

Robinson Crusoe, the novel, and the formation of individual identity and truth



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Robinson Crusoe, written by Daniel Defoe in 1719, is considered by many to be the first English 'novel', and offers to literature what Ian Watt describes as 'a unique demonstration of the connection between individualism in its many forms and the rise of the novel'. Indeed, the notions of autonomy, agency, and self-consciousness as contained in literary characters were, as critic John Richetti proposes, 'only emerging as new and controversial ideas for European thought at the turn of the seventeenth century'; these changes being best exemplified in the emerging literary spaces of novels like Defoe's. The eponymous Robinson Crusoe fills every corner of Defoe's novel, as the reader perceives his physical feelings, thoughts and fancies from every angle, whether retrospectively mediated upon by Crusoe, or experienced through his journal entries. Defoe uses the newly-forged novel space liberally to explore, through Crusoe, more generally the notion of personal identity and a new kind of 'truth' through individual perceptions, touching upon the change post-Reformation and rise of national state in the sixteenth century, which, as Watts suggests 'decisively challenged the substantial social homogeneity of mediaeval Christendom'. Crusoe's trajectory symbolically represents this move in the extreme; from a world in which his social order and position was dependent on familial ties, to literal individuality on a strange island on which nothing is familiar. This isolation, in a literary form just emerging, allows Defoe to explore the 'inward moral being' of his character, and herald individuality as a valid medium through which to perceive and understand one's environment, whilst also mapping new ways orient one's self successfully in the absence of any company, or indeed, social order. Crusoe's island becomes in this way a hyperbolic metaphor advocating self-examination and perceiving one's self as different in reaction

<https://assignbuster.com/robinson-crusoe-the-novel-and-the-formation-of-individual-identity-and-truth/>

to the 'social homogeneity' of the past and the reliance of old thought to orient one's self.

The early eighteenth century novel marked a shift away from the dichotomy that Enlightenment norms between fictional and factual, which, as Richetti writes, 'it established as strictly separate'. One of the facets of the early novel often discussed is its presentation of 'realism' in the sense of everyday life, and is a facet which might seem, at face value, to place the novel firmly in the side of 'factual', at a distance from 'the gloriously and deliberately 'unreal' world of romance from the Middle Ages'. In a conventional sense, Robinson Crusoe is not factual; it was marketed as a real account of a castaway man, yet turned out to be fictional in the sense that it was a product of Defoe's imagination. However, as Richetti goes on to describe the early novel, he suggests that it delivers an interaction 'between a world of facts and heroic individuals who give it shape and meaning', highlighting the point at which fact and fiction intersect in Defoe's novel. If Defoe is trying only to create a sense of individual encounter with the world, then everything Crusoe recounts within the novel is true to his own perception, for he has no perceptible reason to lie or fabricate. Thus a new kind of truth or 'fact' is privileged, in which perceptions of the individual may be objectively fictional, both in the sense that he is a fictional character within a fictional work, and fictional within his universe, yet are true by his own perceptions and thus valid. As an example of this, we see Crusoe begin to linguistically domesticate his surroundings early in the novel:

' So I plac'd it in my new cave, which in my fancy I call'd my kitchin' [.][50]

Obviously, the 'cave', as we are told in clear terms, is not a kitchen in a conventional sense, and Crusoe has merely appropriated domestic language he finds familiar. However, the novel does not find this label non-factual, and accepts that these are the terms upon which Crusoe sees his world.

Furthermore, it has been made clear elsewhere that fancy and imagination rule in the novel: 'obey'd blindly the dictates of my fancy rather than my reason'.^[34] Though 'blindly' is suggestive of foolishness in obeying fancy, the denouement of the novel rewards such pursuit of individual fancy, and presents an individual world view as an important one. Michael Seidel points out this distinction in writing that 'Crusoe does not write an encyclopaedia on his island, but he performs one', illuminating the individuality of his perceptions in the novel, suggesting that he does not 'write' objective facts, but 'performs' subjective ones instead, showing us things as he sees them.

Once we begin to see Crusoe's amalgamations of his fancy with the objective world as an acceptable form of truth or fact, even his dreams and visions become blurred into this mix. Seidel, writing on the 'varieties of fictional experience' in Robinson Crusoe, argues that 'Crusoe's imagination generates many more fictions than the one he experiences', and I would take this argument further to suggest that Crusoe's own generated 'fictions' [in the form of dreams or imaginings] are barely distinguishable from his 'real', recorded events, and as such, are intended to be treated with the same validity.

I thought, that I was sitting on the ground on the out-side of my wall. where I sat when the storm blew after the earthquake, and that I saw a man descend from a great black cloud, in a bright flame of fire, and light upon the

<https://assignbuster.com/robinson-crusoe-the-novel-and-the-formation-of-individual-identity-and-truth/>

ground[...] his countenance was dreadful, impossible for words to describe; when he stepp'd upon the ground with his feet, I thought the earth trembled, just as it had done before the earthquake, and all the air look'd to my apprehension, as if it had ben fill'd with flashes of fire'.[70]

To begin with, Crusoe's dream is not particularly fantastical, and is located firmly in places both himself and the reader are already familiar with, 'the out-side of my wall', as well as mimicking his real-world experiences with the earth trembling 'just as it had done before the earthquake'. On top of this, the language he uses in this particular passage in no way differs from that which he uses to write ordinary events in his journal, with the phrase 'impossible for words to describe' recurrent in a number of different forms throughout the novel - in the instance of his corn being stolen for example, where he describes the effect of this as 'impossible to imagine'.[93] It is barely perceptible to the reader that this is a mere vision or dream at all, and thus it is awarded the same level of acceptance as truth as any other real 'event' in the novel. Ultimately, the kind of 'reality' Defoe creates is one in which all that is perceived subjectively by an individual is true and factual, simply by merit of being experienced.

Whilst I have demonstrated the intersections of fact and fiction as located in the individual experience, the make-up of the individual and the definition of the 'self' have not yet been anatomised; an act that the novel actually tries to achieve itself. Robinson Crusoe was written during an era in which there was increasing interest in sentiment and sensibility, which brought with it mediations on the workings of the mind, body, and emotions, exemplified in

one case with the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*:

' TO begin therefore with this Proof, " That to have the Natural Affections (such as are founded in Love, Complacency, Good-will, and in a Sympathy with the Kind or Species) is to have the chief Means and Power of Self-enjoyment' [.]

In an almost pseudo-scientific manner, Shaftesbury separates out things like ' Natural Affections', ' Love', and ' Goodwill' in order to explain their contribution to constituting ' Self-enjoyment'. He goes on to rely, for validity, on assumptions of people's experience, stating for example ' That the latter of these Satisfactions are the greatest, is allow'd by most People', assuming general experience will speak for his truth. Robinson Crusoe does a somewhat similar thing in trying to anatomise ' self' and all its faculties, yet rather than relying on experience generally, presents one ruling example of personal identity in Crusoe. We are confronted with a number of different workings of Crusoe, with ' body', ' mind', ' heart', ' reason', and ' conscience' all at play as part of himself. The expressions ' my self' and ' no body', now elided in colloquial English, also contribute to the emphasis upon ' self' and ' body' the novel explores. All of these faculties and ' parts' of Crusoe appear to work for different effects on Crusoe as Defoe compartmentalises them in a similar manner to Shaftesbury:

' I was so amaz'd with the thing it self, having never felt the like, or discoursed with any one that had, that I was like one dead or stupefy'd; and the motion of the earth made my stomach sick, like one that was toss'd at

sea; but the noise of the falling of the rock awak'd me as it were, and rousing me from the stupify'd condition I was in, fill'd me with horror, and I thought of nothing then but the hill falling upon my tent and all my household good, and burying all at once; and this sunk my very soul within me'[[65]

Crusoe is initially 'stupef'd', then sick in the stomach, moving rapidly on to being 'awak'd', then 'fill'd with horror', finally having his 'soul' sink within him, in a literary show of detailed interiority. Each of these things works separately, as Crusoe's isolation forces him to anatomise each kind of feeling or drive he perceives within himself, and often at the start of the novel, we see them working against one another:

' 'tho I had several times loud calls from my reason and my more composed judgement to go home, yet I had no power to do it. I know not what to call this, nor will I urge, that it is a secret over-ruling decree that hurries us on to be the instruments of our own destruction'[[13]

Here, Crusoe sees his propulsion to travel as a force working outside his body, a secret 'over-ruling decree' which he has no power or control over. This serves as just one example of moments in which Crusoe displays a difficulty in perceiving himself as a complete individual, retaining the belief that he is in no control of his own impulses and desires. However, as aforementioned, Crusoe symbolically maps out the move from what Watt calls the old thought of 'body politic' to individualism, and with this change comes a more complete and unified conception of self as Crusoe orientates a new order for himself. This change is portrayed as somewhat inevitable, as

we see that even before Crusoe is washed up on his island, he harbours feelings of isolation:

‘ I had no body to converse with but now and then this neighbour; no work to be done, but by the labour of my hands; and I used to say, I liv’d just like a man cast away upon some desolate island, that had no body there but himself’

What this tells us is that the island is not by any means necessary to instigate Crusoe’s feelings of isolation, but instead that it provides a blank space in which to reflect and forge a sense of individualism, something we see happen in his changing perceptions of himself on the island:

‘ But that I was born to be my own destroyer [...] was lost upon me’.[.][33]

Where he has previously perceived his drive to destruction as an over-ruling force outside of his body, just a little while later we begin to see Crusoe internalise this drive and begin to perceive it as an element of himself, something he was ‘ born’ with rather than being outwardly controlled by.

Seidel hits upon a truism in his discussion of Crusoe’s own created ‘ fictions’ on the island, but I would take this further to suggest that Crusoe’s own sense of personal identity and individualism is forged both by attempts to understand and internalise forces working upon him as consequences of his own personality, but, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, also in his projections, or even ‘ creations’ of himself on the island. What I mean by this is that Crusoe is able to orient and understand himself as an individual by psychologically or physically imprinting himself onto the blank parts of the

island. The success of this is best displayed in his rediscovery of a parrot whom he taught to speak:

' Robin, Robin, Robin Crusoe, poor Robin Crusoe, where are you Robin Crusoe? Where are you? Where have you been? [...] I saw my Poll sitting on the top of the hedge' [113]

The parrot, in adopting Crusoe's voice, represents a past, more unhappy Crusoe who left an imprint of himself in the parrot's repetitive voice. This moment comes only a few pages after the current narrating Crusoe has proclaimed, ' I had now brought by state of life to be much easier in it self than it was at first', showing a clear progression in character. Locke's definition of personal identity as ' an identity of consciousness though duration in time' seems especially helpful here as Crusoe's consciousness of his past self is physicalized and reflected in the parrot. Whilst Crusoe may initially feel lonely, as Watt points out, he has ' an exceptional prowess; he can manage quite on his own', and does this by expanding himself into other things and beings on the island, to the point at which when he finds a human footprint, he can calm himself only by convincing himself that it ' might be a mere chimera of [his] own; and that this foot might be the print of [his] own foot' [125]. All of his various faculties and parts, his ' thoughts', ' dictates of fancy' and ' conscience' are ordered through creating such imprints and conversing with them either literally or metaphorically in order to orient himself as an individual.

Towards the end of the novel, Crusoe rather abruptly gives the mutineers ' every part of [his] own story' [219] then states, ' Having done all this, I left

them the next day, and went on board the ship'[219] in a moment which seems indicative of the individualist 'experiment' Defoe performs in the novel. Crusoe indeed goes on to be what Watt would describe as an individualist 'economic man', but this part of the tale is almost incidental to the development of a new kind of truth and individualism Crusoe acquires on the island. His story ends and is imparted, and left behind at a point where he has successfully and happily forged his own individual order and identity afforded to him by his time on the island. The newness of the novel form allows a perfect space into which to promote new and original thought as opposed to adhering to traditional thought, and Defoe gives us a tribute to a kind of individualism in which the truth can be whatever one perceives through their senses, and a new social order can be forged through ordering and understanding one's internal faculties; indeed producing Watts' individual 'economic man', but also, and perhaps more importantly in the case of Defoe's novel, a spiritually 'individual' and stable character.