

Real and Imaginary Stories: *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Serious Reflections*

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Defoe's *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1720) has enjoyed none of the universal popular success of the first part of the Crusoe trilogy. Walter Scott considered that it contained "few observations that might not have been made by any shop-keeper living at Charing Cross,"¹ and it is only the search by modern critics for clues to Defoe's intent in writing *Robinson Crusoe* that has rescued the text from total neglect.² The attention that a relatively small number of critics have given to the *Serious Reflections* has yielded some fascinating clues as to the way in which Defoe viewed his fictional craft. The most complete attempt to define Defoe's approach to fiction from his own writings remains Maximillian Novak's; but, as Robert Merrett has pointed out, Defoe's critical views are so heavily subject to their rhetorical and didactic purpose that contradictions and inconsistencies make it almost impossible to weld them into a coherent theory.³ Within the rhetorical and didactic parameters of the *Se-*

1 *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 171.

2 This neglect began very soon after its publication; no single editions appeared after 1720 and it was but infrequently added to the two narrative volumes as part 3. The decline of the second part of the trilogy, the *Farther Adventures*, was more gradual; it continued to be published throughout the nineteenth century but its critical reputation sank and it was seen as a money-spinning sequel that failed to recapture the magic of the island adventures. Curiously, it is in translation that both the *Farther Adventures* and the *Serious Reflections* survived longest. The French translation by Justus Van Effen and Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe of the three parts of *Robinson Crusoe* was republished regularly throughout the eighteenth century.

3 Maximillian E. Novak, "Defoe's Theory of Fiction," *Studies in Philology* 61 (1964), 650-68;

rious Reflections, however, we can see Defoe, if not defining a theory, at least grappling with the moral and epistemological issues raised by his own creation. It is of crucial importance that Defoe addressed these problems after rather than before writing the *Crusoe* narrative. The light thrown on *Robinson Crusoe* depends on the status we accord the *Serious Reflections*; we need to understand what Defoe was attempting to do there if we are to explore its relationship and relevance to the narrative of *Crusoe's* adventures.

The *Serious Reflections* consists of a series of moral essays. Rather than the modern critical preoccupations with spiritual autobiography—original sin, trial, repentance, conversion, redemption, and deliverance—the essays consider solitude, honesty, immoral conversation and behaviour, the state of religion in the world, providence, and the proportional strength of Christianity and paganism. The relationship between these essays and the narrative can appear, and indeed sometimes is, tenuous; one section on the “Immorality of Conversation” is said by Defoe to have been written in the 1690s.⁴ The final added section, “A Vision of the Angelick World,” bears no immediately apparent relationship to *Robinson Crusoe* whatsoever.

We may be tempted to conclude that Defoe is merely trying to cash in on the success of the earlier books by selling a miscellaneous collection of moral reflections under the lucrative name of *Robinson Crusoe*. Yet if such was his intention, it was a highly laborious and commercially unsuccessful way to build on the popularity of the narrative. I believe we should see the *Serious Reflections* more as a response to the early reception and criticism of *Robinson Crusoe*. The immediate popularity of Defoe's narrative, attested by the speed with which it was translated, serialized, and abridged,⁵ shows how quickly the book escaped the control of its author. Defoe was seeking to reassert control in the *Serious Reflections*. He was also no doubt replying to *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Mr. D— De F—*, attributed to Charles Gildon, which appeared towards the end of 1719. The main issues raised by Gildon, apart from personal attacks on Defoe, were the unsoundness of his religious

Robert James Merrett, *Daniel Defoe's Moral and Rhetorical Ideas*, English Literary Studies (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1980), esp. chap. 5.

4 Daniel Defoe, *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: with his Vision of the Angelick World. Written by Himself* (1720), p. 80n. References are to this edition.

5 The first abridged version of the first part appeared in 1719 and was followed by an abridgement of all three parts in 1722. Parts 1 and 2 were serialized in *The Original London Post, or Heathcot's Intelligence* between 7 October 1719 and 19 October 1720. Translations of part 1 into Dutch, French, and German all appeared in 1720 and were quickly followed by translations of the other two parts.

views (Gildon accuses Defoe of Catholic sympathies) and the improbability of the narrative. In Gildon's account, Crusoe reproaches Defoe with making him "a strange, whimsical, inconsistent Being," while Defoe confesses that the book is "nothing but a Romance," thus invalidating its moral pretensions:

the Design of the Publication of this Book was not sufficient to justify and make Truth of what you allow to be Fiction and Fable: what you mean by *Legitimizing, Invention* and *Parable*, I know not; unless you would have us think, that the Manner of your telling a Lie will make it a Truth.⁶

The *Serious Reflections* constitutes a reply to these attacks on the fictional and moral status of *Robinson Crusoe*, and in particular to the accusation that behind a specious "claim to historicity" (to use Michael McKeon's term) Defoe has written an implausible romance that articulates suspect religious views.⁷ More generally the reply demonstrates Defoe's concern to establish not only what sort of book he intended *Robinson Crusoe* to be, but the way in which he considered it should be read.

These preoccupations are addressed in the Preface to the *Serious Reflections*. From the outset, Defoe refutes the accusation that *Robinson Crusoe* is a romance, defining it instead as a fable, the moral of which is to be revealed: "The Fable is always made for the Moral, not the Moral for the Fable." The elucidation of this moral is one of the main objectives of the *Serious Reflections*. Defoe describes the story as allegorical and historical "because it concerns a Man alive, and well known too, the actions of whose Life are the just Subject of these Volumes and to whom all or most Part of the Story most directly alludes." Later Defoe adds the word "allusive," defining *Robinson Crusoe* as "a Parable, or an allusive allegorick History" (p. 115). The significance of these allusions is explained when Defoe asserts that "In a Word, there's not a Circumstance in the imaginary Story, but has its just Allusion to a real Story" (Preface). *Robinson Crusoe* is thus presented as an imaginary story having the didactic function of a fable, but one which is based on a real event. We have then a double refutation of the charge of romance; *Robinson Crusoe* is both a fable illustrating certain essential moral truths, and an allegory rooted in historical truth. The crucial point in this dense and confusing argument is the way that Defoe's assertion of both the moral and the historical legitimacy of *Robinson Crusoe*

6 [Charles Gildon], *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr. D— De F—* (1719), pp. viii, 33.

7 Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 53.

is presented by means of the dualistic formula of the real and imaginary stories.⁸

The real story is best understood as embodying the different modes of what we can call Defoe's claim to authenticity; McKeon's "claim to historicity" is only partially adequate because more is involved here than the claim to historical truth. The first of these modes is the moral fable. The imaginary story of *Robinson Crusoe* is held to illustrate certain moral truths. The *Serious Reflections* extrapolates from Crusoe's narrative and gives these truths an explicit and generalized formulation. This process is best illustrated by the two essays on religion, "An Essay on the present State of Religion in the World" and "Of the Proportion between the Christian and Pagan World." One of the central issues of these essays is the spiritual status of the savages. We recall that, after witnessing their acts of cannibalism, Crusoe moves from a desire to massacre the savages in punishment for their barbarity to the realization that his mission is to civilize them. He concludes that punishing savages is something best left to God, and "That neither in Principle or in Policy, I ought one way or other to concern my self in this Affair."⁹ He at first interprets his dream of rescuing Friday as indicating the best way to effectuate his own escape from the island; "I made this Conclusion, that my only Way to go about an Attempt for an Escape, was, if possible, to get a Savage into my Possession" (p. 199). It is only after he has begun to educate Friday that Crusoe realizes that in delivering him from barbarity he is also fulfilling his own calling and so bringing about his own spiritual deliverance:

My Grief set lighter upon me, my Habitation grew comfortable to me beyond Measure; and when I reflected that in this solitary Life which I had been confin'd to, I had not only been moved my self to look up to Heaven, and to seek to the Hand that had brought me there ; but was now to be made an Instrument under Providence to save the Life, and *for ought I knew*, the Soul of a poor Savage ... a secret Joy run through every Part of my Soul, and I frequently rejoyc'd that ever I was brought to this Place, which I had so often thought the most dreadful of all Afflictions that could possibly have befallen me. (p. 220)

8 Problems of terminology (Defoe's and that of his critics) are difficult to avoid. Novak summarizes Defoe's view: "Provided that a work has some kind of general resemblance to truth (realism) and that the incidents have some general and serious application to human life (symbolism) a work of fiction is justifiable" (p. 655). Defoe certainly uses the word "real" to mean "true" in a moral sense (though he also uses it to refer to historical reality), but this does not mean that these moral truths are to be equated with a more modern notion of realism. The term "symbolism" raises similar problems; Novak uses it in a contemporary sense, not necessarily one that Defoe would have recognized.

9 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. J. Donald Crowley (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 172. References are to this edition.

Crusoe thus progresses from the role of self-appointed avenging angel to that of deliverer and civilizer. The debate about the spiritual state of the savages is a catalyst for Crusoe's own spiritual evolution, and for the direction of the narrative.

In the *Serious Reflections* these issues are generalized into a discussion of the state of religion in the world. Whether savages are to be forgiven because of their ignorance or condemned for their irreligion remains unresolved. If the former is true, then logically only non-Christians living in Christian countries could be condemned, and Christianity "loses more than it saves, which is impious but to imagin" (p. 127); if the latter is true, the whole notion of a merciful God must be abandoned. The way out, as in the narrative, lies in the civilizing influence of Christianity, and its power to deliver people from barbarity; but the issue is no longer related solely to Crusoe's salvation. The essay is a blueprint for a Christian imperialism whose aim is "to unchain the Wills of Men, set their Inclinations free, that their Reason may be at Liberty to influence their Understandings, and that they may have the Faith of Christ preach'd to them" (p. 254). Defoe even produces a seven-stage plan for evangelizing Japan, involving military conquest, the destruction of temples and idols, the eradication of the priesthood, the extinguishing of pagan practices, the introduction of humane Christian rule, religious teaching through the imposition of the language of the conquerors, and firm action against backsliders. This generalized and impersonal explication of the moral to the fable moves the centre of attention from spiritual autobiography to mass conversion, and the richly complex resonances of the encounter with Friday are flattened into colonial conquest.

The "Essay on Solitude" follows a similar path, but remains closer to the narrative account. Solitude, defined as "Contemplation of sublime Things" (p. 4), is seen as the objective of life: "it seems to me, that Life in general is, or ought to be, but one universal Act of Solitude" (p. 2). Defoe's description of man's natural egocentricity is almost Swiftian in its language, yet its aim is precisely the opposite of Swift's bitter satires on human selfishness:

What are the Sorrows of other Men to us? And what their Joy? Something we may be touch'd indeed with, by the Power of Sympathy, and a secret Turn of the Affections; but all the solid Reflection is directed to our selves. Our Meditations are all Solitude in Perfection; our Passions are all exercised in Retirement; we love, we hate, we covet, we enjoy, all in Privacy and Solitude: All that we communicate of those Things to any other, is but for their Assistance in the Pursuit of our Desires; the End is at Home; the Enjoyment, the Contemplation,

is all Solitude and Retirement; 'tis for our selves we enjoy, and for our selves we suffer. (pp. 2–3)

This egocentricity, which is common to vice and virtue, is carefully differentiated from physical isolation. Complete isolation is impossible and monkish retirement a mere illusion of solitude. He who attempts such physical isolation “causes his Soul to commit a Rape upon his Body” (p. 6). It is better to live in good company than trust to one’s own conscience: “There is no need of a Wilderness to wander among wild Beasts, no necessity of a Cell on the top of a Mountain, or a desolate Island in the Sea” (p. 7).¹⁰

The explanation of the moral to the fable here involves the continuation of Crusoe’s reflection on his situation in the narrative. Crusoe finds true solitude only when he ceases to feel the oppression of his physical isolation; or, to put it another way, when he conquers the urge to travel of which his yearning to escape from the island is a part. Only then does he move from the isolation of despair to true solitude in contemplation of God. Both the domination of his physical environment and the company of Friday are crucial factors in attaining solitude. Yet in stressing the difference between physical isolation and solitude, the *Serious Reflections* points up the irony of Crusoe’s final months on the island, when, having conquered the urge to escape, he is finally able to do so. He is physically delivered only when he recognizes the necessity for spiritual deliverance. This physical deliverance then rekindles his urge to travel; it is Crusoe’s escape from the island that enables Defoe to write the *Farther Adventures*. Crusoe never attains the ideal of solitude in the midst of society, the moral of the fable in the “Essay on Solitude,” because the contradictory behaviour which is engendered by this paradox is the driving force of the narrative.

The second mode of the claim to authenticity is the assertion of an allegory: “’tis 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” (Preface). The idea that *Robinson Crusoe* was an allegory of Defoe’s own life was first put forward at the end of the nineteenth century by Thomas Wright.¹¹ More recently Robert Ayres, again on the basis of

10 For Defoe’s rejection of solitary retirement, see David Blewett, “The Retirement Myth in *Robinson Crusoe*: A Reconsideration,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 15:2 (Fall 1982). Homer O. Brown in his otherwise sensitive and suggestive reading of passages from the *Serious Reflections* seems to me to miss the importance of this distinction between isolation and solitude. “The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe,” *ELH* 38:4 (December 1971), 562–90, reprinted in *Daniel Defoe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 69–94, esp. pp. 92–93.

11 Thomas Wright, *The Life of Daniel Defoe* (London: Cassell, 1894).

statements in the *Serious Reflections*, has suggested that the book can be read as a religious allegory. Such readings posit the existence of "a story whose literal meaning is augmented by a second meaning which is the construct of allusions in the literal narrative."¹² Similarly, the text can be read as spiritual autobiography, where the second meaning is provided by the shadow of a recognizable genre exploring sin, repentance, and redemption.¹³

An allegorical reading of the narrative foregrounds the moral application of the imaginary story by associating it with the specific incidents of the narrative, and recognizing the way in which the real story (as in *Pilgrim's Progress*) structures our reading of the text. Yet the allegorical significance is far from clear. If the allegory is biographical we might expect to find some explanation in the *Serious Reflections*, yet the most obvious reference to Defoe's own life does not fulfil this allegorical role:

I have liv'd to see Men of the best Light be mistaken, as well in Party as in Principles, as well in Politicks as in Religion, and find not only Occasion, but even a Necessity to change Hands or Sides in both; I have seen them sometimes run into contrary Extremes, beyond their first Intention, and even without Design: Nay, in those unhappy Changes, I have seen them driven into Lengths they never designed, by the fiery Resentment of those whom they seem'd to have left, and whom they differ'd from; I have lived to see those Men acknowledge, even publicly and openly, they were wrong and mistaken, and express their Regret for being misled very sincerely; but I cannot say, I have liv'd to see the People, they have desir'd to return to, forgive or receive them. (p. 258)

This passage clearly refers to Defoe's own political problems in reingratiating himself with the Whigs after the accession of George I. He cuts it short by saying "I speak this *too feelingly*, and therefore say no more" (p. 259). Yet such a self-pitying tale of ingratitude in the face of sincere repentance is clearly at odds with Crusoe's spiritual biography, where it is not the ingratitude of others that is the problem but his own spiritual blindness.¹⁴

12 Robert W. Ayres, "Robinson Crusoe: 'Allusive Allegorick History,'" *PMLA* 82 (1967), 400.

13 See George A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) and J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

14 Laura A. Curtis speculates that another passage in the *Serious Reflections* might be autobiographical, that concerning a man who responds to the offensive language of members of his family by refusing to speak at all (pp. 6-7). Even if this claim, for which there is no evidence, were true, it would not contribute to an autobiographical allegory. See Laura A. Curtis, *The Elusive Daniel Defoe* (London and Totowa: Vision and Barnes and Noble, 1984), pp. 148-49.

What is most important about this claim to authenticity is that it remains a claim. Its role is principally to lend not just credibility but significance to the imaginary story. In other words it acts as a kind of alibi to the fable: without this claim, the didactic objective of the fable is weakened—only if the reality behind the imaginary story is affirmed can the fable achieve its effect. Yet the revelation of the real story, the unlocking of the key to the allegory, would prevent the imaginary story from being perceived as a fable. Hence the extremely precarious nature of the allegory. Allegory is a necessary alibi to fable because of the risk that the imaginary story will become self-sufficient. This is indeed exactly what happened to the novel with Defoe. As McKeon puts it:

In Defoe the balance between spiritualization and the claim to historicity has been reversed, and it is as though he has—not without the spiraling misgivings of the *Serious Reflections*—taken that perilous next step and, in the name of a “positive” secularization, explicitly sanctioned our resistance to allegorical translation.¹⁵

Homer O. Brown also sees the allegorical mode (be it biographical or spiritual) as containing the seeds of a radical dissociation of symbol and that which is symbolized, and he points to the way this displacement becomes incorporated within the narrative text itself.¹⁶ In trying to deny the legitimacy of such readings Defoe seeks to limit the independence of his own imaginary story, to retain its moral and historical moorings. In this respect the *Serious Reflections* purports to be the real story to *Robinson Crusoe*.

Defoe is conscious of this epistemological predicament, as his subsequent and highly inconclusive disclaimer reveals:

If any Man object here, that the preceeding Volumes of this Work seem to be hereby condemn'd, and the History which I have therein publish'd of my self, censur'd; I demand in Justice, such Objector stay his Censure, till he sees the End of the Scene, when all that Mystery shall discover it self, and I doubt not, but the Work shall abundantly justify the Design, and the Design abundantly justify the Work. (p. 118)

Reaching back from the precipice, Defoe attempts to suggest the existence of a real story in the form of a biographical allegory. Yet here, as

¹⁵ McKeon, p. 319.

¹⁶ Brown, pp. 92–93.

in the first mode of the claim to authenticity, what he is proposing is an *a posteriori* gloss on, and justification of, the imaginary story.

Defoe's own life story can in any case only appear surreptitiously in the *Serious Reflections*, as the book is presented as the work of Robinson Crusoe. This is the third mode of the claim to authenticity, the documentary objectification of the narrative and indeed of the persona of Crusoe himself. McKeon has demonstrated the process whereby part 2 of *The Pilgrim's Progress* provides a documentary objectification of part 1 in an act of empirical epistemology that is wholly characteristic of the early novel's self-authentication.¹⁷ The *Serious Reflections*, which makes explicit acknowledgment of Bunyan's influence, embodies a very similar process in the claim to the authenticity of the imaginary story. By commenting on his own autobiographical narrative Crusoe validates its historicity, but the real story behind the allegory thus emerges not as Defoe's but as Robinson Crusoe's. "In a Word, there's not a Circumstance in the imaginary Story, but has its just Allusion to a real Story, and chimes Part for Part, and Step for Step with the inimitable Life of *Robinson Crusoe*" (Preface). Here we have the "fetishization of Protestant allegory" referred to by McKeon,¹⁸ the moment when the real story, the claim to authenticity, comes not from outside the narrative in the form of a moral or an external allegorical base, but from the imaginary story itself. It is Robinson Crusoe who now makes the claim to the authenticity of his story, and it is his life which provides the basis of the allegory.

The claim to authenticity is thus inseparable from the imaginative persona of Crusoe. The real story functions paradoxically as a defence of the imaginary story. Indeed it is only if the narrative is perceived as a work of imagination that it will be believed.

Had the common Way of Writing a Mans [sic] private History been taken, and I had given you the Conduct of a Man you knew, and whose Misfortunes and Infirmities, perhaps you had sometimes unjustly triumph'd over; all I could have said would have yielded no Diversion, and perhaps scarce have obtained a better Reading, or at best no Attention; the Teacher, *like a greater* having no Honour in his own Country. Facts that are form'd to touch the Mind, must be done a great Way off, and by somebody never heard of (Preface).

It is precisely the inability of the reader to recognize any real story, the impossibility of actually reading *Robinson Crusoe* as an allegory, which

17 McKeon, pp. 312-13.

18 McKeon, p. 312.

makes the imaginary story so powerful. The claim to allegory and to documentary authenticity must be maintained or else the story might be dismissed as romance; but it is nonetheless the imaginary story that enables the truths contained in the fable to be conveyed. The claim to authenticity must remain no more than a claim, for it is the unfamiliarity of the imaginary story that ensures its impact. Defoe's insistent claim to authenticity and the realism of his narrative style should not blind us to his equally fervent assertion of the power of the imagination. The *Serious Reflections* is not the unravelling of an allegory but his reflections on an imaginary story. As the Preface almost apologetically puts it, the deductions made from the story compensate the reader "for not having the Emblem explained by the Original." What is being addressed is not just the accessory and legitimating real story, but the didactic significance of the imaginary story.

Defoe's reference to Christ's parables in the above quotation is instructive. In Defoe's view it was because Christ was human in form that he was able to convey his teachings to mankind. The dissimulation and deception involved in the son of God's being born the son of a carpenter was the necessary condition for the revelation of his divinity. God's incarnation both affirmed the spiritual dimension of human existence and humanized the divine message. Defoe's approach to fiction is exactly analogous. The imaginary story is a fable which presents moral truths in an unfamiliar guise, but it consequently has a far greater didactic impact than that of simple exposition. Christ's own parables exemplify this same principle—one which informs so much Puritan and Low Church theology, be it in the preference for example over precept or in the debate between natural and revealed religion.

What Defoe does not do in the *Serious Reflections* is to make the most obvious claim to authenticity. Nowhere does he simply claim that the narrative is a straightforward account of historical truth. In order to do so the persona adopted in the *Serious Reflections* would need to be not Crusoe himself but the editor of the narrative who presents it to the reader in the preface to *Robinson Crusoe*. Yet the elaborate claims to authenticity embodied in the multi-faceted concept of the real story, implying as they do a prior didactic intent underlying the very concept of the imaginary story, are clearly incompatible with the presentation of a mere slice of recorded human experience. A claim to authenticity from without abdicates all responsibility for the narrative, whereas Defoe's aim is precisely to reassert his (or Crusoe's) conscious control over what he has written. But by having Crusoe himself formulate claims to the authenticity of his own narrative, Defoe paradoxically draws attention to

the subjective nature of such claims. The real story is enclosed within the imaginary story, as part of its fictional strategies of seduction. The self-authentication of the *Serious Reflections* means that the claims to authenticity of the real story must necessarily be read as elements of the imaginary story in the same way as Crusoe's attempts to authenticate his experience by recording it in his journal, or Moll Flanders's retrospective moral reflections on her spiritual status.¹⁹

The *Serious Reflections* thus simultaneously asserts that *Robinson Crusoe* is a real story conveyed by means of an imaginary story, and that it is an imaginary story that can be read as a real story. The movements from the real to the imaginary and from the imaginary to the real both ostensibly function as guarantors of the efficacy of the text's moral didacticism in the way they protect and propagate "the real story"; yet, in what is the most extraordinary piece of auto-deconstruction in the whole book, Defoe demonstrates how these movements can also have the exactly contrary effect of destroying the credibility of the real story altogether. In chapter 3, "Of the Immorality of Conversation and the Vulgar Errors of Behaviour," Defoe draws a distinction between stories which are no more than lies, and moral fables, of which *Robinson Crusoe* is an example. The essay is in the section entitled "Of Talking Falsely," a practice which is more particularly defined as the telling of stories:

For once we will suppose a Story to be in its Substance true, yet to what monstrous a Bulk doth it grow, by that frequent Addition put to it in the Relation, till not only it comes to be improbable, but even impossible to be true; and the ignorant Relator is so tickled with having made a good Story of it, whatever it was when he found it, that he is blind to the Absurdities and Inconsistencies of Fact in Relation, and tells it with a full Face, even to those that are able to confute it, by proving it to be impossible. (p. 112)

The story thus swells to such an extent that it loses any basis in truth. It moves from being a real to an imaginary story.

The opposite process, whereby the imaginary story becomes objectified and so provides its own legitimation, is described shortly afterwards:

Besides there is a spreading Evil in telling a false Story as true, namely, that you put it into the Mouths of others, and it continues a brooding Forgery to the End of Time ... Fraud goes unto the World's End, for Story never dies, every Relator Vouches it for Truth, tho' he knows nothing of the Matter. (pp. 117-18)

¹⁹ The claim that a passage of the *Serious Reflections* was written in 1690 can be seen as part of the affirmation of a prior didactic intent. As a self-authenticated imaginary story, it raises the question of what Crusoe was doing in 1690.

Ultimately "what begun in Forgery Ends in History, and we make our Lies be told for Truth" (p. 118). The effect is to reverse the process described by Defoe in the transforming of lies into history where what begins in history (the real story) ends in forgery (the imaginary story) and truth is told as lies.

Of course Defoe hastens to distinguish his own narratives from both of these forms of corruption:

The selling [sic] or writing a Parable, or an allusive allegorick History is quite a different Case, and is always Distinguisht from this other Jestings with Truth; that it is design'd and effectually turn'd for instructive and upright Ends, and has its Moral justly apply'd: Such are the historical Parables in the holy Scripture, such the Pilgrim's Progress, and such in a Word the Adventures of your fugitive Friend, *Robinson Crusoe*. (pp. 115-16)

Yet this defensive assertion of authorial intent can protect his story neither from the deformation of the real story nor from the self-legitimation of the imaginary story, because what Defoe has so graphically described is nothing other than the process of reading itself, the exercise of interpretative free will, however mistaken it may be judged by the author.²⁰

This interpretative autonomy is, as James H. Maddox, Jr has shown, a crucial issue in the narrative as "Crusoe quite frankly and openly approaches his life as a text to be glossed and interpreted."²¹ It is this act of interpretation that lends meaning and form both to Crusoe's existence and to his representation of that existence in the narrative. The correct interpretation of the events of his life and of the meaning of his presence on the island depends in particular upon his reading of providence.

This issue is dealt with in the chapter entitled "Of Listning to the Voice of Providence." Defoe develops his conception of providence as a guide working through natural causes rather than as the supernatural manifestation of divine judgment. Providence is therefore not determinist:

It would be an ill Account we should give of the Government of divine Providence in the World, if we should argue, that its Events are so unavoidable, and every Circumstance so determined, that nothing can be altered; and that therefore these Warnings of Providence are inconsistent with the Nature of it. (p. 229)

20 David Blewett sees Defoe's distinction between lies and fable as proof of his overriding didactic purpose. *Defoe's Art of Fiction: "Robinson Crusoe," "Moll Flanders," "Colonel Jack," and "Roxana"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 12-15.

21 James H. Maddox, Jr, "Interpreter Crusoe," *ELH* 51:1 (Spring 1984), 34.

It is by reading and interpreting such warnings that God's wisdom becomes "legible to our Understanding" (p. 229). Despite the apparent determinism of divine providence it is human understanding of such providential signs that provides the basis for the exercise of free will. To the extent that these providential signs are conveyed by natural means, listening to the voice of providence involves the reading of life. The particular providences which are destined to guide an individual's conduct require us to "look up" (to praise, thank, and acknowledge God's power and goodness), to "look out" (to take heed of providential warnings), and to "look in" (to reflect upon events, to repent and to reform).

The problems raised by this notion of providence revolve around the act of interpretation. How can we successfully read the warnings of providence and life in general? How are these warnings transmitted? How can we distinguish the promptings of providence from the promptings of the devil? In short, what is the agency, or to use Defoe's own phrase "the Medium of Communication" (p. 225) at work here? Defoe admits that listening to the voice of providence is treated by many with contempt "as leading to Superstition, to Enthusiasm, and vain Fancies, tainted with Melancholly, and amusing the Mind with the Vapours of the Head" (p. 226), and he acknowledges the danger of substituting one's own judgment for providence. He explains this danger through his theory of the world of the spirits; the subject of the "Vision of the Angelick World," which he was to develop subsequently in *The History of the Devil* (1726) and *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727). It is through the "Converse of Spirits" (p. 14)²² that the extraterrestrial spirits communicate with the spirits of this world. These extraterrestrial spirits are of two sorts, good and evil, and they employ identical methods. Just as God generally works through natural causes, so the Devil, "a very diligent Fellow" (p. 12), does not act in a supernatural way by provoking storms or earthquakes, but insinuates himself into the minds of men.

Spirits operate through dreams and visions—as in the narrative. Yet because the devil and the angels use the same means of communication, it is up to humans to decide on the source of the messages that such dreams convey. The spirits work by "Hints, Dreams, and Impulses, and not by clear Vision and open Discovery" (pp. 42–43). The good spirits, if listened to, provide us with providential warnings that allow us to interpret and understand our spiritual state and our place in the natural world. A good example of this process is Crusoe's first shipwreck, when he ignores or rather stifles those promptings which had provoked

22 *A Vision of the Angelick World* is paginated separately.

in him a feeling of unease and anxiety analogous to the storm he had lived through. The understanding this experience imparts is retrospective; it involves the rereading, and in the case of a narrative account, the rewriting of the past. Good spirits enable Crusoe to write his story as a fable or an allegory, in short to make of his life a real story.

In the description of the general principles of the devil's politics—his "Notions of liberty," his disregard for the divine presence in the world, and his disbelief in a future state (p. 38)—we can recognize the spiritual characteristics of the unreformed Crusoe, his "wandering inclination," his refusal to see the hand of God in his shipwreck on the island, and his failure to envisage his deliverance as anything more than physical escape. The devil works by insinuation, inflaming the passions, stimulating desires and appetites, and above all provoking the imagination: "who forms Ideas in the Mind of Man? who presents beautiful or terrible Figures to his Fancy, when his Eyes are clos'd with Sleep? who but these insinuating Devils" (p. 40). The devil's influence draws Crusoe away from the real significance of events into a world of autarchic imagination where the senses are divorced from understanding. The status of the imaginary story is thus ambiguous; on the one hand it is the most effective way of conveying moral truth, but on the other it threatens to assume its own independent existence in opposition to the structuring and ordering principles implied by fable and allegory.

To reject the conception of an intrusively determinist providence which forces a reading of life upon the individual entails the recognition of the author's inability totally to control the reading of his work. The *Serious Reflections* thus contains an attempt to define the moral purpose behind *Robinson Crusoe*, the way in which it should be read, and an admission that if no freedom of interpretation is left to the reader, this moral purpose can never be accomplished. It must be discovered through the medium of the imaginary story. The power of imagination both attracts and repels Defoe. He sees the writer's imagination as enabling him to communicate and to influence in an almost subliminal way; yet it is a medium that is also open to the devil. Similarly the reader's imaginative response enables him to decode the writer's moral intent, but it can also lead to a misappropriation and a misreading of the text. Defoe provides a parable of such misreadings in the story of two travellers who are attacked by highwaymen: one attributes his misfortune to luck, the other to the devil (pp. 233–35). The way Crusoe's imagination leads to correct and incorrect readings of the signs of providence is of paramount importance in his narrative. What has happened in the process of writing the *Serious Reflections* is that an attempt to define *Robinson Crusoe* in terms of a real

story that is both origin and legitimation turns into a reading, an exegesis, that therefore recognizes the autonomy of the text. The imaginary story is transformed from being the vehicle of the real story to the textual basis on which the real story is subsequently constructed. The roles have become inverted and it is the imaginary story itself which becomes the real story of *Robinson Crusoe*.

As David Blewett has argued, Defoe's prefaces show a subsequent move away from a stress on authenticity towards a much greater emphasis on invention and imagination.²³ The preface to *Colonel Jack* written in 1722 candidly asserts that so long as encouraging good and discouraging evil is the object of the book, "no Objection can lye against it, neither is it of the least Moment to enquire whether the Colonel hath told his own Story true or not."²⁴ After *Robinson Crusoe*, and beginning with the *Serious Reflections*, significantly more emphasis is laid on the reader's judgment, thus transferring a significant share of responsibility for the didactic success of his texts away from authorial control. This provides Defoe with one further line of defence against the autonomy of his text. If he can no longer ensure the didactic effect of his own story, he can absolve himself from all responsibility for its misapplication. The reader who fails to see, or chooses to ignore, the moral signposts that the author provides is alone answerable for the results. As Defoe puts it in the preface to *Roxana*, "if the Reader makes a wrong Use of the Figures, the Wickedness is his own."²⁵

What we have here is a reproduction of the Calvinist paradox that is the subject of Stuart Sim's book on Bunyan and Defoe.²⁶ Just as the elect are chosen by God but the damned are responsible for their fall, so any moral improvement that results from the text is credited to the author, whereas a failure to instruct, or even a tendency to corrupt, merely

23 Blewett, *Defoe's Art of Fiction*, pp. 15–16.

24 Daniel Defoe, *Colonel Jack*, ed. Samuel Holt Monk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 2.

25 Daniel Defoe, *Roxana*, ed. Jane Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 2. This position, which we might paraphrase as "I know what I mean and intend and it is your fault if you do not perceive it," amounts to the final sacrifice of moral didacticism to the reassertion of authorial control, for if only virtuous readers can correctly interpret a text, the vicious remain immune to its message. Lincoln B. Faller discusses this tension between authorial control and readerly autonomy in terms of the relationship between written and oral narrative. He notes Defoe's ambiguity in trying to fix both meaning and form in his texts (if only provisionally), while inviting readers to exercise their interpretive faculties. Faller's difficulty in explaining why this should be derives in part from the fact that he discusses the *Serious Reflections* in the context of crime narratives, a choice which excludes *Robinson Crusoe*. Lincoln B. Faller, *Crime and Defoe: A New Kind of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chap. 3.

26 Stuart Sim, *Negotiations with Paradox: Narrative Practice and Narrative Form in Bunyan and Defoe* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

reflects the moral failings of the reader. The author, however, unlike God, is no longer in control of his creation. The notion of the imaginary story involves a crucial recognition of the presence of strategies of deception in the act of writing, strategies that generate the defensive self-exegesis of the *Serious Reflections*, but which also open up the text as an area of negotiation, a field of interaction between writer and reader (including the writer as reader and the reader as rewriter) where the very issues of control and autonomy that underlie the Calvinist paradox (and which have informed so much of modern criticism of Defoe) are experimented with and explored.²⁷

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27 An earlier version of this essay was read at the thirty-second congress of the Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur in Strasbourg, May 1992.