

“I FOUND PEN, INK AND PAPER [...] I KEPT THINGS VERY EXACT”. GENRENESS IN *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

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Abstract: “The Novel as readers now understand it did not really exist as a literary form in English during the late seventeenth century and the early decades of the eighteenth”, John Richetti (2017: 152) has recently pointed out. Prior to this, in 1957, Ian Watt conceptualised the “myth of modern individualism”. This paper focuses on Robinson Crusoe and the rise of the English novel, revisiting some key excerpts in order to propose a new approach to the new genre. Michael McKeon (2017: 67) postulated that “The novel crystallizes genre, we might say, self-consciously incorporating, as part of its form, the problem of its own categorical status”. This paper addresses the above proposal, examining the adventures of the eponymous voyager from York. In particular, it pays attention to the various means by which reality is recorded in his autobiographical account, as well as the numerous narrative forms through which the reader is presented with the events of Crusoe’s life.

Keywords: bourgeoisie, Crusoe, Defoe, genre, individualism, novel rise, realism

Then what are You, having no Chaos found. (Cavendish 2016: 7)

And now I began to apply my self to make such necessary things as I found I most wanted, as particularly a chair and a table, for without these I was not able to enjoy the few comforts I had in the world, I could not write, or eat, or do several things with so much pleasure without a table. (Defoe 2001: 55)

1. Introduction

Robinson Crusoe (1719) marks a significant early juncture in the rise of the English novel. Outside England, however, it was preceded in Spain by the Cervantine work about Alonso Quijano, as well as by early novels, such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* published anonymously and *Guzmán de Alfarache* by Mateo Alemán. It marks a point in the rise of the English novel in the sense that it was preceded by works that laid the foundations for its development. These include, among other texts, *The Description of the New World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish, *Oroonoko* (1688) by Aphra Behn and *Incognita* (1692) by William Congreve. Prior to these developments, there were the prose works of the Elizabethan period, which did display certain characteristics and devices associated with the novelistic form. These include *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) by Thomas Nashe and *The Miseries of Mavillia* (1599) by Nicholas Breton.

The assertion that the English novel emerged in 1719 belongs to Ian Watt (1974: 74), who wrote that “Robinson Crusoe is certainly the first novel in the sense that it is the first fictional narrative in which an ordinary person’s daily

activities are the centre of continuous literary attention”. Later, in reference to *Moll Flanders*, he stated, “Defoe’s novels are landmarks in the history of fiction largely because they are the first considerable narratives which embody all the elements of formal realism” (Watt 1974: 104). It is not the intention of this essay to challenge this date as marking the birth of the novel.

John Richetti (2017: 171) summarises this postulate about the protagonist of Defoe’s novel: “Crusoe recapitulates various stages of human culture, passing from being hunter-gatherer to domesticating animals (the goats he finds on the island), to agriculture, as he manages to grow grain and indeed to bake bread”. *Mutatis mutandis*, this study will map the various stages of writing in Defoe’s novel; it will examine the initial recording of information and occurrences on a wooden post, followed by the protagonist’s journal and finally, through the direct communication of the protagonist himself within the novel. With regard to these distinct stages in the dynamics of writing, Michael McKeon’s (2017: 67) *dictum* about the ontology of the novelistic genre is extremely pertinent: “The novel crystallizes genre, we might say, self-consciously incorporating, as part of its form, the problem of its own categorical status”.

2. The square post: “thus I kept my kalendar, or weekly, monthly, and yearly reckoning of time”

Robinson Kreutznaer (the birth name of Robinson Crusoe), the son of a German immigrant and the daughter of a prominent York family, recounts his life’s story directly through the narrative voice. He begins with a summary of his early life, detailing events until the point at which he first reached the inhospitable island that was to become his home for twenty-eight years. He lives on the island in almost complete isolation, to the point that he nearly loses all sense of time. Yet Robinson Crusoe is determined not to become completely disorientated; and so he resolves to record the days of the year in a primitive but efficient form: “he used his knife upon a large post in capital letters”:

After I had been there about ten or twelve days, it came into my thoughts, that I should lose my reckoning of time for want of books and pen and ink, and should even forget the Sabbath days from the working days; but to prevent this, I cut it with my knife upon a large post, in capital letters, and making it into a great cross, I set it up on the shore where I first landed, *vz. I came on shore here on the 30th of Sept. 1659.* Upon the sides of this square post, I cut every day a notch with my knife, and every seventh notch was as long again as the rest, and every first day of the month as long again as that long one; and thus I kept my kalendar, or weekly, monthly, and yearly reckoning of time. (52)

This provides the reader with a sense of the narrative chronology, objectively structuring the time that the protagonist spends on the island. Crusoe laments the lack of books, paper and ink in his new surroundings; however, he also longs for a means to distinguish religious holidays from working days. His simple yet ingenious solution is this rudimentary calendar, which he fashions using the materials that he has to hand.

The calendar provides Crusoe with a mechanism for keeping time, and yet - as he later admits - it was not a constant or consistent *modus operandi*. Eventually the stranded sailor becomes disoriented and fails to observe the weekly day of rest,

as he cannot distinguish one day from another. On the seventh of November, the protagonist writes “I soon neglected my keeping Sundays, for omitting my mark for them on my post, I forgot which was which” (59). This failure to maintain an accurate record of the days is referred to later with the following words: “I had all this time observ’d no Sabbath-Day [...] I had some time omitted to distinguish the weeks, by making a longer notch than ordinary for the Sabbath-Day, and so did not really know what any of the days were [...]” (83). There is a notable sense of Crusoe’s concern about the passage of time, as he attempts to transform the “disorderliness of life” (Watt 1974: 106) into literary orderliness.

3. Writing: “I drew up the state of my affairs in writing”

Defoe’s protagonist eventually discovers a pen, as well as some paper and ink, which he uses eagerly to record his story. The narrator explains:

As I observ’d before, I found pen, ink and paper, and I husbanded them to the utmost; and I shall shew, that while my ink lasted, I kept things very exact; but after that was gone, I could not, for I could not make my ink by any means I could devise.

I now began to consider seriously my condition, and the circumstance I was reduc’d to, and I drew up the state of my affairs in writing, not so much to leave them to any that were to come after me, for I was like to have but few heirs, as to deliver my thoughts from daily poring upon them, and afflicting my mind; and as my reason began now to master my despondency, I began to comfort my self as well as I could, and to set the good against the devil, that I might have something to distinguish my case from worse, and I stated it very impartially, like debtor and creditor, the comforts I enjoy’d, against the miseries I suffer’d, thus, [...] (53)

The recording of information in the Journal includes a list comprising two columns, notable for its concise and efficient layout. Crusoe writes down six statements in the left-hand column, detailing his misfortunes; in the right-hand column, he contrasts these with six further statements, which describe the more positive aspects of his situation, “to set in the description of good and evil, on the credit side of the account” (54). The six statements all begin anaphorically with the first-person singular subject pronoun: The six contrasting ideas reflect this pattern, all beginning with an adversative conjunction. For example, the first statement on the left-hand column reads: “I am cast upon a terrible desolate island, void of all hope of recovery”, while the statement on the adjoining column is “But I am alive, and not drown’d as all my ship’s company was” (54).

The shipwrecked Englishman lays out a detailed list describing his misadventures, but he does not fail to recognise the various ways in which he should consider himself lucky, contrasting each of the negative comments with a positive alternative. This ultimately presents the reader with a detailed written summary of the protagonist’s experiences.

He also mentions certain items that he considers most necessary, such as food. Alongside the basic requirements for survival, however, he also describes certain secondary items that – interestingly – point to the significant value that Crusoe places on his ability to write: “And now I began to apply my self to make such necessary things as I found I most wanted, as particularly a chair and a table, for without these I was not able to enjoy the few comforts I had in the world,

I could not write, or eat, or do several things with so much pleasure without a table". (55)

4. Journal. *Memorandum*: "I, poor, miserable Robinson Crusoe"

The shipwrecked adventurer frequently reveals his desire to leave a written record of his experiences. In addition to the aforementioned list, Crusoe determines to write "The Journal", in which he gives a daily account of his activities until he exhausts his supplies of ink. The first journal entry records the events of 30 September 1659.

Crusoe describes his development into "a compleat natural mechanic" (58), having successfully constructed a chair, a table and some shelves. Once he has all the necessary materials to hand (a pen, ink, and paper), Crusoe marks the point at which he begins his diary with a reflection on how negative his written account would have been had he been able to start it sooner. The protagonist, who recounts his life story directly to the reader in the first person, imagines how the earlier account would have been: "For example, I must have said thus" (56).

The conclusion to be drawn is that before turning to the format of the Journal, Robinson Crusoe was already capable of envisaging a written account of his experiences, however bleak they may have been. It is his decision to keep a diary that results in the narrative – of which the story is comprised – coming into being; earlier events that precede this decision are recounted in written form, as the narrator states:

But having gotten over these things in some measure, and having settled my household-stuff and habitation, made me a table and a chair, and all as handsome about me as I could, I began to keep my journal, of which I shall here give you the copy (tho' in it will be told all these particulars over again) as long as it lasted, for having no more ink, I was forc'd to leave it off. (56)

The protagonist's Journal echoes the diarist tradition that was so popular in Restoration England, notable diarists including Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. Deriving from the Latin root 'novus', both the English term 'novel' and the French word 'nouvelle' mean 'new' (as an adjective) or 'news' (as a noun). Since the term 'news' is used to define information recorded in journals and newspapers, it is arguably the case that certain necessary ingredients for the emergence of the novel are present, but not all. As well as the prose itself, some of the defining characteristics of the genre are individualism (Richetti (2001: ix) considers the hero to be "an archetype of modern heroic individualism and self-reliance – the man surviving alone on a deserted island"), realism, the narration of everyday events and a distancing from the fantastical style and content characteristic of earlier literature. McKeon (2002: 118) used the terms "naive empiricism and extreme scepticism" to describe the romance genre, as distinct from the novelistic form. Richetti (2017: 171) confirms that *Robinson Crusoe* is "the most realistic, the most intensely particularized, of all of Defoe's novels". Essentially, the style of the text reflects the authenticity "of the actual experiences of the individuals" (Watt 1974: 27).

The solitary protagonist keeps a diary for an entire year, beginning on 30th September 1659. Eventually, he remarks that he has no ink left and for this reason cannot continue to record the daily account of his experiences ("A little after this

my ink began to fail me, and so I contented myself to use it more sparingly, and to write down only the most remarkable events of my life, without continuing a daily *memorandum* of other things”(83)).

Significantly, the last day recorded in his journal, the 30th September 1660, provides information regarding the date through reference to “the notches on my post”, whereby he is able to confirm the anniversary of his arrival on the island:

September the thirtieth, I was now come to the unhappy anniversary of my landing. I cast up the notches on my post, and found I had been on shore three hundred and sixty five days. I kept this day as a solemn fast, setting it apart to religious exercise, prostrating myself on the ground with the most serious humiliation, confessing my sins to God, acknowledging his righteous judgments upon me, and praying to him to have mercy on me, through Jesus Christ; and having not tasted the least refreshment for twelve hours, even till the going down of the sun, I then eat a basket cake, and a bunch of grapes, and went to bed, finishing the day as I begat it. (83)

It has been argued that “Defoe’s interest in literature was almost exclusively dictated by his voracious appetite for facts” (Watt 1974: 240), or his “genius for facts” (Woolf 1986: 57). This is manifested elsewhere through his “aesthetic tendency in favor of particularity” (Watt 1974: 16). The new literary style emerged in the midst of the scientific revolution of the age, and corresponded to the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (*Answer to Davenant’s Preface to Gondibert*, 1650), Thomas Blount (*The Academy of Eloquence*, 1654), John Locke (*Of the Abuse of Words*, 1690) and Henry Home, Lord Kames (*Elements of Criticism*, 1762). It is important to consider the Royal Society’s keen interest in science; the Society, founded in the year of Defoe’s birth had as its motto *nullius in verba*, advocating the importance of an empirical approach based on investigation and evidence (The motto of the Royal Society comes from the poet Horace, specifically the “Epistle 1” (verse 14): “Nullius addictus iurare in verba magistri”, which is translated as “I am not bound over to swear by the words of any master”).

This is the language and style of natural philosophy, whose origins are to be found in the Oxford Group – John Wilkins (a professor of Locke’s, who published *An Essay Toward a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* in 1668), Robert Boyle, and John Ray. In his *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding in Four Books* (1690), John Locke proposed the use of precise, clear language, prioritising *res* over *verba*. In the tenth chapter of the third book he argues for the use of simple, comprehensible ideas, maintaining that “the ends of language in our discourse [...] being chiefly [...] to make known one man’s thoughts or ideas [...] with much ease and quickness [...] to convey the knowledge of things” (Locke 2009: 106).

Defoe’s text is a “narrative [...] occurring at a particular place and at a particular time” (Watt 1974: 24), achieving a degree of “immediacy” and “closeness” (idem: 29); “The narrative method whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may be called its formal realism” (idem: 32). Nevertheless, the writing style of the Journal gathers the details of sequential events in the form of a diaristic narrative, ultimately formlessly. There are only facts, recounted in a cold, sterile manner. The details and the events are recorded *ad pedem litterae*, that is to say, objectively, to the last detail, in the style of a historian or chronicler.

5. Further narrative techniques

The construction and the content of *Robinson Crusoe* is a challenge to certain literary traditions preceding it, such as travel literature or even spiritual allegorical journeys (e.g., *The Pilgrim's Progress*) and the extensive journals of the diary tradition; and yet *Robinson Crusoe* is, at the same time, something new, experimental and different from any earlier work. The text is arguably as different to its forerunners as *Don Quijote* is to the books of chivalry that it parodies.

5.1. "Sept. the 30th": two versions of the same reality

The reader of *Robinson Crusoe* is confronted with two accounts of the day on which the young man reaches the shore of the island, both of which are related in the first person singular:

Sept. the 30th. After I got to shore and had escap'd drowning, instead of being thankful to God for my deliverance, having first vomited with the great quantity of salt water which was gotten into my stomach, and recovering my self a little, I ran about the shore, wringing my hands, and beating my head and face, exclaiming at my misery, and crying out, I was undone, undone, till tyr'd and faint I was forc'd to lye down on the ground to repose, but durst not sleep for fear of being devour'd. (56)

September 30, 1659. I poor miserable Robinson Crusoe, being shipwreck'd, during a dreadful storm, in the offing, came on shore on this dismal unfortunate island, which I call'd The Island of Despair, all the rest of the ship's company being drown'd and my self almost dead.

All the rest of the day I spent in afflicting my self at the dismal circumstances I was brought to, [...] (57)

It must be asked – what writing style does each of these accounts display? Moreover, what difference is there between these two versions, given that they are both written in the first person singular? The first (56) appears in the novel directly, vocalised by the protagonist himself, with the direct object of the verb "said" ("I must have said thus: *Sept. the 30th.*"); the second is recorded in "*The JOURNAL*" (57), as part of the diary that the shipwrecked voyager keeps. So, the first version is voiced directly by the protagonist; the second, on the other hand, is a written account within the larger text, articulated, formed and formulated within the construct of a journal.

The first account appears starker: it reflects the essence of the protagonist's suffering and his reaction to the dreadful situation. Its primary focus is on all that he experienced and felt. The second account is reported through a more restrained, descriptive language; it focuses on the wider context, such as, for example, the crew with whom Crusoe was travelling and the island itself. Defoe presents the reader with two contrasting styles that, despite their similarities, are markedly different in certain ways.

5.2. “I had frequently given them an account of my two voyages to the coast of Guinea”: the story within the story

Another notable technique employed by Defoe is that of the ‘novel within the novel’, which appears in several instances. For example, when Crusoe gives a written account of his adventures to the Englishwoman who had been safeguarding his money, this allows the reader to view the events from a different perspective. A further example of this technique appears during Crusoe’s time in Brasil. Having learned the local language, he regularly converses with the other merchants in *St. Salvatore*, recounting stories of his travels. In this episode, key concepts relating to the eighteenth century, such as colonisation and expansion, trading, business and sea voyages are particularly evident:

To come then by the just degrees, to the particulars of this part of my story; you may suppose, that having now lived almost four years in the *Brasils*, and beginning to thrive and prosper very well upon my plantation; I had not only learn’d the language, but contracted acquaintance and friendship among my fellow-planters, as well as among the merchants at *St. Salvatore*, which was our port; and that in my discourses among them, I had frequently given them an account of my two voyages to the coast of *Guinea*, the manner of trading with the *Negroes* there [...]. They listened always very attentively to my discourses on these heads, but especially to that part which related to the buying *Negroes* [...] (32)

On numerous occasions, the protagonist employs the nouns “discourse” and “account” (83). For example, in the description of the cultivation of barley and rice, in how the grain is sowed, how a third of the seeds are set aside, how the crops failed to germinate during the dry months only to sprout when the rains came, how he searched for land more suited to the cultivation of crops, how he succeeded in bringing in a good harvest and how he became an expert in agricultural matters through these efforts.

6. “The logic of virtual witnessing”: “I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family”

Crusoe, marooned alone on the island for decades, manages to survive using the tools and supplies that he salvages from the wreckage of the ship and his immediate environment. He is forced to survive with the little that he has (Ian Watt (1974: 87) argues, “Defoe’s hero is not really a primitive nor a proletarian but a capitalist”); in this respect, Julia Prewitt Brown (2008: 25-27) applies the concept of the “bourgeois interior” to the work. In terms of the recording and presentation of events, both through writing and through the narrative itself, a similar dynamic becomes evident.

Both the journal and the preceding and subsequent narratives appear in the first person singular; as such, they provide a direct account of events from first-hand observation. Roger Maioli (2016: 12) conceptualises “the logic of virtual witnessing”, arguing, “By recasting the island as an allegory of his own misfortunes, Defoe is gesturing towards a possible defense of literary representation”. He concludes that the narrative is essentially comprised of “certifiable empirical facts”:

By appealing to living witnesses and insisting that every episode in Crusoe's story corresponds to a particular event in his biography – not only in an allegorical, but often in a *literal* sense – Defoe stops short of defending fiction as a source of instruction – or, as Defoe puts it, “the happy Deductions I have employ'd myself to make from all the Circumstances of my Story” – should be trusted not because fiction is reliable, but because they are grounded in certifiable empirical facts. (Maioli 2016: 14)

Another important element of the story is that of the protagonist's own reflection on events. Crusoe repeatedly takes up the subject of his experiences, sifting them through his consciousness, filtering and reshaping them through his belief system and personal perspective. He then addresses them autobiographically through hindsight: “I can express at this distance the thoughts” (11). So, the autobiographical viewpoint appears in the narrative as an immediate verbalisation on the part of the protagonist, without the mediation of a written journal, that brings with it “self-scrutiny” (Watt 1974: 74), “the internalisation of conscience” (idem: 75) and self-analysis.

First-person singular narration inherently contains an element of autobiography, as is clear from the opening page of the novel: “I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family” (5). Daniel Defoe generates a self-conscious and analytical narrative style. This is evident in Crusoe's recounting of the advice given to him by his father not to abandon the “middle state” or “middle station”, but rather to cultivate and preserve his “happiness” (6). Similarly, when he describes the death of his elder brother, who fell while serving in Flanders, he includes terms such as: “tears”, “so mov'd”, “broke off the discourse”, “his heart was so full” (7).

Crusoe is a character who feels “repentance”, who verbalises his “reflexions” (10) and “temper” (11) and adopts “resolutions” (10). So, “the hurry of [his] thoughts” (10) are tangible for the reader, who cannot help but sympathise with him to some extent, for example when his ship suffers a “terrible storm” in Yarmouth (11) around the 14th of September 1651. Nevertheless, he continues with his travels, eventually passing near the Canary Islands, where he considers the possibility of visiting Gibraltar.

John Richetti (2017: 170) confirms that

Robinson Crusoe may be said to stage the tension between an emerging modern secular individualism and what were in Defoe's days older and still powerful religious modes of understanding personal identity and individual fate.

The sparks of this tension are evident in the “confusion and terror” when the protagonist first becomes stranded on the island “as well as in his resourceful management for survival and ultimate mastery of himself and his environment” (ibid.).

The reader can learn of how the protagonist planned, fabricated, cultivated and conserved; through these efforts alone he succeeded in surviving (Thomas Keymer (2007: xx) speaks of “survival skills”). Crusoe also reflected on the value of money on several occasions. Ultimately, it is the protagonist's capacity for reflection and analysis that – more so than the notches on the wooden post or the mere act of keeping a journal – imbues the narrative with the elements generally associated with the novelistic genre. As such, it merits consideration as one of the earliest examples of novel in the English literary tradition.

7. Conclusion: 1719

With a text as scrutinised as *Robinson Crusoe*, it would be fair to assume that no new aspects of the novel remain to be discovered and commented upon. Yet, *Robinson Crusoe* is a text worth returning to, a text deemed by Richetti (2017: 169) to be “the most enduringly popular of his [Defoe’s] narrative Works”.

Commemorating Cervantes and Shakespeare, Salman Rushdie (2016: 9) recalls, “Milan Kundera proposed that the novel has two progenitors, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*”. However, *Robinson Crusoe* was published three decades before *Clarissa* and four decades before *Tristram Shandy*. Therefore, to put it simply – before Richardson, there was Defoe; before Sterne, Defoe. To go even further, before Defoe there were other writers whose contribution towards the development of the novel should not be ignored.

Critics in the *post-Watt* period have explored the *making* of the novel, emphasising the role of other pioneering literary figures, several of them female writers such as Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood. In *Painting the Novel: Pictorial Discourse in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, Jakub Lipski (2018: 70) acknowledges that

in contemporary criticism there have been strong objections to the labelling of Defoe as ‘the father of the novel’, put forward, for example, by feminist critics, who argue for a proper appreciation of women writers preceding the author of *Robinson Crusoe*.

On the other hand, Sarah C. E. Ross and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (2018: 1) have pointed out that “Women’s literacy increased exponentially over the seventeenth century as a whole [...] that sees the burgeoning in the volume of literary writing by women”.

Some examples of critics who have studied the advent – the making – of the English novel (prior to the rise of the English novel) are Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan in 2006 (pp. 19-37), Marina MacKay in 2011 (pp. 7 and 53-4), Michael McKeon in 2005 (pp. 506-546), John Richetti in 1999 (pp. 18-51) or in October 2017 (pp. 153-162) and Margaret J. M. Ezell in 2017 (pp. 285-294).

To conclude, there are three key points of reference: the wooden Post, the Journal and the Novel. To begin with, the protagonist makes rudimentary signs with his knife on a wooden post, in order to mark the passing of the days and not to lose track of time. Next, he registers the details of his daily life on sheets of paper – “*The JOURNAL*”, with efficient immediacy, closeness and formlessness. From the crude recording of the passing of days, the marooned voyager moves on to the cold, objective realism of his diary. Lastly, his supplies of ink finally exhausted, the self-conscious narration of events emerges once again, whereby the recounting of his experiences are filtered through his own psyche and perspective (“and this I am going to relate”).

Robinson Crusoe was first published in 1719. Its full title, which is exceedingly descriptive in terms of introducing the protagonist, offering details of the location and nature of his experiences, and even the autobiographical format of the narrative, is as follows: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who Lived Eight and Twenty Years, All Alone in an Un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, Near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been Cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein All the*

Men Perished but Himself. With an Account How He was at Last as Strangely Deliver'd by PYRATES. Written by Himself.

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