

God would not bless me: fatalism and the father in robinson crusoe



Though Robinson Crusoe may be popularly envisioned as a harrowing “adventure tale” of shipwreck and survival, the “adventures” of emotional and spiritual discourse act perhaps equally strongly to frame and direct the text. Crusoe’s early travels, in which he says he “I never once had the Word Thank God, so much as on my Mind, or in my mouth” (131), are constantly being narrated through the emotional discourse of parental prohibition; his later foreign adventures are often viewed through the lens of the earlier, less turbulent domestic sphere. Though Crusoe’s adventures seem at first self-consciously antithetical to life with his parents at home, it is also possible to read them as embedded within that early life, testing out the conditions and prohibitions which his father first set out. Having left the comfortable world of his father, blessed neither by his father or God (7), Crusoe is haunted throughout his travels by feelings of carelessness and impetuosity with which his departure was informed. The narrative itself is framed by prohibition and violation: from the very beginning, Crusoe is commanded by his father not to go to sea. Such a commandment acts with a prophetic fatalism, subsumed only by the driving “Propension” (3) of nature, throughout the rest of the tale. From the narrative’s first sentence, Crusoe is unable to keep the discourse of his father out of the discourse of his own adventure and eventual despair. Even as Crusoe narrates his family history, including the history of the alteration of his name, Crusoe’s father plays the central, defining role. Crusoe says his father, “a foreigner of Bremen” rather than a British native, “got a good Estate by Merchandise”, allowing him to leave “off his trade” (3) and move elsewhere. Crusoe speaks of him as, at least initially, culturally other, a self-made man who has “become British” through the growth of his business as well as the alteration of his name.

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Through such a narrative opening, Crusoe delineates not only the evolution of his name from German to English, but his family's economic history as well. Because the "Station" into which Crusoe was born is directly reflective of this history, the reader must be careful not to discount its prominence within the adventure as a whole, especially when one considers it in the context of Crusoe's father's concerns. In advice given early on, Crusoe's father argues that his own path of stable self-sufficiency has set an ideal example for the life and career objectives of his son. He suggests that son Crusoe's desired deviation from this path is due to a "meer wandering Inclination" (4), and notes that, by remaining, Crusoe might be "well introduced" and have "a Prospect of raising [his] Fortunes by Application and Industry" (4). Rather than simply harboring sentimentality towards his son, Crusoe's father suggests that remaining would allow Crusoe to maximize his potential for economic growth. Not of either "desperate" or "aspiring, superior" fortunes, Crusoe has been set into the "middle State" (4) through the effort and modest successes of his father. Crusoe's father does not lament his failure to rise higher, or to gain more than he already has; instead, he argues for the value of maintaining, even for future generations, the station he is in. Such a station, he argues, is "not exposed to the Miseries and Hardships, the Labour and Sufferings of the mechanick Part of Mankind, and not embarrass'd with the Pride, Luxury, Ambition and Envy of the upper Part of Mankind" (4) — rather, it exists stably within society, free of the worst extremes. The apparent glamour of the upper classes reveals itself to be full of suffering and vice, and it is rather the middle state "which all other People envied" (4). This explication of an economic Middle Way, the "upper Station of Low Life," (4) allows Crusoe's father to express and give

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approval to the path of his own life. The avoidance of the worst disasters and the enjoyment of the most commonly available pleasures allows one, in the mind of Crusoe's father, to gain the most from life while being afflicted by the least suffering. Rather than simply avoiding adventure, such a life strategy allows one to go "silently and smoothly thro' the World, and comfortably out of it" (5). Crusoe's father argues that acceptance of such a station does not only make oneself comfortable, but in fact allows one to move gracefully through life, achieving goals and garnering pleasures without too much unnecessary travail. Rather than simply admonishing his son, the father is attempting to reveal the wisdom at which he, through the course of his life, has arrived. He suggests that Crusoe's current station is not only the one most suitable for him, but in fact the one in which he could reap the most happiness and rewards. By noting that Crusoe was "born in" this particular "Station of Life" and that "Nature.. seem'd to have provided against" his misery, Crusoe's father gives at first the impression of desiring stasis and general immobility for his son. If Crusoe has, like a tool of fate, already been "provided" for, it seems the father would have him accept this providence blindly and not act to alter it in any way. However, in the broader narrative, "Nature and the Station of Life" have been only partial contributors to Crusoe's fate; the father's merchandizing and subsequent marriage have done much to set Crusoe where he is. Indeed, his father implies it is unnecessary for Crusoe to handle "Miseries which Nature and the Station of Life [he] was born in, seem'd to have provided against" (5), arguing for a fatalism of birth which is auspicious rather than limiting. Rather than simply being directed by fate, Crusoe seems at least in part provided for by the previous hard work of his father. Through the work of this "wise

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and grave Man" (4), Crusoe has been given enough means to enjoy the life his father sees fit. He may live without too many hardships, "sensibly tasting the Sweets of living, without the bitter, feeling that they are happy, and learning by every Day's Experience to know it more sensibly" (5). Through the approval and recommendation of his current station, Crusoe's father reveals his respect for moderation even in enjoyment, and for a "sensibly" won knowledge not admitting of rash desires. The realization of and contentment with the positive aspects of life — "feeling that they are happy" — is seasoned through with a progressive knowledge, the process of understanding one's experience more finely each day. Though such a respect remains necessarily modest, not claiming to gain much new emotional territory, it seems also well-tested through long experience of losses and gains. Crusoe's father has, it seems, lived his life in just such a fashion and has ended up generally satisfied with the results. Yet, at the same time as he recommends this living within one's emotional means, Crusoe's father offers up a dire alternative to Crusoe if he does not follow his advice. As Crusoe narrates, the father says, "if I did take this foolish Step [of going abroad], God would not bless me, and I would have Leisure hereafter to reflect upon having neglected his Counsel when there might be none to assist in my Recovery" (6). Though such a condemnation seems out of proportion to a travel request, Crusoe calls it "Prophetick" (6), revealing an implicit acceptance of his father as prophet of the actions of God. His rebellion from his father — though he was "sincerely affected with this Discourse," (6), he does not heed it — seems parallel to the spiritual rebellion which he will experience throughout the remainder of the tale. Crusoe's father, who already offers God-like commandments and prophecies

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regarding the best-lived life, seems also able to dictate whether God will bless his son, and indeed to dictate the regret which Crusoe, unblest and unhappy, would subsequently feel. While Crusoe does not heed the commands of his father, he never suggests that such commands are unwarranted, or that his father does not have the foresight he might claim. He allows for his father the role of prophet as well as authority figure; because the narrative is told in the past tense, Crusoe may infuse the sense of "destiny" upon what otherwise may have been well-meant, if overbearing, advice. In such an understanding of destiny, it seems that Crusoe idealizes his comfortable, middle-station home as the fount of these commands and prophecies. His thoughts of how he might have stayed in with his father, enjoying a life "calculated for all kinds of Virtues and all kinds of Enjoyments" (5), allows him to frame his tale in terms of his rebellious departure and the consequences he has come to know. Rather than describing the constellation of events and circumstances which seem to have been related to his departure and adventures - for instance, the "one Day at Hull" (7) which caused him to decide to travel - he instead frames his story strongly as a narrative arc structured by this "fatal...Propension" and the rebellion against his father's desires. Though Crusoe's father's comment is structured not as a blind command, but as a (finally prophetic) statement of concern, Crusoe is unable to take that concern to heart. Rather, he seems to have left with no "Consideration of Circumstances or Consequences" and that he left "in an ill Hour, God knows" (7). While clearly possessing a strong belief in the "fatal" quality of nature, Crusoe narrates his own motives as though they were unstructured and haphazard. Without "asking God's blessing, or my Father's" (7) blessings one and the same Crusoe leaves the

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circumstances in which he has been advised to stay. Through long experience or wisdom, Crusoe's father knows the outcome of this departure, and suggests that the "upper Station of Low Life" is where Crusoe would best have found a home. Crusoe's father seems content with his own station and, with a mixture of wisdom and authority, commands Crusoe to remain where he is. He proceeds to prohibit his son from departing, saying that such departure would prevent him from being blessed. Crusoe will not remain and, because of this clear breaking of prohibition, will feel afterward the weight of grief and rebellion at having left his father and his God.

Bibliography Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.