

Robinson Crusoe: Isle of Providences

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□ ABSTRACT □

This paper confronts the question of which kind of reading Robinson Crusoe calls for. It is probably a mistake to see Defoe's novels as organized in relation to some category, but it is also misleading to see them as mazes without plans. The paper favours the view that the narrative is allocated to the broad kinds of travel writing, the main concern of which is volatility, that a dynamic restlessness is Crusoe's curse and his glory. Unlike Swift, who makes horses talk or islands fly, Defoe's travel book is not spun of the stuff of the marvelous inventions, but is built together as real and natural. The book seems to exploit the ideas of jeopardy and security which can be seen in the author's biography or career, one which shows an extraordinary combination of caution and recklessness. The difficulties, risks and traumas that occur are the stuff of the narrative. Accordingly, the life of Robinson Crusoe is not offered as an analysis in terms of sin and salvation nor is his new status seen as a reward for repentance. In some ways, the paper also suggests that Defoe's fiction effects a compromise between his adventurism and his desire for security by letting his imagination take the risk in a fairly safe-market.

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□ الملخص □

يحاول البحث أن يحدد إلى أي نوع من الروايات تنتمي "روبنسون كروزو" ويخلص إلى أن السرد القصصي فيها يجعلها تنطوي تحت عنوان واسع هو "أدب الرحلات" الذي يركز خاصة على التقلب وعدم الاستقرار، حيث تُظهر الرواية إحساس البطل المتكرر بالخطر والأمان على التوالي، والذي يعكس بدوره حياة الكاتب الخاصة. من هنا يستنتج البحث أن نيفو لا يقفم سيرة روبنسون على أنها رحلة الخطيئة والتوبة والخلص، بل يحاول الجمع من خلالها بين رغبته في المغامرة ونزعه لتوفير الأمان والاستقرار.

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Robinson Crusoe is the first fictional narrative in which the daily activities of an ordinary person are the centre of literary attention. Defoe's novel is a story of the way material space and physical things reflect the drive and the fantasies of the individual. Ian Watt tried to discern an individualist pattern of life in the novel on the economic as well as on the religious levels⁽¹⁾. According to him, economic individualism explains much of Crusoe's character, and it is puritan individualism which controls his being. Robinson Crusoe thus, in the context of his age, was said to reflect modern capitalism by pursuing money and was simultaneously considered as a religious explorer who exploits psychological potentialities of conventional religious notions like fear, guilt, agonies of repentance and wrestling with conscience.

Robinson Crusoe is presented as offering a great variety of delights. The title page promises the adventures to be "written by himself"⁽²⁾ and reveals the editor's concern that all the book's thrills and adventures be mentioned. The editor is making a stylistic comment as much as judgement about content here: truth is not the record of what happened merely, but the believability of the mode of writing that conveys it, or something like it. The genre which immediately supervises reading, therefore, is the genre of the realistic traveller's tale with which readers were familiar then. In the preface, it becomes clear that the book's tactics are to endanger the hero persistently, so that the book is finally about escape and rescue and about danger and imprisonment before that. It is as though greater self-punishment is needed for Crusoe to realize his full potentials: "but I must go and leave the happy view I had of being a rich and thriving man in my new plantation, only to pursue a rash and immoderate desire of rising faster than the nature of the thing admitted" (*Robinson Crusoe*, P.58). The preface ends with a promise that Crusoe will survive his dangers through the benignity of providence, and so the most dangerous threat is spiritual rather than material. Crusoe's departure from home is controversial. Critics have disagreed greatly about how best to read it. Some attribute it to Crusoe's personal characteristics, which he lists as imprudence, lack of trade, lack of desire to settle and wanderlust. Some critics interpret the departure as a sin and they are helped to do so by Crusoe's own remarks who sees himself as having acted "against the will, nay the commands of my father" (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.27). For modern critics, the part of the book which seems most perplexing is Crusoe's relationships with his God. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of response to the book's spiritual concerns. First of all, there are those critics who stress Defoe's materialism and his concern with individual self-assertion in a hostile environment. Thus Ian Watt interprets the departure as an argument about "profit", "Crusoe's only vocation"⁽³⁾ For such writers, Defoe has at best a superficial and conventional interest in religion, which the intelligent reader does well to ignore. Opposed to these views are those which are committed to a providential reading of events, seeing in Defoe's work a great debt to the puritan habits of thinking. In the words of Pat Rogers, "the most striking single development in our recent understanding of the novel has lain in the rediscovery of a pervasive spiritual motif"⁽⁴⁾ Certainly, there are materials for such religious reading ranging from scattered references to providence to the discovery of Crusoe's Christian faith, and his sense that his entire life is ruled by God's will.

Another approach finds it more likely that Crusoe leaves home because he is a figure in that kind of travel writing, where "the narrator must be impelled to travel... and he must be in a fit state to produce reliable reports of his experiences".⁽⁵⁾ For the tale to be effective, in this respect, the hero has to leave home, and so Crusoe does. Apart from the narrative demands, there would be no reason for Defoe to dwell on Crusoe's decision. Accordingly, we should account for Crusoe's behaviour by

considering the wilderness that Defoe found characteristic of man in general, and of youth in particular.

So, it becomes clear that Defoe's opening signals to the readers the conflicting narrative demands with which the author is dealing: the tale will be one of adventure and -recklessness, one of moral discovery, and a lesson in the objective values of home economics. The focus is so exclusively on the narrator that we are told almost nothing about the secondary characters. Crusoe is simply the son who wonders; he acts on compulsion and that seems to be his lot. A person for Defoe has no distinction, really, until events are filtered through his consciousness, until impulses, desires and inclinations are fully played out. The measure of Crusoe's hard-won settlement on his island is the degree to which his impulses force him to avoid too easy a settlement at home or in Brazil. Accordingly, the view that this paper favours and illustrates tends to see *Robinson Crusoe* in terms of stability and instability, danger and survival, especially that the narrative neither begins nor closes in stability, and each of the relative threats can be seen as a necessary feature of travel literature, the main concern of which is volatility.

This view entails an underestimation of other interpretations of the narrative, the act of departure in particular. First, Watt's argument for economic self-assertion which dismisses all considerations of religious and emotional comfort is seen to be unfair. Few critics today still read *Robinson Crusoe* as a simple fable of the economic man.⁽⁶⁾ To interpret the father's speech in material terms is to dismiss the appeal of the adventure and the theological aspects of the story. Crusoe's dilemma on the island resists systematic economic analysis because everything is coloured by his isolation. Defoe was "aware that economic systems consist of more than one isolated man, and that Crusoe's products were objects of personal utility. Moreover, there is reason to read the speech as subtly ironic. The image is striking: an old man with gout (the result of excessive drinking) telling a young man with a wandering lust not to be himself, not to play the young man. (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.27) Given Defoe's attacks on drinking, this small detail cancels the appeal of the advice. The life of ease that the father represents is plagued, especially when we remember that none of his sons paid any attention to him. The story is less about production and more about the relation of control to insecurity, and power to fear. The subtle defining of self surrounded by property as home is part of the island psychology in the narrative. Defoe holds to the notion that provision is part of one's providence. To be a better person is to make use of the material world at our disposal.

On the other hand, and although the novel works and reworks the motions of providence and conversion, it is misleading, I think, to make these into the theme of the book. Crusoe sees his departure as a sin that leads to providential delivery; the tale finds partial residence within this pattern, but many features which disrupt it cannot be ignored. This is even a more tricky and serious question than Watt's claims of economic individualism. Selective quotations will no doubt reveal the island as a personal and interpretable text designed for Crusoe's conversion. But it is notable too that Crusoe's interpretations, like Gulliver's, are his own, and the reader may draw other conclusions. The religious interpretation excludes much in the book that involves Crusoe's character. It is true that Defoe incorporates some features of spiritual biography but he restricts their significance.

First of all, doubts can be raised about how unambiguously Defoe has made the departure seem sinful. Crusoe develops a guilty conscience and commits, in his own mind, a sinful act by acting against the commands of his father and giving in to his own "rambling thoughts" to which he attributes his "life of misery" *Robinson*

Crusoe, p.27). But the hard conscience to which he refers, is rarely a quality that he exhibits. What defines him is not a guilty conscience but a changing one. He always runs his way, showing how difficult it is to make personal behaviour conform to abstract principles of conduct. He is a prey to radical shifts of sentiments and a tendency to confuse what he ought to do with what he thinks he ought to do. A little sunshine on the sea banishes the reproach of his conscience and dismisses his concern with the storm as a warning. (*Robinson Crusoe* 32-7) Later, although scared, he refuses his companion's advice to go back. Trading the happiness of the middle state for such an unstable situation makes us believe that Crusoe's sin is rashness not disobedience, and his act is one of folly rather than immorality. Moreover, reading Defoe, one feels that, for him, filial duty is an obligation open to negotiation. Crusoe never quite sorts out sin from impulse, and, accordingly, he ceases to see a didactic pattern in his adventures, nor does he see his status as a reward for repentance.

Defoe's engagement in religion is inseparable from his interest in the material human stories. Religion in *Robinson Crusoe* takes on a psychological rather than a dogmatic dimension; it takes local shapes, local habitations and is never divorced from the practical realities of life. Crusoe's relationship with providence is more casual within the narrative than a hasty reading of the preface would have us believe. More specifically, Crusoe is interested more in religious phenomena, ghosts, dreams, second sights and visions rather than in doctrinal disputes. In fact, the world through which Crusoe moves is more obviously fraught with dangers than with sources of comfort (including religion). It shows the essential isolation of Crusoe and depicts his struggle to assimilate himself into his threatened world. The situation on the island is reminiscent of the situation of York where Crusoe finds himself in a strange environment with a new name conferred upon him: "was called Robinson Kreutzua, but by the usual *Corruption* of words in England, we are now called.... Crusoe" (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.27. emphasis is mine). The reference to corruption here may be casual but it is not insignificant. York is not hostile but it is certainly foreign. Crusoe reminds us that the stability of his domestic life is at best temporary. Moreover, there is a history of wandering in his family. References to jeopardy are intensified when Crusoe mentions his two brothers whose careers were similarly violent and hectic. Hence, outside York, the world is uncertain, hazardous and threatening.

Similarly, the world of the island is more terrifying than the mere existence of another person or the sense of being perpetually watched (even by God) would be a source of anxiety and jeopardy. In the fictional world of the voyager, there is greater emphasis on the observable and anticipated dangers of the world, that the handling of providence seems intrusive and disinteresting, a means to an end. When Crusoe does concern himself with providence, it is evident that he is seeking to understand his experience, interpret his dreams and find a pattern in his existence. To set a man on an empty island means that everything has to be converted to Crusoe's use to have significance. Hence, the unease with which the idea is occasionally handled shows that Defoe may have been reacting against spiritual generic expectations.

The language of sorrow and repentance is abundant in the tale; terms of sin are more explicitly stated after the second storm, but here, as elsewhere, Crusoe's immediate concern is with survival, not salvation. Yet Crusoe persists in his roaming, sin lurking at the back of his mind, and rambling impulses driving him forward.

So, there is a tension between respect for providence and the hectic rush of the narrator's life. Crusoe learns not to take a step without a counter step, not to entertain a thought without adding up the risks and benefits. The trick in such a life is to set the balance in one's favour. Crusoe knew that risk is an essential part of the life of the

merchant adventurer, but sensible protection from disaster is necessary to stimulate a sensible element of risk. Defoe never fully suggests that providence is in full control of events nor does he opt for the individual's firm grip of his destiny. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the two forces of providence and randomness are necessary for the adventures to be formally coherent. Crusoe sets off on his journey through life in a state of relative innocence "acting like a brute from the principle of nature" (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 104). He develops his religious reflections from the ground up. If God had given the individual the prime responsibility for his spiritual destiny (as the puritans think), it follows that he must have made this possible by signifying his intentions to the individual in the events of his daily life. The stirrings of Crusoe's conscience begins with one of his most interesting discoveries that "there was a strange concurrence of days in the various providences which befel me... that the same day I broke away from my father... the same day afterwards I was... made a slave" (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 143). Crusoe does not fully presume to know God's will. He assumes that providence sets out a life in exemplary ways. Therefore, uncertainties shake him again and he dismisses the practice as superstitious and unconvincing as a pattern in his various life.

The function of the religious references then is to show Crusoe's search for security operating on spiritual as well as a material level, and to show how material insecurity leads to spiritual confusion. Crusoe feels severe physical threats, and in each case he is led to a hasty repentance which is never presented as genuine. The corn episode is Defoe's way of saying that the assessment from the human perspective of providential designs can never really get beyond a kind of guess. If the corn grows, it is merely a divine miracle directed for Crusoe's sustenance (until he discovers the perfectly natural cause for that). If he has a bout of fever, it is a review of the miseries of death and a reprobation for failing to show his gratitude for God's mercies throughout the novel (*Robinson Crusoe*, pp.94 and 103). After the earthquake, he utters "Lord ha' mercy upon me" (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.97). This is more reflex than prayer. When he falls sick, he randomly opens the Bible and hints on psalm 50:15 focusing on God's promise of deliverance. He reads further and wanders whether god himself can deliver him from this place. Deliverance is the point then; all delivery is a kind of self-delivery. So, religion is a means of keeping Crusoe alive and his mind intact. There are many occasions throughout the book when Crusoe's religious views seem to be at odds with his behaviour. When subject to a great variety of threats, Crusoe relies on practicality rather than on providence or submission. This arises from the narrative function of providence in Crusoe as a threat to stability and another source of jeopardy through which the narrator must pass. Crusoe does not set out to act in accord with providence, no matter what he thinks or says he does; rather he reads his actions as providential, which in turn, opens the possibility for secularized sequence of events.

Crusoe has to provide for his own security by all means; this is the theology of the book. In a material and psychological sense, provision is what makes much of the *Crusoe* fable. Any apparent moral impropriety on the part of Crusoe can be explained in terms of the formal requirements upon narrative -the requirements of provision- not immediately in terms of moral ideology. Hence, Crusoe does not reveal moral insensitivity when he sells his servant Xury. His is "a wrong" act (his word, p. 55), a mistake rather than a sin. The act ceases to seem disquieting when we remember that the travel narrative should be moving forward until it reaches a climatic point. In the process, secondary characters are discarded of when they become of no further narrative importance. Xury could have taken his leave quietly-having a

heart attack for instance- but Defoe combines Crusoe's need for cash with the narrative need to get rid of Xury. The act is appalling only if the book is read within moral categories; to read it as a voyage tale is to allow for such a rush.

What is implicit in Defoe's narrative is that religious promise must never disappear completely in the face of personal trial or disappointments because that would constitute a confusion of an uncertain present with a future that is providentially disposed. This is the position Crusoe reaches on his island.

A second episode which shows the power of narrative requirements is the one of Crusoe finding the money:

I smiled to my self at the sight of this money. "O drug!" said I aloud, 'what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me, no, not the taking off the ground; one of those knives is worth all this heap;' (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.75)

Aware of the deficiencies of his first thoughts, Crusoe takes the money, reinforcing the idea of immediate utility. It is true that tools are more important than gold now, but there is still nothing to be gained by ignoring it. Moreover, keeping the money for all these years may be a moral gesture that strengthens what Crusoe saw as a social or religious obligation: to counter the despair of isolation. To have chucked the money, as Xury, would have been to assume the permanence of his condition, and Crusoe had real reasons to avoid that pitfall. So, the money fits into the law of utility in that it promises Crusoe another adventure and teaches him more about his role as an adventurer. Crusoe is acquiring prudence in addition to the adventurer's skill at survival.

So, it becomes clear that Crusoe's adventures, and the adventure tale as a genre, are concerned with juxtaposing the hero's control over his destiny, and his destiny's control over him. If the novel were truly an exploration of the providential view of the world, then the narrator would be wholly in control, ensuring comfort by the mere exercise of virtue; this is obviously not the case. The sense of isolation that pervades *Robinson Crusoe*, the terror of the storms, the wild beasts and cannibals evoke a sense of the real power and danger of natural forces. From the beginning, Crusoe seems to lean on a providential view of his escape, 'I walked about on the shore... wrapt up in contemplation of my deliverance' (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.66). The word deliverance alerts us to the religious understanding of his escape, but the following reminder of the deaf friends reinforces the dangerous nature of events. The narrator deliberately diffuses the point to which events are guided by controlling providence or the individual's hard thriving, and so invites the reader to expect uncertainties every few pages.

Having ventured foolishly from Brazil to encounter near death and a 'terrible' salvation, Crusoe finds that he is almost destroyed once more. After witnessing another shipwreck, he stands on the shore, shaking and muttering in despair, against his fate. Before returning to safety, he trades the dangers of the island for the terrifying cries of the wolves. Everytime, the narrator is seen to be concerned with his physical survival, and the least of threats sets him on to greater precautionary effort (foot print-thunder). Since the present business of the narrative is to invent threats and to maintain interest by surprise and sudden intrusion of jeopardy, there is no need to invoke providence except as a device convenient for the presentation of change. Were

we to feel that Crusoe was confidently under God's care, we would be unable to be excited by his danger, for we would know of his safety.

It is very important to see the way the book puts these two possible explanations, the spiritual and the material, on almost equal footing. The hesitation and fluctuation prevent any one view from canceling the other. The reader is unable to decide which of the two explanations is required. Crusoe emphasizes the mysterious yet uncertain presence of God, inviting us to see his life as a pattern of punishment for sin (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 103). But even when he does so, he is inaccurate, and we begin to doubt his insight into his own experience.

Crusoe places his religious observances, "his duty to God" and the reading the scripture", at the top of his daily priorities (p. 126), yet we still encounter very little of his religion and too much of his other activities. There is a discontinuity between the religious aspects of the book and its action, and any attempt to ask whether Crusoe is religious or not seems irrelevant since it seems to discuss a Crusoe existing outside the narrative. Crusoe's God is thus a "narrative assumption" as Ian Bell likes to phrase it⁽⁷⁾. Even Crusoe seems to keep forgetting about his conversion, and still sees himself in a random world of adventure.

Hence, the novel is in a direct and metaphoric sense about varieties of conversion: fear to salvation, nature to nurture, and accident to providence. In his life, Defoe reserved for himself the right and the necessity to take desperate measures to counter desperate situations, and his characters do the same. The way an individual reacts to personal crisis is Defoe's subject in *Robinson Crusoe*. Only on his island, can Crusoe recover and reconstitute his person and his property. Much of the confusion about whose story Defoe actually tells is accounted for by the recurrence of disaster in Defoe's life and his vivid fictional depiction of the theme.

When he feels threatened, Crusoe's most immediate fear is death, not damnation. Part of Defoe's project during the second half of Crusoe's stay on the island is to work through his Castaway's fear, especially that of being devoured or swallowed up. Seeing the footprint, he reveals his priorities again (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 163). His child like fear of being eaten is immediate not considered. The whole trickiness of the narrative is that the narrator does not know what will happen next, and for the excitement of danger to be conveyed successfully. The reflective Crusoe must avoid reassuring us of an overall plan. Crusoe is never held to doubt God's sovereignty, but he sees it only as an 'assumption' that makes his narrative coherent but often ignored in particular recollection.

Crusoe's meditations being to reveal the tension between the requirements of the adventure tale -where uncertainties loom large- and the organization of formal narrative. The episode where Crusoe sees the shining eyes of a dying goat comes to no moral conclusion, but providential intuitions here -references to the devil-increase the scope of adventure by offering another threat, hastily brought in and discarded of. Hints at religious interpretations, which recur again in the parrot scene, do not intervene with the narrative requirements of peace and surprise; they are only conventional. Crusoe always responds to threats in a dual way; he reviews his spiritual condition and improves his fortification, thus adding other thrills to the adventures.

After Crusoe leaves the island, the narrative closes in a leisurely way. He finds about his family, discovers his wealth, and reflects about his past without much emphasis on the miraculous or providential change which befalls him. The conclusion however, includes some religious instruction:

I had some little scruple in my mind about religion, which... drew me back... However, it was not religion that kept me from going there for the present (*Robinson Crusoe*, p.282).

Recalling that he had called himself a Papist in Brazil, Crusoe now wishes he had not. Even religion becomes absorbed into the narrative's concern with comfort and safety. Fervent emotions, religious or otherwise, are equaled here by the narrative's move towards finality and stable closure.

Summing up his experience, Crusoe emphasizes their difuseness rather than coherence. His most direct summary offers no religious sentiments:

and thus I have given the first part of life of fortune and adventure, a life of providence's chequer - work..."(*Robinson Crusoe*, p.294)

The last statement is but a final attempt to incorporate some religious plan into a narrative which requires variety and fortune. The book ends neither fully stable nor whole volatile.

So, it is tempting, but unfair to extract one theme from the book and so typify it. In the travel tale, all the events have the same status. The narrator must be impelled to travel and to produce reports of his experiences, his conversion being only one of these experiences. If Crusoe acts as his own theologian on the island, he also acts as his own psychologist. At the end of his island stay, he behaves in a manner inconsistent with a notion of reflexive obedience. He worries less about defining sin than about slighting secret intimations of providence. He keeps repeating those impulses on the island that his nature is heir to. The island has not so much absolved him as continued him.

The central entrprise of the tale then is to extend a tension between mobility and stability, jeopardy and security. When Crusoe spends so long making a boat he cannot get to sea, the book is offering little fables of the vanity of human wishes. But when it shows us Crusoe successfully building his habitation, or learning home economics, it is offering a more positive understanding of the human capacity to make sense of the world.

Notes

* Here I draw on Charles Gildon's view that he discovered 'father Daniel in Son Robinson, a view that unites author and narrator in an exercise of self-projection. Charles Gildon, *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr. JD... Def...of London Hosier* (London, 1719), ix-x.

1. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1957), pp.78-85.

2. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1719) other references are given in the text.

3. Ian Watt, p.24.

4. Pat Rogers, *Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1979), p.51.

5. Ian bell, *Defoe's Fiction* (London and Sydney, Roudedy, 1985), p. 111.

6. For the best survey, see Maximilian Norak, *Economics and the Fiction of Daniel Defoe* (Berkeley, University of California press, 1962), pp.49-66.

7. IanBeU, p.98.

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