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Robinson Crusoe and Defoe's Career as a Writer

In 1879, in the process of attacking Daniel Defoe as a writer of immoral works of fiction, the novelist Anthony Trollope set aside *Robinson Crusoe* as a work that everyone agreed was an “accident.” He did not elaborate on this comment, but it may be argued, to the contrary, that so far from being an “accident,” Defoe seemed destined to write the work that brought him a degree of fame in his lifetime and continued fame over the centuries following his death in 1731.¹ Although he achieved some notoriety in the first decade of the eighteenth century as the writer of controversial political poetry, pamphlets, and journals, he sprinkled these works liberally with short fictions; so much so that one critic complained that this was his only real talent. It was not. From the very beginning, those critics who were not biased against him because of his Whiggish politics, his status as a religious Dissenter, and his pugnacious defense of his ideas recognized the vividness of his style and his ability to write powerful narratives, whether of battles, scenes of riots, or accounts of infamous Jacobite gatherings, forceful in a manner to be discovered in few of his contemporaries.

The publication date of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, April 25, 1719, was significant as well. It reflected a time when publishers had begun to recognize a growing audience demand for book-length fiction. It would be a mistake to speak of an imaginary audience eagerly awaiting the publication of Defoe's work, as Richard Altick absurdly imagined the audience for the novels of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding,² but, aside from an amazing ability to involve readers in a work in which, once Crusoe lands on his island, almost “nothing” adventurous happens for almost fifteen years, until the discovery of the cannibal's footprint, there was much in Defoe's masterpiece that played to developing attitudes and interests of the time – ideas of isolation, concepts of the importance of the private life, a sense of exploring a new world, notions of the nobility of labor, and a fascination with the primitive. Along with these, the concept of what may be called anachronistically the Robinsonade, though

hardly original with Defoe, seemed to strike a chord with Defoe's and with future audiences. Island fictions became popular in Britain and the rage in Germany, where that term was invented.

Before entering into an account of Defoe's writings before *Robinson Crusoe*, I want to address the notion argued by Defoe in his *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, the third and last of the *Crusoe* series, to the effect that the first two volumes were an allegorical account of his (Crusoe's and/or Defoe's) life and hence an allegory of his career as a writer. Having been exposed as the author of what purported to be an autobiography of a Robinson Crusoe,³ Defoe, still writing as Crusoe, argued in his preface that his work was to be regarded as "Allegorick History."⁴ He maintained that all of his reflections were a "just History of a State of forc'd Confinement, which in my real History is represented by a confin'd Retreat in an Island; and it is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent any Thing that really exists by that which exists not."⁵ He then proceeded to enumerate all the incidents of his story: there really was a parrot, the footprint in the sand, and a Friday. For all his swearing to the truth of his statements, as if he were signing a legal document, all that we can actually rely upon from this seeming statement of fact, aside from its being a brilliant general defense of fiction, is that Defoe's writings on contemporary politics, both secular and religious, were so often controversial that he was indeed put into prison on a number of occasions. In so far, then, as Crusoe's island experience, which Crusoe at one point describes as being "a prisoner lock'd up with the eternal bars and bolts of the ocean,"⁶ might bear some relationship to Defoe's imprisonment for using his talents to express his viewpoints in print, there is a degree of truth to Defoe's claim. And it may be allowed that Defoe felt deeply enough the anguish of these times in prison to have felt some imaginative empathy with Crusoe's island experience.

Defoe's earliest manuscripts, dating from around 1682 to 1684, have certain fictional interests and hence some relationship with *Robinson Crusoe*. The first involved a series of poetic meditations recounting his personal religious struggles. These certainly have importance in relation to Crusoe's discovery of his need for the comforts of religious belief, but while these were far more than exercises, the meditation, as a poetic form, was well established during the seventeenth century. More interesting are the "Historical Collections," a series of brief prose narratives with particular, pointed morals. These fell under the genre known as the apothegm, or brief fictions, which were popular at the end of the seventeenth century. Defoe's collection was dedicated to his future wife, Mary Tuffley (given the romance name Clarinda), and was almost certainly intended to give her an idea of his

personality. They were fictions with a purpose, but it is surprising how many concerned events involving the emerging of powerful character to meet some difficult challenge. One, of particular interest to students of Defoe as the future creator of realist fiction, involved the ancient Greek painter, Zeuxis, who destroyed a painting for its failure to be real enough.⁷

What contemporary fiction did he read? He occasionally spoke of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. He certainly knew popular picaresque fictions, mentioning *The Spanish Rogue* and *The English Rogue* and seemingly drawing on *The French Rogue* for Crusoe's interview with his father. *The English Rogue*, from which he drew material for his novel, *Roxana*, was essentially a piece of libertine fiction, but as with his admiration for the libertine poet, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, this did not seem a barrier to his enjoyment.⁸ It is hard to tell how many "novels," the successors to the long historical French romances, he might have read. The magnificent *Princess de Cleves*, by Madame de Lafayette, might have seemed to be too much about love to interest him. But he certainly knew the popular first-person fictional memoirs, which were the specialty of Courtilz de Sandras (1644–1712).⁹ Of course he knew John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but although he often used brief allegories to illustrate economic or political arguments in his journal, the *Review*, begun in 1704, he never attempted a lengthy allegory of the kind written by Bunyan. His attraction to picaresque fiction, with its realist depiction of the lowest ends of society, was certainly a more important influence upon his writing.

After working as an effective propagandist for William III, especially in his role as a writer and political activist in moving the country toward war with France and publishing his first book, *An Essay upon Projects* (1697), dealing with the social and economic possibilities of contemporary England,¹⁰ Defoe emerged from relative anonymity in 1700 as the author of a poetic satire, *The True-Born Englishman*, a clever attack upon English xenophobia through a rehearsal of the numerous peoples who had populated England over the centuries and an ironic assault upon ideas of racial purity. For many years afterwards, he identified his writings as being "By the Author of the True-Born Englishman." In 1702, Defoe got into severe trouble by impersonating the voice of a High Church bigot advocating the persecution of the Dissenters in England in a pamphlet with the title *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. Ian Watt suggested that Defoe was too much a writer of fiction to allow a break in the narrative that would have permitted the audience to recognize the irony of the text – to reveal the viciousness of the Anglican priest, whose genocidal attitude toward a religious minority should have shocked, and indeed did shock, its readers.¹¹ Certainly Defoe, the satiric writer of 1702, might have considered as too obvious the "concession"

section of Jonathan Swift's ironic *Modest Proposal* (1729) in which Swift provided positive solutions for Ireland's problems. As contemporary readers would have had no trouble recognizing, there was enough in the extreme positions of Defoe's Churchman to reveal the irony, but it is also possible, as he maintained, that he wanted incompetent readers, those who felt a deep prejudice against the Dissenters, to take his High Churchman as a genuine figure.¹² Defoe created him with all his uncontrolled anger bursting out of him, wittily triumphing over his enemies, and violating all the rules that held society together. It showed a precocious ability to create character, but it also brought with it imprisonment, a large fine, and the pillory. It should have taught Defoe a lesson, but in 1713, he published three pamphlets with provocative titles written through the viewpoints of somewhat dim-witted narrators, who argued against (but just barely) bringing in the family of James II to rule England after Queen Anne's demise: "Reasons against the Succession of the House of Hanover," and "What if the Pretender Should Come? Or, some Considerations of the Advantages and real Consequences of the Pretender's Possessing the Crown of Great Britain," and "An Answer to a Question that No Body thinks of, viz. But what if the Queen should die?" At that time, he was rescued by his patron, Robert Harley, the Lord Treasurer, and by the Queen. But his enemies never let him forget it. The judge hearing the case said that a writer might hang for using such irony.

In 1704, Defoe put together a work called *The Storm*, a series of narratives about the storm of the previous year – a mixture of science, religion, and human interest – with a slight fictional interest, and in that year, he also started his journal, the *Review*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. But in 1705, he produced his first full-length work of fiction in the form of a voyage to the moon – what we would think of as science fiction. Defoe clearly read the early moon voyages with their mixture of satire and fantasy – the works of Bishop Francis Godwin (*The Man in the Moone* [1638]), Bishop John Wilkins (*Discovery of a World in the Moone* [1638]), and Cyrano de Bergerac (*Histoire comique* [1656]) – but his real influence was Jonathan Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, first published in 1704. Defoe read the narrative by Swift's half-insane advocate for modern thought as a rationale for frequently obscure allusions to contemporary politics. On the other hand, his account of the moon inventions is often clever enough, and his use of the relatively new Savery steam engine¹³ as a space vehicle was in line with the way science fiction would use scientific inventions as a central device. That this "rocket ship" is also made an allegory for the British Parliament, however, only adds to the confusion. But Defoe never gave up on fantasy as a possible genre. He has Crusoe walking among the planets in *Serious Reflections*, the third volume of *Robinson Crusoe*.

After *The Consolidator*, Defoe concentrated on his political and economic journalism. But voyages, islands, and global geography were never far from his mind. In various works, he might lapse into speaking of how people who would be thrown on a desert island would establish government as their first act. Or, as in his *General History of Trade* (1713), he might contemplate the circulation of wealth, distribution of goods around the world, and the division of labor – economic themes that were to impact his thinking in writing *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*. As mentioned earlier, he would occasionally employ allegory in describing economic, political, and social situations. And in several issues of his *Review* of June 21 and 23, 1711, he would engage in lengthy economic and political allegories to describe how society was constructed:

NECESSITY – was a Female Bastard of an Ancient Family, Begotten in the earliest Ages of the World by Male *Pride*, upon the Body of Female *Sloth*, and having wasted a great Estate, which her Father *Pride* had got, a Legacy left by one of his Ancestors, called *Violence*, the Son of *Ambition*, she became very poor, for most of her Estate being got by *Rapin*, *War*, *Treachery*, and *Blood*, it therefore could not be expected to thrive much, *especially if our Proverb be true*, That what is gotten *over the Devil's Back*, will be spent *under his Belly* –.

Being thus reduc'd, she fell in with a parcel of Beggars, and finding one nam'd *POVERTY*, A *LIKELY* Fellow, and able enough to Work for her, she Married him, and they had between them one only Son, call'd *Invention*, and a Daughter, call'd *Witt*.¹⁴

This account ends with the birth of the daughter, “CREDIT,” valuable economic force, while all the children of Witt bring misery to the world.

The account of government is similar:

GOVERNMENT was the Eldest Son of *Justice*, the Daughter of *Society*, which was the Son of *Invention*, which was the Son of *Necessity* – as aforesaid ... the *Government* of Himself in Society, was left to his own Reason, to frame upon Foundations of Safety, Property, Defence, and publick Peace, circumstanced, extend, or restricted, as the Accidents of his Posterity should require – And as Justice and Wisdom directed – *Government* being thus discover'd to be Lineally descended from *Wisdom* and *Justice*, its immediate Parents, the Original of it is no more a Mystery, and its Divinity appears to be a Fiction only of the Moderns, Calculated for their private Designs, to carry on the Projects of Tyrants and oppressors, and support the Ambition of Men.¹⁵

I quote these passages not as examples of Defoe's ideology (though it is certainly interesting to see how much it suggests that ideological concepts were never far from the surface of Defoe's writing), but rather to demonstrate how bouncy and inventive he could be in his allegories – how he could make these abstract figures seem alive. The reason for this is that, in

a sense, for Defoe, they were alive – were vitally connected to the economic and political world in which he lived. In his *Essay upon Projects* (1697), he had described how, in the real world, men driven to desperation by poverty would use their ingenuity to come up with projects that might rescue them from their condition and, in the process, not only benefit themselves but also enrich society. And as for his allegory of the true origin of government and the “Projects of Tyrants” in distorting its true end of government, Defoe had engaged in an attack upon tyranny and the very real monarchs who claimed divine sanction for their holding on to power in his long political poem, *Jure Divino* (1706).

Large parts of *Jure Divino* are historical – about individual tyrants and their roles in history. In considering Defoe's path toward *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*, his involvement with historical narrative should not be forgotten. Indeed, “History,” however fictional, was a term often used to describe contemporary novels, and as we have seen above, it was one of the terms he used in the preface to *Serious Reflections* in an effort to describe his particular kind of writing.¹⁶ His journal, the *Review*, began with an historical consideration of the rise of French power in the world, and in that publication, he appeared to enjoy continually rehearsing historical cause and effect. In 1709, he brought out a large volume called *The History of the Union of Great Britain*, recounting the events involved in the union of England and Scotland. Defoe presents his account as someone who was deeply involved in the committee work that contributed to the ultimate success of the union. And this involved some fascinating passages in which Defoe described how in Glasgow and Edinburgh he was pursued by anti-Union mobs. At a time when the genuine truth value of history was viewed with skepticism, an account from a participant in an event such as the Union might be viewed as making a real contribution, even though it was sometimes thought that the narrator tended to exaggerate his role in the events. Defoe quite accurately presented himself as being in the middle of an important historical event. Detractors tended to attack it as first-person fiction.

This was hardly the only historical work Defoe engaged in before writing *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*. His *General History of Trade* (1713) was an attempt at economic history; his *Secret History of the White Staff* (1715) belonged to the genre of “secret history,” an account of political events by an insider; and his *Memoirs of the Church of Scotland* (1717) gave an historical account of the sufferings of the Covenanters in Scotland. This last work was particularly important because it described this persecuted religious group as “wandering about in Sheep-skins and Goat skins, in Dens, and Holes, and Caves of the Earth,” after the defeat of their army in the battle of Bothwell Bridge in 1679.¹⁷ Defoe also depicted sublime aspects of

the Scottish landscape in this work, and these descriptive passages may have prepared him for situating Crusoe on his island. Crusoe is far from being persecuted for his religious beliefs, but the sufferings of the Covenanters and the landscape through which they moved may have stuck in Defoe's imagination.

In addition to his involvement in history, Defoe was also deeply involved in geography, particularly economic geography. In the *Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures*, Crusoe sails down the east coast of England, then goes to Africa, and in the second voyage ends up as a slave in Sallee, in North Africa, present-day Morocco. In escaping, he sails down the west coast of Africa, is rescued, and taken to Brazil. After several years spent working as a sugar and tobacco planter and manufacturer, he is shipwrecked on an island in the Caribbean off South America. Crusoe lives on the island for twenty-eight years, but after arriving in England, he travels to Portugal to visit the Portuguese Captain who befriended him. Then he travels over the Pyrenees to France and back to England. Crusoe's island experience is so central to Defoe's fiction that we may forget how much movement through other locales is involved. In *The Farther Adventures*, Crusoe's travels are indeed epic. He returns to his island, then voyages to Madagascar and to the Far East. He is abandoned at an outpost in the Bay of Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), engages as a merchant in the East Indies, travels through China and then crosses Asia through Siberia until his final return to England.

Travel became central to much of Defoe's work after the Crusoe volumes and is particularly noteworthy as an element within his fiction.¹⁸ His Captain Singleton travels to Madagascar and then on land across Africa. In his career as a pirate, Singleton operates throughout the Caribbean and later in the Indian Ocean. The Cavalier of *Memoirs of a Cavalier* (1720) travels to France and Germany and ends up fighting throughout England during the wars of the Rebellion. Colonel Jack travels north from London to Scotland, to the North American Colonies, to France and Italy, and back to England and North America. Even the female protagonists engage in some adventurous travels. Moll does considerable traveling in England and becomes a plantation owner in America. Roxana travels to France and Italy, picks up a knowledge of Turkish manners and language from a maid, returns to England, and then goes to Holland with her husband. The narrator of *A New Voyage Round the World* (1724) visits what was thought to be Australia, lands in southern Chile and tells of a voyage across the Andes from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. Even a work such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) has its narrator H. F. explore various parts of London, and the three workmen who escape from London to Epping Forest cross the

city in a manner not very different from Captain Singleton's trip across an Africa haunted by ferocious, strange beasts.

Defoe seems to have been extremely knowledgeable about geography, particularly wherever economic matters were concerned. A scholar treating the sugar industry in Brazil during the seventeenth century maintained that the way in which Crusoe eventually becomes the owner of an *ingenio* or factory was precisely the process that most manufacturers pursued.¹⁹ He read widely in travel accounts for the Crusoe volumes. And some of his knowledge may have been first-hand, at least from the standpoint of buying and selling goods, if not from that of actual travel. In his role as a young merchant, he had traded to North America and probably to Africa. In addition to extensive travel within Britain, he seems to have done some travel on the European Continent. Some of his willingness to invest so much time in researching this material may have been connected with a volume which William Taylor had contracted, *Atlas Maritimus & Commercialis*, for which Defoe wrote the section on economic geography. Although it was not published until 1728, Taylor had advertised a similar volume in the back of *The Farther Adventures* in 1719. At any rate, much of Defoe's output after 1719 had a geographical element, including his three-volume *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–6) and *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728; 1730).

Another form that Defoe practiced in the years prior to the publication of the *Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures* was the memoir. In 1715, fearing a backlash from his enemies after the George I's ascension to the throne and a shift from a Tory to a Whig administration, Defoe published *An Appeal to Honour and Justice, Tho' It Be of His Worst Enemies*, an account of his career as a writer, what amounted to a justification of his public life. Although he provided some interesting biographical details, the intent of this work was to place his actions in defense of the Tory ministry that dominated British politics from 1710 to 1714, the last four years of Queen Anne's reign, in the best light possible. He had not changed his political views, he argued, it was the times that had changed. He was always sincere in his beliefs.

If his enemies might have considered this work a form of fiction, it merely amounted to a degree of concealment and some bending of the truth. On the other hand, he produced a fictional political memoir in 1717, which showed how capable he could be in handling this form. *Minutes of the Negotiations of Mons. Mesnager* was the purported account of a diplomat sent over to Britain by Louis XIV in an effort to obtain a peace agreement. Mesnager was dead by 1717 and therefore in no position to refute the account of Defoe's fictional diplomat. In so far as one can see, the purpose of the entire fictitious account was a passage which showed that the former

Lord Treasurer, Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, who had been imprisoned in the Tower since 1715, was innocent of any complicity in restoring the exiled Stuart dynasty to the throne of Great Britain. In Mesnager's version of events, although Harley was interested in making peace with France, he was entirely committed to the House of Hanover. Mesnager finds that Harley was extremely elusive – difficult to pin down about anything. Of Mesnager's character we learn little. He is a loyal servant to Louis XIV. He is Catholic. He views the English common people as “furious and brutal,” lacking in “due subordination.”²⁰ He tries to bribe a journalist (Defoe), who turns down his overtures. For the most part, Defoe makes Mesnager into a fairly typical Frenchman, given just enough elements of character to make him convincing. But after all, the memoir was supposed to be about external events. One of Defoe's less friendly fellow journalists quickly discovered this was by Defoe and complained about his “Forge of *Politicks* and *Scandal*.”²¹ This accusation that he was a forger of fictions might have pushed him into the possibilities of longer and more elaborate narrative fiction.

In 1715 and again in 1718, Defoe produced two volumes of religious dialogues, both entitled *The Family Instructor*. The first volume presents a fairly unified vision of a family, including a father who decides to turn toward firm Christian beliefs and his son who remains defiant and perishes miserably. Defoe showed an adept use of dialogue and developed his characters with considerable skill. Although these volumes purported to be based upon the lives of genuine families, they were generalized sufficiently to allow for the broad moral that Defoe wanted to convey. And they depicted the lives of his characters with seriousness and sympathy. Most eighteenth-century novels portrayed devout Dissenters as objects of comedy or satire. For example, in most of these works, it is impossible to imagine a serious scene such as that in which the daughter is sassy toward the mother, causing the mother to box her ears. Even in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, scenes of this kind border on the comic, and in Henry Fielding's novels, they tumble into farce. In the second volume, there is less unity, but the central figure – a man who finds himself unable to control his passions – brings up a theme that will become important in almost all of Defoe's fiction. These volumes, both of which continued to be reprinted during the nineteenth century, marked in their sharply rendered scenes and fully realized characters a flair for the dramatic in Defoe's writing. Nevertheless the scenes are set in a novelistic fashion, with considerable detail about the emotions of the characters. They are essentially dramatic fictions exploiting religious themes.²²

As one critic suggested, at least the first volume in this series was probably suggested by the dangers posed by the Schism Act of 1714. That Act was essentially intended to end the existence of Dissenting schools or even

Dissenting tutors in private homes throughout England. Only the Church of England would be permitted to engage in religious education. A work such as the first volume of *The Family Instructor* was probably intended, in part, as a means of religious instruction for Dissenting families. Although the dangers inherent in the Act ended with the death of Queen Anne at the very time at which it was supposed to go into effect, it still provided the possibility of practicing home religious schooling.²³ Defoe's turn toward the evils of passion dominating domestic life in the second volume is probably an indication that the original target of his interests had shifted. But we should be aware that some of the subject matter in these volumes carried over to *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*. From the first volume comes Crusoe's discovery of his Christian beliefs, not through the preachings of the Anglican Church, or any other church, but rather away from organized religion; from the second volume comes Crusoe's finding himself carried away by his passionate "Wandering Fancy" to throw himself upon the dangers of the sea. It should also be noted that the opening domestic scene of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures* has some of the same ambience as the second volume of *The Family Instructor* – life among the middle orders with its typical conflict between parents and children.

In composing these volumes, Defoe grew as a writer. In the second volume of *The Family Instructor*, the bitter dialogue between the husband and the wife, with its witty allusion to the eclipse of 1715, is done brilliantly.

the Husband tells her, that the Moon was like a cross Wife, that when she was out of Humour, could Thwart and Eclipse her Husband whenever she pleased; and that if an ill Wife stood in the Way, the brightest Husband could not shine.

She flew into a Passion at this, and being of a sharp Wit, you do well, says she, To carry your Emblem to a suitable height; *I warrant*, you think a Wife, like the Moon, has no Light but what she borrows from her Husband, and that we can only shine by Reflection; it is necessary then you should know, she can Eclipse him when she pleases.

Ay, ay, says the Husband, but you see when she does, she darkens the whole House, she can give no Light without him.

[Upon this she came closer to him.]

WIFE. I suppose you think you have been Eclips'd lately, we don't see the House is the darker for it.

HUSB. That is because of your own Darkness; I think the House has been much the darker.²⁴

And so the quarrel continues, with husband and wife becoming more enraged with each bitter, witty exchange. In such passages, Defoe showed an ability to render his characters with considerable psychological depth. Ian Watt

credited Defoe with the importation of “formal” or “circumstantial” realism into the novel, singling out scenes such as that in which, going through the pockets of a drowned boy from a wreck, Crusoe could tell us: “He had on no clothes, but a seaman’s waist-coat, a pair of open knee’d linnen drawers, and a blew linnen shirt, but nothing to direct me so much as to guess what nation he was of: He had nothing in his pocket, but two Pieces of Eight, and a tobacco pipe” (149). In order to make his paradigm fit, Watt had to deny Defoe what he called “psychological” realism, arguing that this particular aesthetic concept was an innovation of Samuel Richardson.²⁵ But Defoe was deeply involved in the psychology of his characters.²⁶ The realistic details of the boy’s clothing and the contents of his pocket are intended to disguise the “affliction” (149) Crusoe feels at the sight of the boy’s body. He has just had a kind of fit of uncontrollable emotion at contemplating the failed possibility that one person might have been saved out of the ship in distress he had heard during the night.

In making a claim to “novelty” in the second volume of *The Family Instructor*, Defoe instanced *The Turkish Spy* as being among those books that “have pleased and diverted the world, even to the seventh or eighth volumes.” He was probably already at work on his *A Continuation of Letters Written by a Turkish Spy*, which was published on August 29, 1718, by William Taylor, the same publisher who was to bring out *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* eight months later. There is indeed a strong possibility that Taylor was seeking to turn Defoe toward works of fiction. In writing his *Continuation* of the popular work by Giovanni Paolo Marana (1642–93), Defoe did more than bring Marana’s device of having a Turkish spy in Paris comment on seventeenth-century political life in Europe. He transformed the character of the spy, Mahmut, into a more complex personality. Mahmut has grown old in the service of the Turkish government, and he longs to return to his native Arabia. The work begins in the year 1687; Mahmut has been in Europe for almost fifty years, passing as Titus the Moldavian. But he has grown tired of a life of disguise and of exile from his native land. He longs to “flie from this Exile.”²⁷ When he learns of a plan to replace him and bring him back to a land where he feels he can practice his religious beliefs openly, he has a truly ecstatic moment in which he envisions himself back in his native land.

Robinson Crusoe, who is indeed exiled from the human race on his island, until his encounter with the cannibals and then with Friday, experiences a somewhat different kind of exile from that of Mahmut, but making the connection between the two had to be easy enough. And indeed Defoe, who at this time was working for the Whig government as a spy on the Tory and Jacobite press, probably felt a strong identification with Mahmut. Thanks to his former ties with Harley and the Tories, he now posed as a skilled

journalist, only too willing to join in the political struggle against the Whig government. He wrote to the Under-secretary of State, Charles De la Faye, about his situation. Often, he noted, it was impossible for him to prevent anti-government material from appearing. Under such conditions, De la Faye would have to forgive him and indeed sympathize with him:

I Beg leav to Observ Sir one Thing More to his Ldpp in my Own behalf, And without which Indeed I May one Time Or other Run the hazard of fatall Misconstructions: I am Sir for This Service, Posted among Papists, Jacobites, and Enraged High Torys, a Generation who I Profess My Very Soul abhors; I am Oblig'd to hear Trayterous Expressions, and Outrageous Words against his Majties Person, and Government, and his Most faithfull Servants; and Smile at it all as if I Approv'd it; I am Oblig'd to take all the Scandalous and Indeed Villainous papers that Come, and keep them by Me as if I Would gather Materialls from Them to Put them into the News; Nay I often Venture to let things pass which are a little shocking that I may not Render my Self Suspected.²⁸

Defoe may have indeed experienced discomfort and alienation in having to converse with people he regarded as traitors, but there is a rhetorical element in this passage. It is only too reminiscent of a somewhat jaunty letter to Harley in which he saw himself as a spy among conflicting groups as he entered Scotland during the debate over the Union:

I have Compass't my First and Main step happily Enough, in That I am Perfectly Unsuspected as Corresponding with anybody in England. I Converse with Presbyterian, Episcopall-Dissenter, papist and Non Juror, and I hope with Equall Circumspection ... I have faithfull Emissaries in Every Company And I Talk to Everybody in Their Own way. To the Merchants I am about to Settle here in Trade, Building ships &c. With the Glasgow Mutineers I am to be a fish Merchant, with the Aberdeen Men a woollen and with the Perth and western men a Linen Manufacturer, and still at the End of all Discourse the Union is the Essentiall and I am all to Every one that I may Gain some.²⁹

And it is hardly surprising that he had mentioned Marana's Turkish spy to Harley just a few years earlier.³⁰

Still functioning as a kind of spy, then, Defoe must have felt some kinship and sympathy for Mahmut. In the preface to the *Continuation*, Defoe expressed his intention to "make the Language plain, artless, and honest, suitable to the Story, and in a Stile easie and free, with as few exotick Phrases and obsolete words as possible," stating his intention to appeal to "the meanest Reader." Such an intention may well have spilled into *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures*. But the passage in the introduction that is most interesting has to do with the creation of character in a work of fiction:

It was objected, I know to the former Volumes of this Work, that the *Turk* was brought in too much debasing the Christian Religion, extolling *Mahomet*,

and speaking disrespectfully of Jesus Christ, calling him the *Nazaren*, and the Son of *Mary*, and it is certain that the Continuation must fall into the same Method; but either Mahmut must be a *Turk* or no *Turk*, either he must speak his own Language, or other Peoples Language, and how must we represent Words spoken by him in the first Person of invincible *Mahmut the Arabian*, if we must not give his own Language the very Stile of the Original?³¹

Posing as the translator, Defoe states that wherever Mahmut wrote anything that might be offensive to Christian ears, he removed it. But dismissing “the nice Palates of a censorious Age,” he insists that Mahmut must be “a *Turk* or no *Turk*,” that he has to remain in character. With these statements on style and character, Defoe was offering a kind of manifesto for a new kind of fiction.

To a certain extent Mahmut fashions his character to suit the person to whom he is addressing his letters, but he shows a solid core of personality, along with his skepticism about Catholicism and his strong faith in own mystical religious beliefs. Nineteenth-century critics, such as Leslie Stephen, maintained that all of Defoe’s characters were simple projections of the author; whether creating pirate or pickpocket, whore or soldier, Defoe simply wrote his own personal identity into these characters, asking himself, were I Roxana or Robinson Crusoe, what would I do next? Stephen’s formulation was intended to suggest that Defoe had a limited imagination, an imagination Stephen may have associated with Defoe’s status as a shop-keeper. In fact, when Defoe wanted to emphasize characterization (and sometimes, admittedly, he did not) he made them highly individualized. *Pace* Stephen, there is no confusing Robinson Crusoe with Daniel Defoe or Moll Flanders as Defoe in drag. In addition to a degree of snobbery toward Defoe as a person once engaged in trade, Stephen’s and his period’s conception of women probably made him consider both Moll Flanders and Roxana as too masculine to have been conceivable as fulfilling the character expected of women. Hence Stephen saw them as merely versions of Defoe himself.³² Defoe had a more complicated mind and emotional range than Stephen imagined. Indeed there is a degree of truth in W. H. Davies’ argument that Defoe wrote his fictions as if his characters had no author but themselves.³³

In addition to all of these lines that lead directly to *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*, there were economic and religious events in the year 1719 that have some relationship to Defoe’s work. The economic bubble that became the South Sea Scandal was already creating considerable financial turmoil. There was talk about the possibility of the South Sea Company becoming involved in establishing a colony in South America not far from where Crusoe’s island was located. Defoe, who was an enthusiastic supporter of new colonies in undeveloped areas and who wrote of such an adventurous exploration in his *A New Voyage Round the World* (1724),

would have found such a prospect very exciting. But he looked on the financial speculation that would become the disastrous South Sea Bubble as just what it was. He watched John Law's experiment with paper money in France with considerable dismay, and feared the kind of speculation that would force up the price of stocks that had no intrinsic value. Shortly after the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe published an economic tract with the title *The Anatomy of Exchange Alley* (1719), warning of what might happen: "Stock-Jobbing is Play; a Box and Dice may be less dangerous, the Nature of them are alike a Hazard."³⁴ And he blamed the Stock-Jobbers who were driving up prices – men who "will do anything for Money":

The Truth is ... that these Men by a Mass of Money, which they command of other Peoples, as well of their own, will, in time, ruin the Jobbing-Trade. But 'twill be only like a general Visitation, where all Distempers are swallow'd up in the Plague, like a common Calamity, that makes Enemies turn Friends and drowns lesser grievances in the general Deluge.³⁵

One of the important lessons learned by Crusoe on his island has to do with the uselessness of gold on a desert island, and his address to the gold that he discovers on his wrecked ship is one of the best known passages in Defoe's work.

I smil'd 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 of the ground, one of those knives is worth all this heap, I have no manner of use for thee, e'en remain where thou art, and go to the bottom as a creature whose life is not worth saving.

However, upon second thoughts, I took it away. (47)

Crusoe's self-conscious oration on the artificiality of money, though sound enough in theory, is ironically undercut by Crusoe's very civilized inability to resist the temptation of the gold before him. He is not the founder of a utopia (though there are moments such as this when he is aware enough of what that might mean) but a castaway from wealth-obsessed contemporary Europe. Nevertheless it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Defoe's skepticism about this new world of rapacious finance had an influence on a work in which his hero finds himself in an economy without money, in which he has to become a farmer, a herdsman, and a maker of clay pots.

If economic matters were to loom large in 1719, almost equal in importance were the religious squabbles within the Church of England and among the Dissenters. As a writer of pamphlets, Defoe was to participate in both of these controversies. Benjamin Hoadly, Bishop of Bangor, preached a sermon in 1716, which essentially argued against the excessive interference of the Church of England in politics. The debate that ensued led to an end

to Convocation – the gathering of the Church members that some members of the High Church party had hoped would become equal to the gathering of Parliament. In the debates, there was a great deal of criticism aimed at Hoadly's arguments about the sincerity of belief. If the High Church mocked "Bangorian Sincerity" as equivalent to no sincerity at all, sincerity emerged from the debates as a crucial concept for the period. As a Dissenter, Defoe would have always considered sincerity a crucial element in judging the validity of religious belief, but he tended to mock Hoadly, a staunch enemy of the Dissenters, more than he mocked Hoadly's enemies. The dispute among the Dissenters involved a debate over the Trinity. Meeting at Salters Hall³⁶ on February 19, 1719, a majority of those present would not vote to affirm a belief in the traditional concept of the Trinity, more from a dislike of being forced to take a position than from a doctrinal standpoint, but the meeting broke up in disarray. A staunch supporter of unity among the Dissenters as well as an equally staunch upholder of the Trinity, Defoe could not but be distressed at this development. That Crusoe comes to avow an orthodox position on Christianity on an island away from such controversies, suggests again how, for Defoe, life on an island away from civilization and its discontents might simplify religious belief.

I began my discussion with the suggestion that so far from being an "accident," *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* might be viewed as the inevitable result of his interests as a writer. I have tried to trace some of the themes that would have stirred his imagination and some of the challenges in the writing of fiction that he had attempted to work through over many years as a writer. Questions involving exile, isolation, religious disputes, economic experiments, politics, considerations about European history, thoughts about the nature of reality and how humans experience it – it had to be all still fresh in his mind. And in experimenting with the creation of strong, independent character through dialogue and epistolary form, he had honed narrative techniques that he had been perfecting over the years. By 1719, Defoe already had an amazing ability to tell a story in a way that made everything seem real – an ability to combine a sense of a seemingly convincing environment with a character's response to that environment. Now he succeeded in creating fictions that seemed to open up worlds equivalent to those we might experience on a daily basis, even if one of those worlds might be an uninhabited island in the Caribbean. In *The Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and to a certain extent in *The Farther Adventures*, he achieved something remarkable, even if critical opinion has sometimes been uncertain whether he could have been conscious of what he was doing – conscious as a writer, conscious as a thinker. Such uncertainties fail to pay serious attention to his

achievements – both intellectual and writerly – during the period preceding the publication of his masterpiece.

NOTES

- 1 Anthony Trollope, "Novel Reading," *The Nineteenth Century* 23 (1879): 30.
- 2 Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 63.
- 3 By Charles Gildon's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Mr. D— De F—, of London, Hosier* (London, 1719). Gildon had his own version of Crusoe and Friday complain bitterly against their treatment by Defoe, waylaying him on the road to his home in Stoke Newington and tossing him in a blanket.
- 4 Defoe, *Serious Reflections during the Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1720), sig. A6.
- 5 *Ibid.*, sig. A5v.
- 6 Defoe, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. John Richetti (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 90. Subsequent citations from this work will be included within parentheses in my text.
- 7 This manuscript is located at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. The manuscript containing the "Meditations" is at the Henry E. Huntington Library.
- 8 For Defoe's use of an episode in *The English Rogue*, see Maximillian E. Novak, *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe's Fiction* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 114.
- 9 His *Memoires de M.L.C.R.* (the Count de Rochefort) had a strong influence on Defoe's novel of education, *Colonel Jack*.
- 10 One aspect of *An Essay upon Projects* has an interesting connection with *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*; the one I have in mind has to do with Defoe's advocacy of strenuous exercise in connection with his proposal for a military academy. His suggestion about the importance of teaching swimming plays a role in Crusoe's saving himself from the shipwreck that throws him on his island as well as in his swimming out to the wrecked ship from the island to gather the supplies that will enable him to survive.
- 11 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), 126–7.
- 12 Defoe, *The Present State of the Parties* (London, 1712), 18–24.
- 13 A diagram of this engine, which was mainly intended to pump water from mines, was printed in John Harris's *Lexicon Technicum* (London, 1704). It is reproduced in *The Consolidator*, ed. Joyce Kennedy, Michael Seidel, and Maximillian Novak, Stoke Newington Edition of the Writings of Daniel Defoe (New York, NY: AMS Press, 2001), 42.
- 14 *Review*, ed. John McVeagh, 9 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003–11), 8:193, Part 1, 1711–12 (originally 8:153–4).
- 15 *Review*, 8:198, Part 1, 1711–12 (originally 8:158).
- 16 As in Defoe's *The History and Remarkable Life of the truly Honourable Col. Jacques* (1722).
- 17 Defoe, *Memoirs of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1717), 231.
- 18 For a general discussion of the relationship between voyages and the novel, with frequent mentions of Robinson Crusoe and Defoe's other fictional characters, see

- Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), especially pp. 119–24.
- 19 Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 211.
- 20 *Minutes of the Negotiations of Mons. Mesnager*, ed. P. N. Furbank, in *Satire and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe*, ed. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, 8 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), 4:56, 91. It is significant that Defoe made the supposed author of *The Great Law of Subordination Consider'd* (London, 1724), who complains of the lack of a sense of class difference, into a naturalized Frenchman.
- 21 See Abel Boyer, *The Political State* 13 (June 1717): 627–30.
- 22 Defoe published two other works using this format: *Religious Courtship* (1722); and *A New Family Instructor* (1727).
- 23 The third volume in the series, *A New Family Instructor* (1727), has a specific educational tendency with a father instructing his children. This is of interest considering the manner in which *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures* was adapted later in the eighteenth century and again in the nineteenth century for educational purposes.
- 24 *The Family Instructor, Volume II*, ed. P. N. Furbank, in *Religious and Didactic Writings of Daniel Defoe*, ed. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, 10 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), 2:9–10.
- 25 Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 29–34, 175–7, 188–9, 199, 232–8.
- 26 Commenting on reader expectation for relatively simple characterization, Kate Loveman notes how complex Defoe's characters were: "they are plausible enough to persuade their readers that they are capable not only of deception but also of self-deception." See *Reading Fictions, 1660–1740* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 49.
- 27 *A Continuation of Letters of a Turkish Spy*, ed. David Blewett, in *Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe*, ed. W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank, 8 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), 5:109.
- 28 *Letters*, ed. George Healey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 454.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 158–9.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 31 *Continuation of Letters of a Turkish Spy*, 46.
- 32 Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library* (London: Smith, 1874), 24–5.
- 33 W. H. Davies, "Introduction," *Moll Flanders* ([New York, NY:] The Bibliophilist Society, 1931), xi–xii.
- 34 Defoe, *The Anatomy of Exchange Alley* (London, 1719), 43.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 27, 44. As early as 1701, Defoe had attacked the manipulation of stocks in his *The Villainy of Stock-Jobbers Detected* (London, 1701).
- 36 The Salters were one of the twelve major livery companies in London. Their hall, rebuilt in 1668, after the London Fire of 1666, was often used as a general meeting place.

Robinson Crusoe (/rɪˈkruːzə/) is a novel by Daniel Defoe, first published on 25 April 1719. The first edition credited the work's protagonist Robinson Crusoe as its author, leading many readers to believe he was a real person and the book a travelogue of true incidents. Epistolary, confessional, and didactic in form, the book is presented as an autobiography of the title character (whose birth name is Robinson Kreutznaer) – a castaway who spends 28 years on a remote tropical desert island near the Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe was inspired by the story of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who went to sea in 1704. This is the book review. His occupations ranged from spying and embezzling to soldiering and pamphleteering. He had started out as a merchant, but he soon found himself bankrupt, which led him to choose other occupations. His political passions, his flare for libel, and his inability to stay out of debt also caused him to be imprisoned seven times. Even if he wasn't financially successful, Defoe managed to make a significant mark on literature. He influenced the development of the English novel, with his journalistic detail and characterization. Some claim that Defoe wrote the first true English novel: and he – Robinson Crusoe, novel by Daniel Defoe, first published in London in 1719. Defoe's first long work of fiction, it introduced two of the most-enduring characters in English literature: Robinson Crusoe and Friday. Learn more about the novel in this article. Crusoe is the novel's narrator. He describes how, as a headstrong young man, he ignored his family's advice and left his comfortable middle-class home in England to go to sea. His first experience on a ship nearly kills him, but he perseveres, and a voyage to Guinea – made me both a Sailor and a Merchant, – Crusoe explains. Now several hundred pounds richer, he sails again for Africa but is captured by pirates and sold into slavery. He escapes and ends up in Brazil, where he acquires a plantation and prospers.