

A Reply to Maximillian E. Novak*

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I am delighted that Maximillian E. Novak, an authority on Defoe, has found my discussion of surprise in *Robinson Crusoe* useful, and am grateful for the opportunity to offer further observation on the way that Defoe's classic invites its readers to re-think the opposition of nature and culture. Novak's highly informed, attentive readings of several passages from *Robinson Crusoe* not only highlight the different shades of surprise evident in the novel, but also demonstrate how this aspect of the reading experience is sometimes related to the cognitive and ideological implications of a seemingly simple adventure story, a point aptly encapsulated in Novak's formulation: "The reader is surprised into knowledge" (247).

Novak's discussion of the encounter between Friday and his father is exemplary in this context. Everyone, including the reader, is surprised to find out that the man rescued from the hands (or rather teeth...) of the cannibals is in fact Friday's father. Friday's spontaneous burst of joy during that scene may echo representations of encounters between natives in contemporary accounts of desert islands.¹ What is even more important, however, is that this affectionate, heartwarming meeting of father and son indirectly references the cold, alienated relationship Crusoe had with his own father. Thus, in Novak's words, "[t]he 'other,' as represented by Friday, is not merely to be accepted as human, he is seen as capable of the kind of familial love that the 'civilized' world can only barely remember" (242). Defoe

*Reference: Maximillian E. Novak, "Strangely Surpriz'd by Robinson Crusoe: A Response to David Fishelov," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 238-49; David Fishelov, "*Robinson Crusoe*, 'The Other' and the Poetics of Surprise," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 1-18.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfishelov01413.htm>>.

suggests that when it comes to familial relationships and the ability to express genuine feelings, the 'other' is closer to nature and to "the law of nature."²

In some points Novak's readings offer a slightly different emphasis than my own, especially when it comes to the question of the 'correct' distance that the reader should adopt vis-à-vis Crusoe, the character and narrator. Such differences in emphasis are not surprising and result from Defoe's art of putting on fictional masks. Defoe's chameleon-like use of his personae is not only an important part of his art of realism, presenting story and narrator as a *tranche de vie*, but also contributes to his works' rhetorical complexity: it fosters an active reader who constantly tries to decide whether, and to what extent, Defoe-the-author should be identified with his invented personae. In some cases the fictional mask serves as Defoe's mouthpiece, in others there is a huge gap between the two, and in still others, it creates an unstable irony, mixing identification and distance, agreement and discord; readers know that they should not take the speaker's words at their face value, but it is difficult to determine what they should adopt instead.³ When this art of playful masking and irony touched upon sensitive contemporary political nerves, it had some painful consequences for the author, as the incident of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* illustrates.⁴

The famous scene in which Crusoe relates the finding of the money on the wrecked ship may illustrate the active role of the reader in determining the correct distance that they should adopt vis-à-vis Crusoe-the-narrator. After making an impressive speech about the uselessness of money on a desert island, Crusoe tells us that "upon Second Thought" (43) he decided to pick it up. Is Crusoe-the-narrator aware of the ironic implications of the contrast between speech and action performed by Crusoe-the-character? And if not, as I perhaps too hastily suggested, are we to feel superior to the narrator, imagining Defoe smiling behind his back? Novak convincingly argues that such a superior position—adopted towards character and narrator alike—is quickly transformed into sympathy and understanding,

because, “who knows what may happen: A ship might come to the island, and he might find himself rescued with the money so esteemed by society” (246). Furthermore, Novak shows how the reader’s surprise in witnessing Crusoe’s change of heart goes beyond a local, rhetorical effect, teaching us something deep about our attitude towards money.

There is, however, one point where Novak seems to dismiss too quickly Defoe’s poetics of surprise as a springboard for attaining valuable insights. According to Novak, alongside “transformational moments” there are also

some set pieces involving surprise, particularly at the end, when Crusoe at last finds the opportunity to escape from his island and when he takes so large a part in recovering a ship from mutineers who plan to become pirates. Similarly, the adventure in the snows of the Pyrenees, when Crusoe and his fellow travelers find themselves charged by a band of ferocious wolves, comes as a surprise after Crusoe appears to have escaped all the dangers of the island. These are mainly the surprises we expect of adventure stories and while they involve suspense, they don’t teach the reader very much. (244)

Granting that recovering a ship from mutineers is a set piece, I would like to argue that some events of the Pyrenees go beyond the horizons of a simple adventure story, not only because they shake up certain narrative expectations but also because they make us re-think a few accepted ideas. If by ‘teaching the reader’ we understand a specific set of didactic statements, then perhaps Novak is right. But when we adopt a broader understanding of the term, including a tacit invitation to question and contemplate certain categories, then the surprising adventure in the Pyrenees may bear important cognitive and ideological import.

What makes this adventure surprising is, as Novak rightly points out, that it occurs when we have every reason to believe that now, when Crusoe is safely back in the civilized world, time has come for him to enjoy some peace and quiet. Defoe’s idea to present Crusoe struggling against the dangerous forces of nature (snow, wild beasts) in the Pyrenees has, however, additional ramifications. The decision

to locate perhaps the most 'primitive' fighting scene in the story—man against ferocious beasts struggling for survival—in Europe, the heart of civilization, is not only surprising but also instructive. After all, it would have been more 'natural' to set such a scene in the wilderness of a desert island or on the shores of Africa. True, on the shores of Africa Crusoe and Xury face and kill "a most curious Leopard" (24), but the scene there is quite short, lacking the detailed, graphic elements of brutality used in the Pyrenees, and can be described as a relatively pale prelude to the later episode.

By locating a primeval struggle for survival in the heart of Europe Defoe is unexpectedly confronting two opposing notions, that of wild nature and that of civilized Europe, inviting the reader to question the clear-cut division between the two, suggesting that brutal struggle for survival is not the monopoly of extra-European territory but can also be found where we would expect a tranquil, bourgeois existence.⁵ Furthermore, just after the encounter with the "monstrous wolves," the next developed memorable scene, in which Friday fights a bear, involves a surprising, grotesque mixture of wildness and refined civilization. The scene is first introduced by Crusoe as follows: "the Fight manag'd so hardily, and in such a surprising Manner [...] between *Friday* and the Bear, which gave us all (though at first we were surpriz'd and afraid for him) the greatest Diversion imaginable" (211). There is a double surprise here, referring both to the manner by which Friday chooses to fight the bear as well as to the effect it had on his audience. When the travelers perceive "a vast monstrous" bear, they are all "a little surpriz'd" but what makes Crusoe truly "surpriz'd" is Friday's reaction: he does not seem frightened but rather pleased. In response to Crusoe's warning that the bear will "*eat you up*," Friday jokingly says that "*Me eatee him up*" (212),⁶ volunteering to handle the situation with the bear, accompanied by a promise: "*Me make you good laugh*" (212).

Friday performs his 'show' by teasing the bear, luring the animal to follow him in climbing a tree, and when the bear reaches a point where the branch of the tree is weaker, Friday addresses his audience:

"*Ha, says he to us, now you see me teachee the Bear dance*" (213). From here on, we witness a strange sequence of movements:

the Bear began to totter, but stood still, and begun to look behind him, to see how he should get back [...] when he sees him stand still, he calls out to him again, as if he had suppo'd the Bear could speak *English; What you no come farther, pray you come farther*; so he left jumping and shaking the Bough; and the Bear, just as if he had understood what he said, did come a little further, then he fell a jumping again, and the Bear stopp'd again. (213)

Finally, just before the bear "could set his hind Feet upon the Ground, *Friday* stept close to him, clapt the Muzzle of his Piece into his Ear, and shot him dead as a Stone" (213-14). Thus, Crusoe and the travelers, as well as the reader, all expecting a dangerous, violent confrontation with a wild beast, are instead invited to imagine a genteel ballet-duet of Friday (as performer and choreographer) and the bear. To add irony to irony, it is Friday, the 'brute' equipped with garbled English, who is staging the dance-like performance, addressing the bear with genteel expressions ("pray you come farther").

Defoe's achievement in *Robinson Crusoe* lies not only in creating an enthralling story of a man on a desert island, but also in implanting in some minor but memorable scenes a major theme of the book: the unexpected juxtapositions of nature and culture. This theme is evident in several macro-elements: the author's basic idea to place a civilized man in a primordial situation, and in orchestrating an encounter with a cannibal whose religion resembles, surprisingly enough, some aspects of the Roman Catholic Church (157); and also in micro-elements, like Crusoe's description of his clothing on the island: a bizarre mixture of civilized and wild elements (breeches and wild skins) that, if seen by people in England, "must either have frightened them, or rais'd a great deal of Laughter" (108); and the grotesque mixture also includes elements borrowed from foreign cultures (whiskers in a shape "seen worn by some *Turks*," 109), making him the ultimate hybrid. The oscillation between fear and laughter, the hallmark of the grotesque, characterizes not only the self-portrayal of Crusoe's clothing

but also Friday's killing of the bear (although I suspect most of us today would not laugh at witnessing the killing of an animal).

Thus, the minor, almost negligible, scene in the Pyrenees, tagged as part of a simple adventure story can, upon second thoughts, reveal the author's innermost sensibilities and thematic concerns. And, as with various other episodes in *Robinson Crusoe*, narrative surprise may trigger some serious reflections about man as a complex, sometimes inharmonious meeting ground of nature and culture.

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NOTES

¹"Friday kiss'd him, embrace'd him hugg'd him, cry'd, laugh'd, hollow'd, jump'd about, danc'd, sung, then cry'd again, wrung his Hands, beat his own Face, and Head, and then sung, and jump'd about again, like a distracted Creature [...] It is not easy for me to express how it mov'd me to see what Extasy and filial Affection had work'ed in this poor *Savage*, at the Sight of his Father" (172); and see also William Dampier's description of an encounter between two Moskito Indians: "a Moskito Indian, named Robin, first leap'd ashore, and running to his Brother Moskito Man, threw himself flat on his face at his feet, who helping him up, and embracing him, fell flat with his face on the Ground at Robin's feet, and was by him taken up also. We stood with pleasure to behold the surprise and tenderness, and solemnity of this interview, which was exceedingly affectionate on both sides" (228). Quotations, followed by page number, are from Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

²For a discussion of "the law of nature" as the implicit standard underlying Defoe's oeuvre, see Maximillian E. Novak's seminal study *Defoe and the Nature of Man* (Oxford: OUP, 1963).

³See Maximillian E. Novak, "Defoe's Use of Irony," *The Uses of Irony, Papers on Defoe and Swift* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1966): 7-38. The essay convincingly argues for the ubiquity of irony ("we must always expect irony of Defoe," 36) and its versatile use in Defoe's writings. For the term 'unstable irony,' see Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1974) especially 240-45.

⁴For details of this incident, in which some contemporary readers were unable to tell exactly where the irony starts or stops, see Maximillian E. Novak, *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) 178.

⁵Cf. the cruel struggle for survival that Moll Flanders has to go through in the “jungle” of the streets of London.

⁶The talk of eating/being eaten may remind us of Crusoe’s and Xury’s state of mind on the shores of Africa as well as the motif of cannibalism in the entire work.