

THE COMPLETE ENGLISH TRADESMAN: DANIEL DEFOE AND THE EMERGENCE OF BUSINESS WRITING £

A pioneer of the English novel, Daniel Defoe primarily earned his living as an economic pamphleteer, a proposal writer, and a freelance business consultant. Like many English writers in the late 17th and early 18th century, Defoe combined the talents of a journalist and entrepreneur. At this time, notes Thomas Keith Meier, “the practice of business and the concerns of literature in England had begun to intersect at an increasing rate. With the growing importance of commerce, increasing numbers of literary figures inevitably came into closer contact with it” (10). None, however, could match Defoe’s in-depth knowledge of new markets and new technologies, or his first-hand experience of the rewards and punishments of trade.



Born in 1660, the son of a Puritan candlemaker, Defoe became in turn a successful cloth merchant and a prominent brick and tile manufacturer, once employing over one hundred workers in a factory of his own design. But political activism and restless curiosity twice seduced him away from his concerns and drove him into bankruptcy. Disgraced, imprisoned, and hounded by creditors, Defoe turned to writing to pay off a collective debt of £17,000. Not surprisingly, he chose as the chief subject of his tracts and novels the new economic order.

"Writing on Trade was the Whore I really doted upon," he boasted in the last number of *The Review*, and he devoted his retirement, "freed from the burden of journalism and fiction," to composing long economic treatises (Novak v). When he died in 1731, his obituary boasted that this "great natural Genius understood well the Trade and Interest of his country" (quoted in v).

For major economists like Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Maximillian Novak, Defoe remains early capitalism's most enthusiastic and paradoxical apologist. But although much ink has been spilled about the worth and meaning of his major novels, little has been written about the over 400 business works he produced between 1697 and 1731, including: promotional materials and marketing reports for the first practical diving bell, for which Defoe was an investor; proposals for designing commercial fisheries and improving London's sewer system; a series of popular self-help manuals and Chamber of Commerce travelogues; and the first English technical writing journal, *The Projector*. These and similar texts would form the loam of Defoe's great novels, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Moll Flanders* (1721), and *Journal of a Plague Year* (1722).

While Defoe's professional writing shaped his creative writing, his gifts as a novelist and a journalist—his plain, demotic style; his knack for concise narrative and analytical summary; his ability to create convincing personas through textual documentation—shaped his professional writing. This article will examine two of Defoe's major business works: his first major publication, *An Essay Upon Projects* (1697), a portfolio of proposals, and his landmark *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726), the first English business manual. These texts are the bookends of a remarkable career, one in which business and creative writing form a single didactic body of work on what Sandra Sherman calls the "fictionality of finance" (1).

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England," comments Thomas Meier, "commerce represented the force of social innovation and was supported by radical thinkers" (7). That is because commerce was seen as the engine of scientific progress. As Defoe never ceased from remarking, it was a giddy time of experiment and innovation: "Necessity, which is allow'd to be the Mother of Invention, has so violently agitated the Wits of men [at] this time, that it seems not at all improper, by way of distinction, to call it, *The Projecting Age*" (*Projects* 1).

Projectors, of course, were the most prominent and vocal advocates of applying science in the marketplace. A cross between technical consultants and snake oil salesmen, these freelancers wrote proposals for scientific projects that supposedly would benefit the community and



increase trade—at no small profit to themselves. As such, their motives and methods were always suspect. Jonathan Swift viciously lampooned them in "A Modest Proposal," but Samuel Johnson in an influential article in *The Rambler*, praised projectors for giving England the world's highest standard of living and for improving the material condition of the masses.

Defoe, whose creative and political work was dedicated to bettering the lives of the poor through economic education, was drawn quite naturally to proposal writing. As a projector, he had three great talents: a solid technical background, an understanding of the dialectic between

emerging markets and formerly unmet human needs, and an ability to court and appease different audiences while promoting his agenda. These three characteristics distinguish his proposal collection, *An Essay Upon Projects*.

Unlike most projectors, Daniel Defoe was as much a scientist as an entrepreneur, thanks to his superior education at Charles Morton's Academy for Dissenters. Here he was first exposed to Francis Bacon's principles of experimental science, not to mention the foundations of scientific technical writing. As Ilse Vickers declares in *Defoe and the New Sciences*, Defoe is greatly indebted to the Baconian tradition. Its influence appears in his empiricism, his inductive reasoning, above all, in "his belief that knowledge should be useful to society, and be concerned with 'things, rather than words'" (2). Morton's Academy taught Defoe to use language accurately, to illustrate points concretely, and to communicate to ordinary people. In old age, Defoe recalled a lecture in which Morton explained the sun's rotation with the help of a charwoman: "Betty was call'd, and bad bring out her mop; [Morton] placed his scholars in a due position, opposite . . . to her left side, so that they could see the end of the mop; when it whirl'd round her arm, they took it immediately; there was the broad-headed nail in the center, which was the body of the sun, and the thrums whisking round, flinging the water about every way by innumerable streams, described exactly the rays of the sun darting light from the center to the whole system" (quoted in 57).

Defoe also adapted Bacon's idea that commerce is a form of science. Nature gives the materials, Bacon argued, "but art—human manufacture, inventions, discoveries—makes the products on which human life depends" (Vickers 84). Put another way, trade, like science, reshapes the natural world to alleviate human want. Accordingly, business should be conducted

with the exactitude of physics. In the *Parasceve, or Preparative towards a Natural and Experimental History* (1620), Bacon advocates the cataloging and explication of different branches of manufacturing, such as dyeing, smelting, glazing, and paper-making. One of Defoe’s more eccentric economic treatises, *A General History of Trade* (1713), attempts just such an encyclopedic anatomy, but even his more practical tracts treat business like a science—a science mediated by rhetoric and shaped by institutional and political concerns.

This was the final and the most important lesson Defoe learned from Francis Bacon. As a philosopher and a scientist, Bacon tried to strip language to its essentials, but as a courtier and a lawyer, he knew how to dress a proposal to make it successful. Even in disgrace, Bacon’s power as a rhetor enabled him to shape public policy and to secure private interest. Defoe, a prickly Nonconformist, who was always at odds with the establishment even as a paid informant, could not have chosen a better mentor. When he was pilloried in 1703 for libel, he circulated a broadside winning the mob’s sympathy. They threw flowers instead of cabbages.

Defoe applies Bacon’s scientific and rhetorical lessons in *An Essay Upon Projects*. Marginalized and stigmatized, he fully understands the precariousness of his position. A bankrupt Dissenter of shopkeeper’s stock, he must court both powerful ministers and fellow tradesmen without seeming like either an opportunist or a class traitor. He also must distinguish himself from other projectors. In an effective introduction, Defoe establishes his credentials and builds good will within his readers.



Most projectors, he admits, "are generally to be taken with allowance of one half at least; they always have their mouths full of Millions, and talk big of their own Proposals" (xii). Defoe compares them to the builders of the Tower of Babel, self-servers who design monstrosities only to cause confusion. "But that is no reason," he continues, "why Invention upon honest foundations, and to fair purposes, should not be encourag'd; no, nor why the Author of any such fair Contrivances should not reap the harvest of his own Ingenuity; our acts of Parliament for granting Patents to first Inventors for Fourteen years is sufficient acknowledgement of the due regard which ought to be had to such as find out anything which may be of publick Advantage" (14-15).

The times, in fact, demanded new projects. The debt and poverty caused by recent mercantile wars had to be alleviated. "Wherefore," Defoe presses, "'tis necessary to distinguish among the Projects of the present times, between the Honest and the Dishonest" (11). Whenever England in the past experienced a crisis, responsible projectors stepped forward with timely proposals that saved the commonwealth. Reviewing historical scientific breakthroughs from Elizabeth I to Charles II, Defoe legitimizes proposal writing as a patriotic enterprise and validates his claim as a public benefactor: "Projects of the nature I Treat about, are doubtless in general of public Advantage, as they tend to the Improvement of Trade, and Employment of the Poor, and the Circulation and Increase of the publick Stock of the Kingdom" (*Projects* 10-11). Let us examine one of his projects: the improvement of England's highway system.

"It is a prodigious Charge the whole Nation groans under for the Repair of the High-Ways," Defoe begins. ". . . I make no question but if it was taken into Consideration by those who have the Power to Direct it, the Kingdom might be wholly eas'd of that Burthen" (68). This

was a pressing issue in Defoe's day. At the time, England's roads "were scarcely less dirty, dangerous, and unreliable than they were in the Middle Ages" (Rogers 24). Defoe considers these conditions "shameful" (69). "Unpassable" roads, he contends, cause "Tolls and Impositions upon Passengers and Travelers," on the one hand; "and on the other hand, Trespasses and Incroachments upon Lands adjacent, to the great Damage of the Owners" (69). "The Romans," Defoe reminds his readers, "while they Govern'd the Island, made it one of their principle cares to Make and Repair the High-Ways of the Kingdom[;] . . . the Consequence of maintaining them was such, or at least so esteemed, that they thought it not below them to Employ their Legionary Troops to the Work" (69-70). Surely free Englishmen, blessed with true religion and true science, can match the efforts of these noble "Heathens" (72).

The chief problem with the English highway, Defoe explains, is poor drainage. Standing water seeps into and softens the earth to such an extent that it cannot bear the weight of horses and carriages. Defoe proposes, therefore, draining, widening, and leveeing the dirt road: "A noble magnificent Causeway might be Erected, with Ditches on either side deep enough to receive the Water, and Drains sufficient to carry it off, which Causeway shou'd be Four Foot High at least, and from Thirty to Forty Foot Broad, to reach from London to Barnet, Pav'd in the middle, to keep it Cop'd, and so supplied with Gravel, and other Materials, as should secure it from Decay with small Repairing" (88). Defoe estimates the work will take eight years and cost 10 shillings a foot, which for 67 miles equals £176,880. This is a great expense, he concedes, but constructing a causeway system would defer the greater cost of overhauling the entire highway. In fact, he argues, the proposal's most attractive feature is its economy—engineering, figuratively and literally, the best results from the humblest materials: stone, chalk, and gravel.

"My plan," Defoe explains, "is not to Repair the roads, nor to Alter them, that is, not alter the Course they run. But perfectly to Build them as Fabrick" (95).

Defoe's conclusion demonstrates how everyone can profit from his proposal: "The Gentlemen would find the Benefit of it in the Rent of their Land, and Price of their Timber; the Country People would find the difference in the Sale of their Goods, which now they cannot carry beyond the first Market-Town, and hardly thither; and the whole Country would reap an

Advantage an hundred to one greater than the Charge of it" (111-12). But closer examination shows how Defoe's proposal has secretly promoted the special interests of the poor and outcast. For instance, Defoe recommends that the state purchase useless wasteland and lease oxen, draft horses, and equipment from indigent farmers for highway construction. He also advocates manning the work crews with convicts for humanitarian as well as economic reasons,



converting corporal punishment into manual labor. All Defoe's proposals follow the same pattern, as he tries using public works to improve the lives of bankrupts and debtors, widows and orphans, maimed sailors, and the mentally retarded.

Although *An Essay Upon Projects* had only three small printings and failed to make Defoe money, it proved a seminal text in two important ways. First, the collection became an

important blueprint for proposal writing in the mid-18th century, thanks mostly to Benjamin Franklin, who as a boy religiously studied Defoe's pamphlet. We can see its influence in Franklin's proposals for the Philadelphia Library, for the Pennsylvania Academy, and for the Franklin Stove. Second, the collection proved a laboratory for Defoe's future creative work. To entertain the reader, Defoe mixes his technical proposals with verse satires, anecdotes, and character sketches. These vignettes contain the picaresque types who would people his fiction and journalism: paupers and apprentices, usurers and thieves, frauds and adventurers. For example, the dialogue in his proposal for accident insurance for merchant sailors prefigures the pirate novel, *Captain Singleton* (1720). A merchant ship returning from the Indies is under siege. Speaking on behalf of the crew, the boatswain educates the skipper on acceptable risks:

Noble Captain, We are all willing to Fight, and don't question but to Beat him off; but here is the Case: If we are Taken, we shall be set on Shore, and then sent Home, and Lose, perhaps, our Cloaths, and a little Pay; but if we Fight and Beat the Privateer, perhaps Half a Score of us may be Wounded and Lose our Limbs, and then we are Undone and our Families; if you will Sign an Obligation to us, That the Owners, or Merchants, shall allow a Pension to such as are Maim'd, that we may not Fight for the Ship, and go Begging our selves, we will bring off the Ship, or Sink by her side, otherwise I am not willing to Fight, for my part. (127-28)

When Defoe in his late fifties turned to novel writing full time, he adapted many of the conventions of proposal writing to shape his fiction. *Robinson Crusoe* is a projector in the wilderness, and his journal is a collection of proposals for improving his wretched condition on the island: plans to construct tools from scrap, to convert goat's hide into fabric, to smoke and cure meats, to design and build furniture, fences, and magazines. H. F., the narrator of *A Journal of a Plague Year*, is not only a chronicler but a city planner, studying patterns of contagion in order to propose ways to contain the infection, rescue the abandoned, and dispose of the dead. Defoe uses the same technique in his book-length journalism. *A Tour Through the Whole Island*

of Great Britain (1724-26) is both a travelogue and a Baconian analysis of national industries. Defoe proposes ways to improve the trades of different cities and even resurrects his old plan to repair the highway system.

Even as Defoe cultivated his reputation as a novelist, he still pursued his interests as a venture capitalist. Throughout the 1720's, he bought and maintained grazing and farming land, raised civets and harvested oysters, and dabbled in maritime insurance. He also continued to produce major proposals, most notably *Atlas Martimus & Commercialis* (1728), a comprehensive reform of shipping and trading maps, and *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728), an aggressive blueprint for expanding England's international markets. Defoe's work as a fiction writer, however, made him see the fictional dimension of commerce itself.



As both an early novelist and an early capitalist, Defoe witnessed the harrowing birth of paper currency, easy credit, speculative investment, and deceptive advertising. "Air Money," Defoe called it, a chimerical "congeries of bills, notes, stocks, annuities, [and] reports on the National Debt" (Sherman 1). The disastrous Mississippi and South Sea Bubbles had proven that finance was more fantasy than fact, while the new medium of print had made the financier and the fiction writer practically indistinguishable. Both trafficked in paper lies.

"The public sphere," states Sandra Sherman, "—the market in ideas, in literature—and the market constituted by commercial paper (both developing during this period) generated a mutually inflecting discursive field around the notion of 'fiction'" (2). Defoe concluded that tradesmen not only were characters in an ongoing narrative of commerce, but that they themselves needed to become co-authors of this fiction if they were to succeed. He presents these ideas in his longest and most engaging business treatise, *The Complete English Tradesman*. Part handbook and commercial encyclopedia, part satire on the hazards and delusions of the market, this two-volume manual became the merchant's Bible on both sides of the Atlantic. Benjamin Franklin, who first encountered the text during his penurious sojourn in London, printed and distributed it throughout the American colonies. Conceived as a series of business letters, the book offers practical advice on surviving apprenticeships, establishing a shop, displaying goods, and securing credit. But its primary concerns are clear writing and empirical observation, the trademarks of Defoe's literary style.

"As plainness and a free unconstrain'd way of speaking is the beauty and excellency of speech," Defoe declares in Letter II, "so an easy free concise way of writing is the best stile for Tradesman. He that affects a . . . bombast style, and fills his letters with long harangues, compliments, and flourishes, should turn Poet instead of Tradesman, and set up for a wit, not a shopkeeper" (I, 17). Defoe illustrates his point by quoting a letter from a fop who has entered the job market: "SIR, The destinies have so appointed it, and my dark stars concurring it, that I, who by nature was fram'd for better things, [am] now launch'd forth on the great ocean of Business" (18). "This fine flourish," comments Defoe, "which no doubt the young fellow thought very well done, put his correspondent in London into a fit of laughter" (18).

Effective business letters, in contrast, rely on the vernacular and on scientific exactitude. Defoe states: "If any man was to ask me, what I would suppose to be a perfect stile or language, I would answer, that in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, Ideots and Lunaticks excepted, should be understood by them all, in the same manner with one another, and in the same sense which the speaker intended to be understood" (*Tradesman* I, 16). But Defoe also knows that the market is full of vagaries, that every profession has its own jargon, its own discourse. He therefore recommends every young tradesman "to take all occasion to converse with mechanicks of every kind, and to learn the particular language of their business; not the names of their tools only, and the way of working with their instruments as well as hands; but the very cant of their trade" (30). Like a good Puritan preacher, a tradesman must "suit his language" to his audience (29).

Defoe's reference to homiletics reminds us that for all its simplicity, the English Plain Style is deliberate and artificial, not spontaneous and natural. Anthony Burgess's comment on Defoe's fiction equally applies to his business writing: "The art is too much concealed to seem like art, and so the art is frequently discounted" (7). More recent Defoe scholars, however, have paid more attention to the artistry of *The Complete English Tradesman*. Sandra Sherman, a former corporate and contract lawyer, is particularly sensitive to Defoe's rhetorical strategies. Although Defoe advocates honest plainness in business writing, he also stresses the importance of "poetical licenses" (I, 226). In all his correspondence, a tradesman must create and sustain the convincing persona of the pious Plain Dealer; but by necessity his honesty is not a private virtue but a public display, less a product of natural morality than an advertisement. Just as Defoe in *Moll Flanders* uses fake legal and commercial documents to make an imaginary character seem

real, a merchant must use legal and commercial documents to transform himself from a flesh and blood person into a character, the Complete English Tradesman, whose story is narrated through business letters, broadsides, and prospectuses. In a sense, Defoe proposes that the entrepreneur turn novelist, transforming his establishment from a mere shop into "a fiction factory" (Sherman 121).

Appropriately, large sections of *The Complete English Tradesman* read like a novel. Defoe manages to keep the reader's attention for 900 pages by alternating straightforward instruction with colorful and detailed narrative. Many of these fictions read like abandoned chapters from *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* (1724): two mincing upper-class women haggling over goods in a draper's shop discover that their husbands share the same mistress; a genteel widow, who was too proud to learn her husband's business while he was alive, courts a fellow tradesman to take charge of her concerns; coffeehouse wits lament their losses in the recent bubble while the barmaids, the daughters of humble but solvent tradesmen, mock them.

Defoe intersperses these stories with historical anecdotes, Biblical parables, Newgate gossip, and panoramic reportage on every aspect of English manufacture. No detail is too insignificant. A humble servant's livery, for instance, becomes a Homeric catalog of English textiles: Yorkshire wool, Berkshire shalloon, Wiltshire drugget, Westmoreland yarn, Leicester felt. Defoe employs his formidable gifts as a creative writer to stimulate his readers' passion and curiosity, to inspire them to participate imaginatively in the epic of English mercantilism. Essentially, his advice to young tradesmen prefigures that of Henry James to aspiring novelists: be one on whom nothing is lost.

As a novelist and an economist, Defoe certainly was one on whom nothing was lost, although as an entrepreneur, he often acted against his own best interests. Even on his deathbed, he was eluding his creditors. Nevertheless, his proposals and manuals remain important historical documents. "One can ignore Defoe's commercial works," says Thomas Keith Meier, "only at the cost of willing oneself to remain ignorant of the most important body of thought dealing with the place of business in an emerging industrial society" (108). Besides their scholarly



value, however, Defoe's business works contain relevant lessons about effective marketplace communications—about the rhetorical and material interface between markets, media, and documentation and the possibilities of applying the techniques of fiction in real-life situations. For critic Kenneth Rexroth, Defoe's writing career embodied these lessons:

Business men who succeed in literature or literary men who succeed in business commonly possess [stylistic] virtues found less frequently among literary men who succeed only in literature. . . . The prose of the literary man of affairs [is] usually distinguished by what [the 19th-century British economist Walter Bageshot] called animated moderation and above all else by cogency. Cogency is not just persuasiveness; it is convincingness, the result of a kind of literary prudence. It is a style that comes to a writer used to surviving in a larger arena than that of literature. One of the merits of the cogent style is that it practically demands imitation. (312)

But besides Defoe's style, we should consider imitating his example. As professional writing scholars, teachers, and consultants, we too face a brutal economy in which new media

have turned finance into fiction. Whenever we complain that never before has the economy been this cruel or sordid, that never before has the market so dominated public policy, so gutted social institutions, so prostituted human relationships, we should remember Defoe's resourcefulness.

"His experiences might have embittered or warped him," marvels biographer Paula



Backschneider, "but instead he became endlessly versatile, courageous, and resilient. His struggle to support himself and his large family could have drained his creativity and energy, yet in fifty-ninth year he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*" (xi). *Nil desperandum* was his motto: Never despair. "The

[Complete] English Tradesman," he writes at the end of his great business manual, "is a kind of Phoenix, who often rises out of his own Ashes, and makes the Ruin of his Fortunes be a firm Foundation to build his Recovery" (II, 198-99).

The same could be said of this Complete English Business Writer.

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