

ESTRATTO

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Reforming Informing in the Long Eighteenth Century

But these are called Informers; men that live by treason,
as rat-catchers do by poison.

Francis Beaumont, *The Woman Hater*, V.2 (1607)

Pious and Useful Persons, who out of Love to GOD and
their Neighbours, do reckon themselves obliged in Con-
science, to Inform against the Vicious.

Francis Grant, *A Vindication of Informers* (1701)

In an earlier contribution to *Textus* (Clegg 1998) I investigated Alexander Welsh's suggestive linking of the eyewitness narrator to the legal witness testifying in court on the basis of his direct experience of the (criminal) fact (Welsh 1992). The article argued that Defoe exploits Lockean criteria for credibility and emerging conventions for the evaluation of direct evidence, even when offered by witnesses of no repute, in order to authenticate his narratives as true. The current essay focuses on the cultural construction of a special category of witness to fact, that of the paid informer, on the hypothesis that here may be found a narrator whose distinguishing traits betray an even closer family relationship to the early modern novelist. Paid for their (usually freelance) observing of and reporting on the crimes, misdemeanours, religious and moral comportment of their fellow citizens and neighbours, early eighteenth-century in-

formers bear interesting resemblances to those who tell and sell "true and authentic" stories about their contemporaries' lives, and claim for those stories an improving social function. Not least among the characteristics informers and novelists share in this period is a need to overcome their low and scandalous reputations as profiteers from crime and lewdness. The substance of what follows concerns attempts first to mobilize, and then to overturn, that reputation, a partially successful attempt to transform society's necessary but despised rat-catchers into "Pious and Useful Persons".

1. *Turbidum hominum genus*

Unlike America, where bounty hunting is still a not uncommon profession, modern England has tended to forget how deeply rooted in private enterprise is the enforcement of Anglo-Saxon justice. Until the nineteenth century, when the state took over the management of law enforcement and a professional police force was formed, "the pursuit and apprehension of suspects, the gathering of evidence, and the preparation of cases [...] these matters were left largely to the private initiative of the victim" (Beattie 1986: 36).

Organizing a court case in early modern England, however, was an expensive and time-consuming business. The decision to prosecute would also have been influenced by other "broad incentives and discouragements":

There was no general attitude toward "crime" or "the law", either among the propertied or the poor, but rather attitudes toward particular offences [...] offences like smuggling or poaching [...] often enjoying a measure of public approval [...] the decision to prosecute would also depend on who the suspected offender was, and perhaps on what was thought to be the general state of crime. (*Ibid.*: 73)

Practical and ethical deterrents had to be outweighed if "particular offences", and certain individuals, were to be punished at all. The massive economic legislation of the sixteenth century relied almost wholly on informers, otherwise known as "promoters", who received half the fine imposed on conviction (Beresford 1958: 221). Fear of

treason often triggered *ad hoc* offers of rewards. In 1550 Edward VI offered £ 20 “for Information of Sedition and Rebellion” (Hughes and Larkin 1964-69: I, 491), and in 1601 his sister announced an enormous £100 reward to persons who

shall in any sort either openly or secretly discover [...] the names of authors, writers dispersers of traitorous and slanderous libels tending to slander the royal person and state and stir up rebellion and sedition. (*Ibid.*: II, 288-289)

Elizabeth seems to have resorted to paying informers in a wide range of circumstances. In August 1586 she offered rewards for detectors of soldiers selling their arms after discharge; in February 1589, for information about those responsible for Marprelate tracts; in November 1596, in support of obligations to give hospitality and maintain defences; and in January 1600, in support of statutes on abstinence from meat, ale-houses, and vagabonds.

It is not surprising that by the mid sixteenth century people were trying to make a career of informing (Elton 1954: 150). The *OED* shows that at least by 1566 the expression “common informer” had come into use.¹ But as a recent study of informers’ social relations comments, “An intervention that rewards informers creates enormous stresses within the community it targets”, splitting and weakening it by destroying trust. Moreover,

Because informers’ operations are predatory, they are secretive; and [...] under constant risk. (Warner and Ivis 2001: 563-564)

The Tudors took measures to protect their partners in law enforcement. When Henry VIII invited his subjects to disclose the names of enclosers, he suggested that they do so secretly and in writing, promising that the “Lord Chancellor shall keep secret the same bills, so as no person shall fall into any indignation or displeasure of any man for his said disclosing” (Hughes and Larkin 1964-69: I,

¹ The adjective could indicate the habitual nature of the activity, and/or qualify it as public, and perhaps promiscuous, rather than private and singular; cf. the expression “common prostitute”. The *OED* shows “common” as figuring in many legal phrases, so it would not necessarily carry the implication of low or vulgar, but hostile writers clearly intend to solicit this connotation.

119). In 1566 Elizabeth threatened with the Star Chamber those
 divers light and evil-disposed persons who in great routs and compa-
 nies have assembled themselves together against such as be informers
 upon penal laws and statutes [...] and so being assembled, have not
 only beated and very evil treated divers of the same informers but
 also have made great outcries against the same persons. (Hughes and
 Larkin 1964-69: II, 288-289)

It was recognized, however, that the beaters had a point. They may have been partially placated by the assignation of a proportion of most rewards to the community in which the crime had been committed, usually to the poor. Though detectors of the arms-selling soldiers of 1588 received half the fine, the other half was to be employed in provision of corn poulter for "the county where said detector shall dwell" (*ibid.*: III, 25-26). In addition both Elizabeth and then James legislated "for the ease and quiet of the Subject, and for the regulating of Informers upon Penal Statutes" (Coke 1660: 191). The "regulating" was much needed if informing was to continue to be an effective instrument of control; abuses of the system back-fired on the government, and by the early seventeenth century those abuses were receiving publicity in the popular press. One coney-catching pamphlet, first published in 1612 but several times re-issued, tells of two Newgate turnkeys who extorted money from countrymen by threatening prosecution (Anon. 1638). Most victims would compound rather than lose time and business by staying in London to defend themselves. Money could also be made by prosecuting people without their knowledge in distant courts, and it was to prevent this that, in 1624, James I effectively banned informers from the Westminster courts (Beresford 1958: 221). More importantly, his parliaments revoked above three score "unnecessary statutes unfit for this time" which had come to constitute, in the words of Coke, "snares, whereupon the Relator, Informer or Promoter did ver and intangle the Subject" (1660: 191-192). Among these were statutes of Edward III's reign on poultry prices and the transportation of corn, Henry IV's regulations on prices of hats and caps, and Henry VIII's law on the "keeping of great horses". As a result of these changes, Coke thought, the *turbidum hominum genus* of "vexa-

tious Relators, Informers and Promooters" had been "well regulated and restrained" (*ibid.*: 194).

2. *Lupus in Fabula*

The dissenters of Restoration Britain would not have agreed. Charles II's laws against seditious conventicles opened up a lucrative new information market. By a statute of 1670, the word of two witnesses was enough to condemn participants to a hefty fine, and preachers to an even heftier one; a third of the sums obtained went to the informer. According to Owen Stockton (1675: A2r), informers began roaming the country in search of opportunities. As the anonymous author of *The Second Character of an Informer* (1882: 5) sarcastically put it:

I never before knew the meaning of that Latine Proverb, *Lupus in Fabula*, but now I guess the English to be *An INFORMER in a Meeting-House*.

In the early 1680s, when Charles was ruling without parliament, and control of even the City of London had passed under Tory control, Whigs and dissenters were subject to wholesale arrest and exemplary trial. Vital to this massive operation were informers, who were now organizing collectively and efficiently. Goldie (1997) has described the activities of the "Hilton gang", a band of 25 or more men and 15 women who, under the leadership of "Captain" George and his brothers hunted down non-conformists throughout the parishes of London, publicizing their successes in *The Conventicle Courant*. By November 1682, after only six months' in business, they were claiming to have closed down over 40 meeting-houses, sent the same number of preachers to prison and brought in more than £ 17,000 in fines. By the end of their second year the sum amounted to £ 40,000.

In the words of the spoof pamphlet *The Informers Answer* (1675c: 2-3), however,

These Nonconformists are subtler Currs than we imagined [...] we find they have the Impudence to ask why and by what Authority,

and if we exceed our Warrants, or the Punctilio's of the Statute.

Even against the Hiltons, who had the crown and the top ranks of the magistracy behind them, dissenters fought back, organizing prosecutions for perjury, and drawing on their rich experience of print culture. The anti-informing literature of the 1670s and 1680s is abundant, and widely varied in genre.

Of those who chose to attack on religious grounds, Stockton's measured and logically-structured *Rebuke to the Informers* offered warning examples from the Bible, called on these "turbulent persons" (1675: A2r) to "convert from the evil of their ways", and challenged them to attack alternative targets:

If it be your zeal for the Law that carries you out; why do you not inform against Whore-mongers, Drunkards, Swearers, Sabbath-breakers, and other prophane Sinners, who break the Laws of God and men? (*Ibid.*: 38-39)

Others went for a hell-fire style. George Fox, for instance, ranted that "The Devil Was and Is the Old Informer", "the Head of all Informers, Persecutors and Destroyers of the RIGHTEOUS" (1682: 1). Yet others indignantly argued the legalities of particular actions, appealing to equity, or to James's regulating statutes. *The Case of Present Distresses* (1682d: 1) called the attention of "Judges, Justices, and Juries" to the fact that dissenters' goods were being confiscated on informers' evidence, "without Notice, Warning or Summons, or any intimation of Procedure against them, or allowance for them to make their own Defence". This was "contrary to the known Rules of interpreting Laws" and, moreover,

These Convictions are made on the Oaths of the Informers, who at present are a sort of men, so destitute of all reputation [...] as that men of the like qualifications are prohibited by many Laws, from bearing Testimony in any case. (Anon. 1682d: 8)

There were also journalistic narratives, sensational stories of violent incidents in provincial towns. *Don Quixot Redivivus* (Anon. 1673), printed "for the Company of Informers", gives a humorous and satirical account of Andover men taken up for shouting "Informer! Informer!", of boys imprisoned for throwing stones, and a

corrupt and “overgrown tapster” launching a “dangerous expedition against a certain barn [...] in the land of Little Ease, and less Justice”. *A True Account from Chichester, concerning the Death of Habin the Informer* (Anon. 1682e) tells of men paid to sit on the road on Sundays and take the names of people walking in the direction of a meeting house, of witnesses suborned and of a respectable citizen falsely accused of murder. Among other genres used was the mock elegy (Anon. 1675a); the character, which abounded in colourful comparisons to animal life (*The Character of an Informer* 1675b; *The Informer’s Answer* 1675b; *The Second Character of an Informer* 1682a; *The Informer’s Looking-glass* 1682b); the personal exposé (the Hilton gang’s murky past was raked up in the numbers of *The English Guzman*, 1683); the parody lecture (*The Informer’s Lecture to his Sons* 1682c); the dialogue (Freeman [1682?]); and the allegorical trial.

To this last category belongs *The Informer’s Doom* (1683), by that eccentric pioneer of the modern literary market, John Dunton. Justice Implacable, a persecutor of good Christians, is tried, convicted and hanged. When his body is cut open, it is found to contain twelve informers, two constables and Mr. Envy Good, “the chief Informer in Utopia”, who prefers to “inform against a good Preacher than a Bawdy-house, a Drunkard, or a Swearer” (34, 43). Like Stockton, but also like the authors of *The Informer’s Lecture to his Sons*, and *The Second Character*, Dunton seems to condemn informing outright, but then suggests that it could be righteously directed against the vicious and immoral. In this he and his like anticipate the next stage in the history of the informer’s public image.²

3. Instruments for Reformation

The wave of apologies for and defences of informing which poured from the presses around the turn of the seventeenth-eighteenth century came almost wholly from members and supporters of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners (from here on referred

² My brief notice of *The Informer’s Doom* (Clegg 2002) failed to register how frequently the dissenting literature of the 1680s points to “proper” targets for informers.

to as SRMs). Probably originating in a decision by a group of Tower Hamlets residents to take legal action against brothels and prophaners of the Sabbath, the movement was supported by both Queens Mary and Anne, and initially by the Anglican establishment. It was soon able to boast 30 societies in London alone, while others flourished in Bristol, Edinburgh and Dublin. Members were typically skilled craftsmen or tradesmen, in religion low church Anglican or dissenters (Shoemaker 1992: 114; Barnard 1992: 814). Curtis and Speck (1976: 48-52) distinguish Reformers from more introspective protestants by their firm beliefs in the real existence of God and the Devil, and of the eternal struggle between them; in the nature of man as, on the one hand, sinful yet capable of regeneration, on the other social and communal. From these beliefs followed a deep conviction of the duty to take social action, interfering in the lives of others in the name of right and in order to prevent the infection of the healthy by the vicious. For the SRMs only a radical reform of morals could forestall divine revenge in the form of natural and/or political disasters (earthquakes, storms, the return of the catholic Stuarts to the throne of England), and deleterious effects of sin on the economy, on the mental and physical health of the people, on the condition of the family, and ultimately on the defence of the nation (a vicious, sick and effeminate population would be incapable of bearing arms).

As for the means by which this war on sin was to be fought, there was talk of national fasting and of barring sinners from communion, private admonition and propaganda; but the main weapon in the Reformers' arsenal was prosecution under the statutes. Names and numbers were published in annual black lists explicitly designed to gratify the members, encourage recruits and – though this was not stated – shame evildoers. *A Black List* for 1698, for instance, triumphantly gave the names, followed by "B" for "Bawd", "W" for "Whore", "P.P." for "Pick-Pocket" etc., of 752 "Lewd and Scandalous Persons" prosecuted that year by the London societies, and "Punished (many of them divers times) either by Carting, Whiping [sic], Fining, Imprisonment, or Suppressing their Licences". Not included in the 752 are "many Notorious Cursers, Swearers, Sab-

bath-Breakers, and Drunkards". By 1738 the Societies were claiming 101,683 successful prosecutions in 44 years (Bahlman 1957: 62).

Who actually initiated all these cases? In many cases constables, but it is a common complaint that the officers of the law, who were part-time and unsalaried, were either unwilling or too busy to put the excellent existing laws into execution. As in other areas of law enforcement, therefore, paid informers became crucial to the Reformers' success in the courts. It has been estimated that in 1691 between 150 and 200 were active in London alone (Goldie 1997: 67), and in the words of one contemporary writer these employees became "so highly instrumental in this undertaking that they may be reckoned as the very cornerstone of it" (cited in Curtis and Speck 1976: 53).

Unlike other kinds of informers, however, reforming informers cannot have looked directly to the courts for their pickings. By the late seventeenth century thief-takers were receiving substantial fixed rewards for evidence leading to the conviction of highwaymen, deserters and even petty thieves, but except in the case of prophanation of the Sabbath, fines for manners offences were destined for relief of the poor. Reformers had, therefore, to pay their informers themselves. In taking law enforcement into their own "private Hands", they were in practice committing themselves to employing a private police force. The authors of the 1694 *Proposals for a National Reformation of Manners* solemnly declared, *à propos* of "The INSTRUMENT for Reformation", that

We agree, upon our own Costs and Charges to imploy [sic] and maintain a competent Number of such fitting Persons, as we shall choose, to assist the several Constables and other Officers [...] by observing and taking notice of all those, that for the time to come, shall impudently dare [...] to Swear and Curse. To profane the Lord's Day, or be guilty of the loathsome Sin of Drunkenness; also by searching out the lurking Holes of Bawds, Whores, and other filthy Miscreants, in order to their Conviction and Punishment according to Law. (24-"29"³)

To find so deeply involved in the employment of informers

³ The pages are misnumbered, "23" being followed by "29".

members of those same dissenting groups who had, a generation earlier, lamented their own sufferings at their hands, suggests a strangely short memory. "Astonishingly" – Goldie's word – in at least one case, that of John Dunton, we have an example of a writer who had previously pronounced "The Informer's Doom" now defending him as an honourable servant of society (Goldie 1998: 67). This is less astonishing if we remember how many 1680s tracts had suggested that informing could usefully be directed against just the kinds of moral transgression that now preoccupied the SRMs. As under the Tudors and Stuarts, the point was not to stamp out, but to channel, regulate and in effect reform informing itself.

It was largely to this regulating end, presumably, that the *Proposals for a National Reformation* of 1694 declared that their instruments would be employed on a regular (not *ad hoc*) basis, and specified that

none shall be connived at for Favour or Affection, and none prosecuted out of Malice or Hatred. And to the end that nothing may be done illegally, we will have frequent Recourse to those that are learned in the Law. (*Ibid.*: "29")

It was no doubt with the help of these "learned in the Law" that the Societies began in 1700 publishing a series of handbooks for "Magistrates and Ministers, and the Direction and Encouragement of private Persons engaged [sic] in the Glorious Work of Reformation". The first *Help to National Reformation* appeared in 1700, only to be regularly up-dated and distributed round the country by members of the Societies for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (Bahlman 1957: 5). These succinct, clearly written manuals distilled into portable volumes all a reforming informer would need on his city walks: the texts of the latest royal proclamations; specimen agreements for forming an SRM; abstracts of the penal laws against prophaneness and vice in table form (each offence listed with reference to the statute book and corresponding penalty); a blank warrant and "Prudential Rules for the Giving of Informations to the Magistrates in these Cases" (Anon. 1700: title page).

These "Prudential Rules" or "Methods" are particularly interest-

only to be more effective, but also to improve their self-presentation. This in turn would presumably help mitigate hostility and encourage others to join the ranks. And the fact that all this is *published*, and widely distributed, helps show the public at large that reforming informers, like so many other professional and other social groups of this period, had methods, rules and regulations, a stock of prudence as well as of zeal. They were not, therefore, the loose canon, fanatical meddlers, malignant and/or predatory scum of common opinion.

4. *Pious and Useful Persons*

This, of course, betrays the persistence of that common opinion, a persistence attested to also by the appearance of several tracts dedicated to defending informing. The second part of *A Friendly Discourse concerning Profane Cursing and Swearing* (1697a) has this purpose, as does the whole of Josiah Woodward's *A Short Vindication of those Pious and Useful persons who give Informations* [1701: 1-3]. In the same year Francis Grant, Lord Cullen, published (anonymously) *A Vindication of Informers* which uses many of Woodward's arguments, but is fuller, more systematic and interesting for its class perspective. Impelled by the worry that the bad name of informers was responsible for the fact that

not so many, as might have been expected, have been pleased to shew their Love to GOD and their Neighbours, by giving INFORMATION. (1701: 3)

Grant sets out to answer six

Objections made by Ill or Ignorant Men, against those Pious and Useful Persons, who out of Love to GOD and their Neighbours, do reckon themselves obliged in Conscience, to Inform against the Vicious.

To the first of these, that informing is ungentlemanly and unneighbourly, Grant responds that he who prevents the ruin of his community "deserves the Character of a Gentleman, a good Christian Neighbour and Countrey Man" (*ibid.*: 8). The second objec-

ing in that they allow us to deduce which kinds of imprudence (and cunning) were felt to need regulating. The first instruction, "give no Information where the Matter of Fact is any ways doubtful", raises general epistemological issues made specific in the second, which recommends "Caution and Prudence in judging when a Man is *Drunk*": reeling, staggering, and faltering speech are usually sufficient indicators, but may be due to "natural Infirmary or Defect". The third advises informers to remember the exact words of oaths and curses, the fourth not to prosecute for "tipling" unless on the Lord's Day. Method five gives free rein to informing against bakers, barbers, shoemakers "or any other Tradesmen, carrying out their *Work* and *Ware* [on the Lord's Day]; and against all kind of *Manual Labour*", while six urges caution in informing against selling of goods by "those that live in Cellars".⁴ Number seven, which warns against the use of "any Artifice to provoke or draw in others to the Breach of the Laws", suggests that reforming informers were not averse to the kind of tricks for which thief-takers were becoming notorious, and which earned informers the underworld cant name "trap". The last, recommending "Deference and Respect" to magistrates, reflects the insubordinate and at times threatening attitude which reformers felt justified in assuming towards social betters who failed to prosecute or convict energetically enough, and/or whose own behaviour did not come up to the reformers' standards (Anon 1700: D3r-D4v).

The SRM *Helps* are of special interest for reforming informing for a number of connected reasons. Firstly, they bureaucratize the practice through the provision of tables, forms, model warrants and so on, all of which prevent mistakes and therefore render prosecution successful. This bureaucratization has, moreover, a rhetorical function: it presents the process of private prosecution as orderly, clear and precise, structured by rites and formulae which confer social sanctions. The blank warrants and model agreements, like the "Prudential Rules", also constitute a form of damage control. By modifying actual behaviour on the street they help informers not

⁴ As with drunks, problems of interpretation were involved. Cellar-dwellers needed to air their belongings, which could be misinterpreted as putting out for sale.

tion, that informing occasions discord, is rebutted on the grounds that it is vice that destroys concord. To the third, that informers are ridiculed as foolish bigots, Grant responds with exalted praise of "Brave Soldiers, under the Conduct of Christ" fighting a "Heroick Quarrel". To inform is "Honourable, Equitable, and Charitable", but by no means enjoyable (!):

can they imagine that we have any pleasure in Informing and Witnessing before Humane Tribunals, and confirming our evidence by solemn and sacred Oaths? No sure, This is most unpleasant Work, and very far from being our Choise [sic]. (*Ibid.*: 10-11)

To charges of ineffectiveness Grant replies that shame and punishment will raise serious thoughts, while the accusation of meddling is rejected in the name of duty. Finally, to the objection that suppressing disorderly houses will reduce revenue, he responds with typical snobbishness that the ale-houses in question are mostly in the wynds, back lanes and closes,

kept by the Meaner and Baser Sort of People, (most of them not Burgesses,) and are common Receptacles of Whores, Thieves, and Idel Vagabonds, Reseters of Stollen Goods. (*Ibid.*: 12-13)

Grant's was just one of several attempts to gentrify informing, and his rhetoric of heroic Christian militancy and martyrdom is a common idiom. In December 1708 Dr. Thomas Bray urged his Mary-le-Bow congregation to act their "proper Part" in

this vastly extended war! Why? If you find yourselves possesst of a Noble and heroic Spirit, if you feel in your Breasts a generous Ardour, if you thirst for Glory, and affect the Post of Honour, turn Informers. These are they who offer and present themselves for the Grand Attacque; These bravely scale the Walls of Sin; These carry off the Devil's Vassals Captives after them, halling [sic] them to the Tribunal of the Christian Magistrate. (1709: 23-24)

Not all the devil's vassals were willing to be hauled off to suffer condign punishment. Shortly after Bray's sermon a "mean man" named John Dent, who for over 17 years had aided in "apprehending and prosecuting" the lewd and prophane, was killed by three soldiers. At his funeral Bray congratulated the 1000 or so mourners,

especially two pall-bearing Justices of the Peace, over 30 constables and beadles, 20-30 clergy and a "great Train of other Gentlemen of Quality" (Bray 1709b: [1]). One wonders whether two J.P.s constituted such a good turnout by the judicial establishment.

5. *Reforming Informers*

In the second and third decades of the eighteenth century the SRMs went into decline, the work of reformation passing into the hands of the Societies for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, whose educational approach generated less social conflict. Informers remained a shadowy and unloved category throughout the eighteenth century, despised by their employers and hated by their victims. Swift, writing in 1709, deplored the reform movement's decline into "a trade to enrich little knavish informers of the meanest rank, such as common constables and broken shopkeepers" (1957: 57). In the same year the street responded enthusiastically to Sachaverell's attack on the SRMs' "troublesome wasps [...] Illegal Inquisitors" with their "Idel, Incroaching and *Meddling Curiosity*" (Sachaverell 1709: 15, 20; Burt 1992: 58). Increasingly used to control political opposition in the middle decades of the century, informers were among the favourite butts of the Tory satirists;⁵ and of the 200 or so informers who initiated prosecutions under the Gin Acts of the 1730s several paid with their lives. When Henry and John Fielding began experimenting with salaried detectors in the 1750s, they were hard put to it to distinguish their "real thief-takers" men from the "traps"; indeed several of their first recruits had been "traps" (Paley 1989: 330-331; Beattie 2001: 420-421).

Yet it is important that they put such an effort into making that distinction. Both directly by argument and indirectly by means of the orderly and scrupulous organization of their Bow Street intelligence operation, the Fieldings forced another step in the direction of making informing respectable. Without attributing any direct influ-

⁵ Gulliver is ruined by informers in Lilliput, and Gay's name for Jonathan Wild in *The Beggar's Opera*, Peachum, isolates informing as his main activity.

ence, I would suggest that the SRMs' attempt to re-invent the informer in the public imagination was not a total failure. For one thing, the idea that informing could be regulated in the service of society filtered into detection of property and other offences. A turn-of-the-century manual for informers working against transgressors of the trade laws concludes with an initially hostile innkeeper conceding to a "Common Informer" that "I shall hereafter rather give you the Title of a Reformer, than that of an Informer" (Anon. 1697b: 301). *A Dialogue between Fidelity and Honesty, alias an Informer and a Cheat*, of two years later, debates the ethics of informing as against those of solidarity and obedience in the context of profiteering by naval commanders. In conclusion Justice proclaims Informer "Supporter and main Pillar of the Law", and condemns as self-interested the arguments of "Honesty, and Friendly, with his Wife Civility" (the latter's aliases are "Fraud and Deceit") (Anon. 1699: 23). In the second and third decades of the next century both the notorious "Thief-Taker General" Jonathan Wild and his teacher, Charles Hitchen, appropriated motifs from the SRMs' rhetoric of public service, and Wild especially shared their love of watching and recording (see Clegg 2003).

Wild's role in gathering and organizing information about the modern city has been highlighted and likened to that of the early modern novelist by Bender (1987: 139-150). Yet compared to his 150 odd capital convictions, the SRMs' 100,000 plus successful prosecutions speak of surveillance on a huge scale. Their rules, lists, tables and annual accounts both reflect and solicit a penetrating curiosity about, a desire to collect, categorize and interpret the behaviour of others. What is more, those others were often neighbours, social peers or even superiors, rather than thieves, robbers or spectacular swindlers, and the behaviour that interested the reformers and their informers was much more ordinary than that which interested thief-takers or political spies. The people SRM informers observed were, on the whole, going about what they probably considered their normal business (shaving beards, selling fruit and vegetables), or indulging in widely-tolerated transgressions: alcohol, strong language, adultery, sex for money.

The information(s) gathered by the SRMs found expression in narrative forms as well as in statistics, sermons and rule books. While, in the literary market-place, criminal biographies satisfied a need and desire to read about the exploits of the hanged and transported and, at the opposite extreme, the secret histories of Behn and Manley exposed the scandalous doings of the great, the curiosity harnessed by and stimulated by the Reformation of Manners was fed and encouraged by the kind of non-fiction out of which the confessional, didactic, realistic novel was to come.⁶ Dunton, who stuffed his own *Life and Errors* with intimate details of his own life, lists and "information about his contemporaries" (Hunter 1990: 332), claims to have spent eight months observing and conversing with whores in preparation for *The Night Walker*, and thought that his accounts would do more good than the black lists. He also planned *A History of Living Men*, inviting friends and correspondents to send in "their true characters" and threatening them with exposure if they failed to do so (1974: 357). Dunton expected the *History* to be of "Great use to promote the Reformation now on Foot; for we are led by Examples, more than Precepts" (*ibid.*: 365). The project did not come off, but more modestly conceived histories of the living did. Ned Ward's *London Spy*, Steele and Addison's *Spectator* and Haywood's *Female Spectator* all present themselves as genteel and cultured versions of the reformed informer, watching the world in order to correct it. Defoe, who used the language of reformation in his early political propaganda, was for a time a member of the Edinburgh SRM, and when he did attack the movement it was with its own weapons, naming the names of reformers who did not practise what they preached (Novak 2001: 128-135 and 171). His later narratives and novels too respond to that morally impelled curiosity about contemporary life which the reformers had fed and channelled. In *The Plague Year*, that "epic of confinement and surveillance" (Carnochan 1977: 71), attempts to control the spread of the plague turn on the "setting of neighbour against neigh-

⁶ Didacticism, together with a tendency to "portray aberrant behaviour" and "invade traditional areas of privacy", are among the "ignored or underrated features" of the early novel discussed by Hunter (1990: 36, 39, 55).

bour", while H.F. is both "watchman" of and informer on an urban sickness which is as moral as it is physical (*ibid.*: 75). In this he anticipates and promotes what Martin Kayman (1992: 51) calls "the transition from a narrative based on crime to one based on detection". The literary invention of the detective may well owe much to the SRMs' efforts to launder the reputations of those commonly considered no better than rat-catchers. Those efforts also, no doubt, fed into what William Warner (1998) calls the "elevation" of novel reading, and the transformation of the professional novelist from a mercenary scandal-monger into a "Pious and Useful" citizen whose observation of – and stories about – society will, it is hoped, lead to the elimination of the very vices of which they tell.

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