

Strangely Surpriz'd by Robinson Crusoe: A Response to David Fishelov*

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In treating Defoe's *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, most critics have focused on the first word, "Life"—the fictional work as creating a real world in which characters learn, experience feelings, and live in an environment that is at least partly recognizable. Crusoe tells us in his first sentence: "I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York, of a good Family, tho' not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull."¹ The modern reader recognizes that the narrative will involve someone from England at a particular period of time. A reader of 1719 would also have been aware on encountering this sentence, with its details about time and place, that he/she was unlikely to encounter the kind of romantic "novel" that composed the bulk of fictions written at the time. And if, as Susan Feagin suggests, the reader at the beginning of a work of fiction is always ready to "shift gears" rapidly, the seeming contradiction between a real "Life," "Written by Himself," and a life filled with "Strange Surprising Adventures" might lead to the expectation that this was to be one of the many false memoirs of the type produced by Gatién Courtilz and others.² If 1632 is not as visitable a past (to use Henry James's term) for us as it was for the first readers of Defoe's novel, nevertheless even for them, an historical period was being invoked—one that was filled with strange, surprising changes. What will most surprise the reader is that the bulk of the novel will treat the experiences of an isolated figure on an island in the Caribbean Sea.

*Reference: 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>>.

To my mind, David Fishelov's "*Robinson Crusoe, 'The Other' and the Poetics of Surprise*" achieves its most significant insight when it examines Crusoe's being "strangely surpriz'd" (158) by Friday's theological question about the existence of evil in the world, about God's having unlimited power while permitting the Devil and evil to exist. Crusoe, who confesses to being but a fledgling theologian, does not have an answer to such a question and pretending not to have heard Friday, asks him to repeat his query—a query that Crusoe cannot answer with any skill. Despite Crusoe's attempt at an evasion, Friday knows exactly the import of his question:

But he was too earnest for an Answer to forget his Question, so that he repeated it in the very same broken Words, as above. By this time I had recovered my self a little, and I said, *God will at last punish him severely he is reserv'd for the Judgment, and is to be cast into the Bottomless-Pit, to dwell with everlasting Fire;* This did not satisfie *Friday*, but he returns upon me, repeating my Words, *RESERVE, AT LAST, me no understand; but, why not kill the Devil now, not kill great ago? You may as well ask me said I, Why God does not kill you and I, when we do wicked Things here that offend him? We are preserv'd to repent and be pardon'd.* (158)

With this, Friday, perhaps seeing the stress he has caused Crusoe, replies "affectionately," that he understands, "*that well; so you, I, Devil, all wicked, all preserve, repent, God pardon all*" (158). Now Friday's generosity includes a pardon for all those who repent including the Devil, an idea that Crusoe rejects as false doctrine, and his creator, Defoe, would almost certainly have considered heretical.³ Crusoe then speaks of the necessity for "divine Revelation" for a proper understanding of Christian doctrine.

Thus, as Crusoe explains, the "meer Notions of Nature" can guide a savage such as Friday to a "Knowledge of God" (158), but not to a true understanding of Christianity. Or is Friday's generous concept of a universal salvation that even includes the Devil an idea thrown out for the reader's consideration? The second part of *Robinson Crusoe*, titled *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe Being the Second and Last Part of his Life and the Strange Surprising Accounts of his Travels Round Three Parts of the Globe*, published just a few months after the first part

and until the beginning of the twentieth century read as an essential part of the work,⁴ has an admirable Catholic priest who, in converting the inhabitants of Crusoe's island, preaches a broad concept of Christianity, closer in some ways to Friday's notions than to Crusoe's. Crusoe appears to adhere to a strict concept of salvation, probably Presbyterian in nature—a concept that would not only exclude the Devil but also many repentant Christians.

The question of Crusoe's surprise, then, is extremely complicated. In the first place, he clearly did not expect Friday to come up with an extremely difficult question about the nature of evil in the world. As Fishelov remarks, Crusoe is unsure of what exactly he is searching for when he decides that it would be a good thing to capture one or more of the natives. He thinks such persons might be made into "Slaves" (145) or if just one, a "Servant, and perhaps a Companion, or Assistant" (146), and he is close to having a "Feaver" because of "the extraordinary Fervour of [his] Mind about it" (143). At that point, he has a dream in which he envisions himself rescuing a savage whom the cannibals were about to kill, a savage who would not only be his "Servant" but also a "Pilot" (144) who would help him to escape from the island. The dream is so vivid that he awakes with a feeling of disappointment and depression, the wish fulfillment of the dream being so much more desirable than his isolated condition. He decides to act upon what his dream tells him. Yet it is clear that he has not considered with any clarity what the coming of Friday will mean to him. The dream has the putative Friday escaping from the Cannibals, but there is no violence. The fleeing native asks his help, and he gives it. In his dream, the native will be the ideal pilot to take him off the island. He will know how to avoid the cannibals and lead him to a successful escape.

The real rescue of Friday is far messier. Crusoe is forced to kill several of the savages; some escape. Friday, in Crusoe's imagination, is eternally grateful and swears to serve him forever, but all we see is an ambiguous gesture involving the placing of Crusoe's foot on the kneeling Friday's head. Friday is interested in eating the dead canni-

bals, and Crusoe has to indicate his displeasure at such a prospect by violent gestures. Friday proves to be grateful toward the man who saved his life, and to have an affectionate nature. He willingly does all the work asked of him. When Crusoe decides later to attack a group of cannibals who are preparing to kill and devour those who turn out to be the Spanish Captain and Friday's father, Friday joins Crusoe in assault. And when Friday discovers that one of those rescued is his father, he dances wildly up and down, embracing his father with complete abandon. Crusoe finds this display of affection somewhat disturbing and wonders if it may indicate a certain loss of Friday's allegiance to him. But Friday remains the good-natured servant and companion until his death in *The Farther Adventures*.

Fishelov tries to distinguish varieties of surprise in the Crusoe-Friday relationship, indicating some cases in which both Crusoe and the reader are surprised and some in which the readers find themselves distanced from Crusoe. The case with which I began, that of Friday's question concerning the existence of the Devil and of evil in the world despite God's seeming power to remove it, is strange and surprising to Crusoe. He did not expect such a complex question from someone whom he clearly regards as inferior in knowledge. His eventual answer leaves Friday unsatisfied and with what Crusoe considers a heresy. But Defoe knew that many of his readers would be surprised in a different way—delighted with Friday's "natural" response. In some sense, although there were many attempts at theodicies during this period, the question of the existence of evil in the world was usually answered by the "argument from ignorance." Human beings, limited in their powers of understanding, are incapable of answering such questions and should be humble about their abilities.⁵ As Fishelov remarks, there appear to be echoes of the biblical book of Job in this section, and while Job's visitors present arguments to the effect that his punishment must result from his having committed some sin, God himself does not provide such an answer. Many, perhaps most, eighteenth-century readers, were likely to conclude that this was an area of knowledge that God had withheld from humankind and to be

both surprised and delighted with Friday's response and amused at Crusoe's bewilderment.

An even more obvious example of this separation between the surprise of the reader and Crusoe's surprise occurs with Friday's joy at discovering that the native he has rescued is indeed his father. Crusoe had already some suspicions of Friday's loyalty to him after observing what he thought to be a momentary longing for his home when he showed Friday a distant view of some land to be seen from the island. Crusoe tests Friday's devotion to him and brings him to tears, and he is convinced of Friday's "settled Affection" (164). Yet Friday's ecstatic response to finding his father exceeds any previous display of emotion. Crusoe regards it with surprise and with good reason. He had quarreled with his father before leaving home and in departing from his home, showed no filial emotion but merely the curiosity of the adventurer. While Crusoe's surprise is complicated by his experiences with his father, the readers are asked to be delighted by the uncomplicated love displayed by Friday. While the readers identify in part with Crusoe, the young Englishman seeking adventures, they are asked to be surprised and amazed by the emotions of Friday, the "natural man." The '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.⁶

Fishelov suggests that the reader is surprised by Crusoe's sale of Xury, the boy with whom he escaped from slavery among the Moors, arguing that this is an example of the reader feeling some separation from Defoe's protagonist. Crusoe has experienced slavery for two years. In addition, Xury has shown great affection for Crusoe. But the reader is surprised because he/she has not been paying attention. Like his two brothers, Crusoe rejected the advice of his father and ran away from home to pursue his adventures. He was involved in the trade to Africa, which usually meant engaging in the slave trade. The reader should have remarked how much Crusoe was delighted at the money he made in his first voyage. In the sale of Xury, we learn something about Crusoe's character. He is a venture capitalist at heart, ex-

cited by taking risks and careless of the lives of those around him. In Brazil, the planting of sugar was a labor intensive venture. As Fishelov points out, he regrets that he did not have Xury with him in Brazil, not from affection but because he needed his labor, and it is on a venture to Africa as a slave trader that he finds himself wrecked on the island. We don't empathize less with Crusoe because of this part of his character. The egotism of the protagonist is almost a given in tales of adventure, but the contrast between the scheming Crusoe and Friday is no accident. Friday embodies the generosity, loyalty, and affection that may be found deep down in all human beings, even a former cannibal; Crusoe, while admirable in his determination to survive on the island, is a problematic character, willing to use others for his advantage. He is something of a religious enthusiast, and certainly not the most trustworthy of companions. In reading *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*, we may be surprised by some of the ironies, but our moments of surprise are also moments of knowledge.

The great moment of surprise for all readers of Crusoe comes with the discovery of the single footprint in the sand. As Fishelov suggests, Defoe pulls out all the stops at this moment to enable the readers to feel the astonishment that Crusoe feels. Since this is a realist text, Crusoe's initial notion that somehow it might be the workings of the Devil does indeed seem to create a separation between the readers' surprise and Crusoe's. Meir Sternberg remarks that "every writer may be permitted to deal as much in the wonderful as he pleases; nay, the more he can surprise the reader, if he thus keeps within the rules of credibility, the more he will engage his attention and the more he will charm him."⁷ This is maybe true of the Fieldingesque novel, but even this type of fiction risks coming close to parody.⁸ As Alexander Welsh has suggested, Crusoe subjects the experience of the footprint to a kind of empirical examination that might be expected in the investigation of a crime scene.⁹ Crusoe looks to see if there is anyone in sight, measures it, and tests the possibility that it is indeed a print of his foot (it is not). But the evidence as Crusoe presents it, leads to a horrifying conclusion. The footprint has to be that of a native who has come to the is-

land, and that native is likely, in Crusoe's mind, to be a cannibal. Crusoe, who has been longing for a companion to relieve his loneliness, is horrified by the presence of the 'other,' in the form of the enemy. Crusoe's narrative does not stress this irony, but the reader who has empathized with Crusoe's loneliness should be fully aware of it. Thus, as Feagin would suggest at this point, our feeling is closer to "sympathy." We can understand Crusoe's nearly hysterical reaction, we are concerned with his plight, but the dramatic irony and our judgments separate us somewhat from Crusoe's terror.

It would seem as if Crusoe might simply resolve to be more cautious. Instead he destroys all evidence of his agricultural and pastoral labors and spends two years living in fear. Only after such a time has elapsed does he come to terms with the cannibals who visit the island and with their terrible feasts. The reader has to see his fantasies about rushing among the cannibals and killing them as extreme. Only after arriving at the position of Montaigne and others to the effect that cannibalism is an aspect of their culture is Crusoe capable of rational thought. He still finds them frightening, but he rejects the slaughter made among the natives by the conquering Spaniards as barbaric and exceeding the bounds of civilized conduct. Following Crusoe's line of reasoning, the reader has to conclude that even the terrifying cannibals are part of the human race.

Such moments in Defoe's novel are truly transformational, but 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.¹⁰

But there are also surprises in Defoe's descriptive techniques. The two storms involving shipwrecks, the one when he first departs from

home to voyage from Hull to the seashore near London, and the other when he goes on his venture to trade for slaves in Africa, present descriptions of a vividness unknown outside of the amazing Dutch paintings of seascapes. It would be naïve to suggest that the Dutch paintings are not in motion and do not extend themselves in time, but Defoe's descriptive powers had to strike the readers as amazing—as something never encountered before in fiction. Even we who read Defoe through the veil that the realists and naturalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have created are surprised by the power of his descriptions.

And there are always surprises at the rhetorical moments of Crusoe's discovery of money and its uses. One involves Crusoe's surprise at finding himself amazingly rich from the wealth accrued from his plantations in Brazil while he was on the island. Crusoe's reaction to his newly discovered wealth almost kills him as he finds himself barely able to contain his emotions. It constitutes a minor theme involving the ways in which excess joy can be almost as destructive as sorrow. And it comes long after a more famous moment: Defoe's set piece on Crusoe's discovery of gold on the wreck. It was a passage that caught the eyes of the reviewer for the *Journal des sçavans* in 1720 and of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his notebooks. Crusoe delivers an oration on the uselessness of money on the island as he decides what objects will be useful to him there:

I smil'd to my self at the Sight of this Money, O Drug! Said I aloud, what art thou good for, Thou art not worth to me, no not the taking off of the Ground, of those Knives is worth all this Heap, I have no matter of use for thee, e'en remain where thou art, and go to the Bottom as a creature whose life is not worth saving. However, upon Second Thoughts I took it away [...]. (43)

Crusoe, who has left the safety of his plantation in Brazil to pursue what might have been an opportunity to become wealthy, has a moment of awareness. Money, he sees, is an artificial thing—a mode of exchange that cannot help him in his attempt to survive on the island. Certainly the reader can understand such a concept, though to those

who had not thought very much about the principles of economics, it may have come as a surprise. That Crusoe should, after posturing in this manner, gather the 36 Pounds together and take the money from the wreck is a wonderful surprise for the reader. After being convinced by Crusoe's rhetoric, he/she suddenly discovers that the eminently "civilized" Crusoe cannot resist taking the money that has so much worth in Crusoe's former world. Perhaps, as Fishelov suggests, the reader feels superior to Crusoe as he contradicts himself, but the moment of surprise involves a recognition of certain truths. Yes, money is valueless on the island, but 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. It is all very well to theorize about money as an artificial form of exchange, but who would not succumb to the wish to have a bit of it? For Crusoe, such reactions are merely "Second Thoughts." For the reader they are a revelation.

Both Noël Carroll and Susan Feagin maintain that surprise need not involve any great intellectual effort,¹¹ but Fishelov is right to point to the ways in which Defoe surprises the reader into seeing something new. This is not only true about Crusoe's discovery of the complex reasoning of the 'other' in Friday's question about God's willingness to allow the Devil to live. It is also true of that way in which Defoe uses the dream—one of the realist's ways of introducing fantastic elements into a narrative. Both dreams are understandable on a realistic level.¹² The first comes after Crusoe has been literally feverish, the second after his desire to capture one of the natives as a possible guide to reaching the mainland. The first dream is truly horrific, a figure "bright as a Flame" (64) advances toward him with a lance threatening to kill him for his wicked life. It is a double nightmare—of the kind in which one thinks one has awakened only to experience the horror of the dream over again: "I mean, that even while it was a Dream, I even dreamed of those Horrors" (65). The surprise, the "Horrors" (65), leads Crusoe to change his life and become a repentant Christian. Even for the reader who is unwilling to follow Crusoe in his conversion, the scene is vivid. The second dream, involving

events similar to Crusoe's rescue of Friday and which I have already discussed, is less dramatic but still surprising in the working out of the problem that "agitated" (143) his mind and produced a kind of "Feaver" (143). Unlike his previous dream, he wants to cling to this one and is dejected when he awakens. Yet it is a dream that he is able to put into action, and it sets up the surprise of repetition when much of it comes true. Yet the coming of Friday is different in one particular way. Crusoe's dream arose from his desire to escape the island. After he has attained the companionship of Friday, he finds a kind of contentment. It turns out that what he really wanted was not a slave who would help him escape but a companion who would relieve his loneliness. He continues to dream of escaping from the island, but once he has Friday, the "Feaver," the overwhelming desire to escape vanishes.

What Fishelov remarks about surprise in *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures*, then, is entirely correct and provides a new way of approaching Defoe's novel. The reader is surprised into knowledge. The cannibals are envisaged as a possibility when Crusoe first lands on the island in the connection with his fear of "being devour'd by wild Beasts" (36), foreshadowed by his earlier account of wild beasts on the shore of Africa. Crusoe's surprisingly good experience with these African natives—evoking the myth of the virtuous natural man—might serve as a preparation for the arrival of Friday, but Defoe plays Crusoe's horror at the cannibals to arouse the basic fears of the reader. They are not merely the 'other.' They are first represented as monstrous, or as Noël Carroll puts it, "something that defies cultural categories" (185), arousing curiosity and disgust. When he finally gets to examine a cannibal feast, he asks the reader to share his feelings:

I was so astonish'd with the Sight of these Things, that I entertain'd no Notions of any Danger to my self from it for a long while; All my Apprehensions were bury'd in the thoughts of such a Pitch of inhuman, hellish Brutality, and the Horror of the Degeneracy of Humane Nature; which though I had heard of often, yet I never had so near a View of before; in short, I turn'd away my Face from the horrid Spectacle; my Stomach grew sick, and I was just at the Point of Fainting, when Nature discharg'd the Dis-

order from my Stomach; and having vomited with an uncommon Violence, I was a little reliev'd. (133)

The point is that Defoe makes us feel how strange and alienating the concept of cannibalism is. Montaigne does not have a scene of this kind in defending cannibalism as little different from European warfare. Defoe, on the other hand, wants us to feel with Crusoe his revulsion, his horror, and his fear of these "Savage Wretches." It is only after such a moment that Crusoe's acceptance of the behavior of the cannibals—of the 'other'—can achieve its surprise and force.

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NOTES

¹*Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1994) 1. Subsequent citations from this first part of *Robinson Crusoe* will be included in my text within parentheses.

²See Susan Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) 63-74; and Gatién Courtitz, *The French Spy: or the Memoirs of John Baptist De la Fontaine* (London, 1700) 2.

³Friday's belief is usually associated with "universalism," a doctrine that was common in the early Christian church but condemned by the Catholic Church in 543 AD. The idea seems to be contrary to Revelations 2:7-10, which has the devils tormented forever. This doctrine experienced a revival among some Christian mystics during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See J. R. Willis, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 15 vols. (Detroit: Thomson; Gale, 2003) 14: 321-22.

⁴See Melissa Free, "Un-Erasing Crusoe: Farther Adventures in the Nineteenth Century," *Book History* 9 (2006): 89-130.

⁵Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* preached such humility. The accompanying argument concerning this being "the best of all possible worlds" was derided by Samuel Johnson and Voltaire.

⁶Ian Watt suggested that Crusoe's attempt at mastering all the trades of his contemporary world represented an evocation of primitivism—the notion of an earlier, simpler, and better world—at a time when most Londoners went to the local shop to buy bread, meat, and furniture instead of producing things at home; according to Watt, this can be read as expressive of "the deprivations involved by

economic specialisation." *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: The Hogarth P, 1957) 71-74, 71. The representation of Friday's emotions has a very similar function.

⁷*Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 262.

⁸The discoveries of the various identities and origins of the characters at the end of *Joseph Andrews* compromises the reader's sense that he/she has been experiencing a fairly detailed and convincing account of eighteenth-century life in England. Sternberg argues that Ian Watt faults Fielding merely for not being Richardson (264), but it is notable that by the time Fielding came to write *Amelia*, he had left behind this kind of playful abandonment of the real. It may also be noted that critical fashions change. At the time Sternberg was writing, self-conscious narrative was particularly valued in critical circles and Watt's admiration for the real may have seemed quaint. Some modern writers now regard the playfulness of a Henry Fielding, a Laurence Sterne, or a Vladimir Nabokov less favorably.

⁹Alexander Welsh, *Strong Representations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) 3-8.

¹⁰It should be noted that, in presenting these hungry wolves as having the ability to attack in the manner of a European army, Defoe humanizes them. Crusoe's real battle with the army of cannibals is thus tranposed to the battle with the more genuinely carnivorous wolves.

¹¹See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 12, 65-68, 196-203; and Feagin 128.

¹²In *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, volume three of the *Crusoe* trilogy, Crusoe tells of a third dream—a classic nightmare involving a weight on his body that he at first ascribes to some supernatural force. In recalling the experience, Crusoe states that he first ascribed the dream to physiological causes—perhaps a kind of stroke.