of her victims, who more or less deserve their fate, and lingers on her ability in planning robberies and escaping from the police.

In the scene when her male-partner is arrested, for instance, the narration is very fast before and during the criminal act, and drastically slows down while Moll runs away to her governess’ house and disguises back to a woman. To give a further stress to the event, at the end of the episode Moll offers her own comment on the fact that she did never reveal her identity to her comrades, which is exemplified by the adventure which follows, that happened before she disguised as a man.

Another cohesive device exploited by the novel is the prolepsis. What Barthes¹⁸ calls hermeneutic code is here reduced to a minimum –there are no mysteries and, from the very title, the reader knows perfectly what is going to happen to Moll. At the beginning of a number of episodes the narrating Moll inserts some prolepses that anticipate the end. This is a characteristic of Defoe’s plain style, rather than Moll’s, in fact the puritan polygraph wrote in such a way that no particular effort was demanded on the part of the reader. Thus we encounter sentences of such a tenor: “Nor had I any thoughts about me at first that looked the way which afterwards I suffered them to be guided”;¹⁹ “If this woman had known my circumstance, she would never have laid so many snares”;²⁰ “It is true that sick beds are the ti-

mes when such correspondences as mine are looked on with different countenances”.²¹ This last sentence is referred to the gentleman from Bath. His illness had created a sort of enigma whose dénouement is far from exploiting all its narrative power. On the other hand we must acknowledge that according to the discursive logic, such prolepses undermine possible wonders and doubts produced by the old *deus ex machina* device, thus supporting the realistic effect.

There are other interesting prolepses bound to the discursive logic and to the narrating-I. They seem to suggest what is going to happen to Moll, by setting her adventure in the natural order of the events – what happens to Moll is not extraordinary, because that is the way of the world. One of these prolepses is the story of Moll’s mother, which can be read as the old saying *talis mater talis filia*; another prolepsis can be associated with the extraordinary facts that accompany the first appearance of Jemmy, in a way Moll’s alter ego. The successive arrest of all Moll’s companions is another instance of a proleptic device aimed at the acceptance of the protagonist’s fate. These second kind of prolepses enhance the cohesion of the plot and show how the author bore a plan in his mind when he set to writing and that the succession of the chapters is organised in a historical rather than mythical way.

A third group of prolepses reveals a sort of dialectic between Moll as a character and Moll as a writer: “And if I had known his thoughts and how hard I thought I would be to be gained, I might have made my own terms with him [...] but I seemed to have abandoned such thoughts as these”. “I wasn’t wicked enough for that fellow yet”;²² “From the first hour I began to converse with him, I resolved to let him lie with me”.

Such statements give reality to the narrator²³ as a character, they would be unsustainable if the novel was written in the third person. The old Moll leads the reader by the hand, telling him what she was

¹⁷ M.F. p. 249

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Paris, Éditions de Seuil, 1970.

¹⁹ M.F. p. 117.

²⁰ M.F. p. 137.

²¹ M.F. p. 131.

²² M.F. p. 82.

²³ See also Ian Bell, “Narrators and Narrative in Defoe”, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 18, no. 2, winter 1985.

thinking as a young woman during the episodes described and what she thinks of herself now. The reader of *Moll Flanders* is not the reader of a detective story, but rather the witness of a comedy, as he knows more than the characters he is observing. Such a superiority allows the reader to think especially of the devices through which Moll dominates her life (the same that are narrated at slow motion) rather than on the life itself, which is no mystery at all. From this dialectic of narrating-I/narrated-I stems the irony many critics have found in the novel. A narrating-I that speaks of him/herself is the ideal device to create a comic effect. Woody Allen in his *Take the Money and Run*, again a criminal biography, exploits the same dialectic, though with a patent comic purpose—in a scene from the film he says “after half an hour I had been talking with her I understood she was my life’s woman, and after one hour I had definitely given up the idea of stealing her handbag”.

As a further proof of the plausibility of the results obtained by studying the time discrepancies throughout the novel, we can try to apply the method described by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* to various parts of the novel—the data amount that would result from an extensive application of Barthes’ method would make any analysis almost virtually impossible. Such a method consists in segmenting the text into different lexies and finding out what code(s) may be associated with them.²⁴ Since we determined three different main sections in the novel we can compare the results obtained from the analysis of the frequency of the occurrence of the various codes in each section. If the novel were so loose as Watt contends, we should find a different distribution of the codes in the three parts. In fact, that does not happen. It is of particular interest that analysing what might constitute the first chapter of the novel we find all the five codes mentioned by Barthes with reference to all the essential themes of the novel—such as gentility, disguise, crime, industry, felony. References to time are

²⁴ According to Barthes there are five narrative codes: proairetic, hermeneutic, symbolic, semantic, cultural.

to be found in the first and last part, but not in the middle one. Besides, the first chapter is dominated by the semantic code, whereas in the other chapters the proairetic code dominates; this characteristic may be taken as an instance of the proleptic value of the first pages, which present *in nuce* the whole novel, thus revealing that a sort of plan does exist since the beginning of the book.