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Hermeneutic Castaways: Problems in Reading *Robinson Crusoe*

2019 marked the tercentenary of the publication of one of the most popular works in the history of the English novel, one that has been reproduced, translated, parodied more than any other over the past three centuries. When *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner* appeared on the 25 April 1719, few of its first readers could have anticipated the sensation that it would become. By the time of its author's death in 1731, twelve years after the novel's first appearance, the story of the castaway marooned on his inhospitable island had become so familiar to British and overseas readers that it had spawned a remarkable number of imitators. In that same year, Johann Gottfried Schnabel, in the preface to an early imitation, *Die Insel Felsenburg*, coined the term 'Robinsonade' to describe the phenomenon. Thereafter Robinsonades would continue to be remediated and translated in vast numbers, in chapbooks, illustrated children's editions, religious tracts, lantern shows, pantomimes, and later in films and cartoons.

J.M. Coetzee, who achieved success with his own rewriting of the classic tale with the novel *Foe*, used his Nobel Prize speech of 2003 to meditate on the strange ways that Defoe's book had been appropriated over the generations. Coetzee has Robinson cast his plagiarists, translators, and adapters as a cannibal horde, who 'sought to strike me down and roast me and devour me.' Thinking that he was defending himself against these corruptors of his own history, Coetzee's Crusoe comes to realise that 'these cannibals were but figures of a more devilish voracity, that would gnaw at the very substance of truth.'¹ If, as Harold Bloom argued in *The Anxiety of Influence*, many belated readings are acts of misreading – deliberate or otherwise – then Defoe's novel must surely be one of the texts *par excellence* through which such acts of literary cannibalism have taken place.² Even today, *Robinson Crusoe* continues to present a challenge to even its most confident readers who continue to engage in what Coetzee called 'gnawing at the truth'.

This is hardly surprising. The book Defoe left the public in 1719 may be compelling but it is also rambling, uneven, and often bewildering. Virginia Woolf, an

¹ J. M. Coetzee: "He and His Man." <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/25261-j-m-coetzee-nobel-lecture-2003/> (01.01.2022)

² Bloom uses the term 'misprision'. Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York 1973.

admirer, suggested as much when she reflected how its readers, in seeking a key to its meaning, often found themselves reducing it to what they believed were its bare essentials. For all its brilliance, for her the novel was fraught with hermetic mysteries, many of which remained unresolved: 'However we may wind and wriggle, loiter and dally in our approach to books,' this otherwise confident reader concludes 'a lonely battle waits us at the end.'³ Joseph Acquisto similarly maintains that the history of the novel's reception is analogous to an accumulated set of solitary adventures the text has generated over nearly three hundred years. In attempting to 'make a narrative of the solitary adventure itself,' Acquisto invites us to read the versions of *Robinson Crusoe* as 'a series of imaginative interventions in the castaway narrative, each of which opens up new territory for exploration. In that sense, the act of reading is just as adventurous as the hero's struggles on the island.'⁴

Woolf concludes her essay on *Robinson Crusoe* with an enigmatic image: 'Thus Defoe, by reiterating that nothing but a plain earthenware pot stands in the foreground, persuades us to see remote islands and the solitudes of the human soul.' Woolf's focus on such a mundane detail is often taken as a comment on the novel's obsession with materiality. 'The earthenware pot's banal and prosaic existence remains as a counter, an object whose persistence and tangibility reflects on – and distinguishes itself from – the illusory nature of our own projections as readers of this text.'⁵ In the context of Woolf's essay, the empty vessel can be seen to stand as an emblem of a text whose gaps and silences give themselves over to readers to fill. Woolf was not alone in seeing the text, like its hero, as a brilliant and recalcitrant child demanding the discipline of reading to reduce his tale into a coherent form.

And yet, it is not only through redaction that this outlandish story has been tamed by its readers over the years. The act of interpretation, as Tilottama Rajan observed in *The Supplement of Reading* (1990), often operates in terms of at least two different tendencies: the first is one that 'synthesizes the text by arranging and expending elements actually given in it'; another 'in which the act of reading supplies something absent from and in contradiction' to it.⁶ Time and again, we can see both tendencies at work – redaction as well as supplementation – in ef-

3 Virginia Woolf: "Robinson Crusoe." *The Common Reader*, Second Series. London 1932.

4 Joseph Acquisto: *Crusoes and Other Castaways in Modern French Literature. Solitary Adventures*. Newark/DE 2012, p. 11.

5 James R. Martel: "'Nothing Exists Except an Earthenware Pot': Resisting Sovereignty on Robinson's Island." *Societies* 2 (2012), p. 376.

6 Tilottama Rajan: *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice*. Ithaca 1990, p. 5.

forts to give meaning to this unruliest of texts. For theorists, the indeterminacy of texts has long remained a focus of critical interest. From Roland Barthes' description of the 'readerly' text to the gaps and silences associated with German reception theory, the generosity of certain literary works to accommodate an almost infinite number of readings has often been attributed to textual indeterminacy. Within Marxist theory, formulas such as the 'not said' and the 'political unconscious' of the text, have often been invoked as occasions for the 'productive' analysis of aesthetic objects. Terry Eagleton went so far as to advocate the violent metaphor of a text 'violated, melted down, read against the grain and so reinscribed in new social practices.' Within the realm of postcolonial criticism, Edward Said extended a similar method to champion the deployment of what he called 'contrapuntal reading':

We must therefore read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works. The contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes—that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.⁷

Said's is one among several approaches since the 1980s that appeal to the idea that perceived gaps and silences in the text are occasions for what I would call *occupational reading*, a term meant to convey two types of operation. First, it presupposes the efficacy of a criticism which uses the multivalence as a tactical means of taking possession of (largely canonical) texts for political ends. In a second and related meaning, occupational reading can be seen as the function of a particular professional community – from humanist to Marxist and postcolonial – whose ideological beliefs legitimate an interpretative method.

The *argumentum ex silentio* might even be seen to point to an almost irresolvable hermeneutic paradox: while its gaps and silences lend the text to indeterminacy at the same time being used as evidence of ideological closure. Where, we might ask, does 'recuperation' begin and 'invention' end? Bearing this fraught question in mind, I would like to propose that the history of reading must keep its sights on three distinct though interrelated phenomena to be found in the text's journey from production to reception: namely, intention, (in)determinacy, and effect. Of continuing relevance here is the work of Wolfgang Iser on the sociological fortunes of the literary text, evident in the ways in which it confronts

⁷ See Pierre Machery: *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978). Translated by Geoffrey Wall. London 2006; Terry Eagleton: *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London 1981, p. 113; Edward Said: *Culture and Imperialism*. London 1993, pp. 78–79.

historic audiences. Multivalence, as Iser demonstrates, that property that allows the literary text to entertain a range of (sometimes contradictory) meanings, is key to understanding reception history. While Iser's initial preoccupation was almost exclusively with the abstract text as linguistic code, in his later work he engaged more directly with sociological aspects of the way that literary meanings are made.⁸ Similarly, historians of reading have also learned to occupy themselves with bibliographical concerns about the material scene of reading in which the physical text, and not merely its textuality, is a determining factor.⁹ Three decades ago, Jerome McGann described what he called the 'socialization of texts' in terms of an interrelated 'double helix of perceptual codes', characterised by what he called 'the linguistic codes, on the one hand, and the bibliographical codes on the other.' McGann observed that 'literary works are distinct from other linguistic forms in their pursuit of extreme concrete particularity tending towards textual and bibliographical dispersion (signalled at the earliest phases of the work by authorial changes of direction and revision, which may continue for protracted periods).'¹⁰ With each iteration, through editorializing, translation, remediation, the literary work offers to its audience a materially transformed text with new hermeneutic possibilities. Gerard Genette, in his celebrated paradigm of the 'paratext', famously asserted that it was the framing devices that surrounded the text proper that set the stage for the scene of reading.¹¹ As Genette understood, the text as a linguistic abstraction and the text as object are not entirely separate phenomena. It might be argued that these paratextual principles have rarely been more evident than in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, one of the most reproduced, translated, mimicked, bowdlerized, disseminated works in the history of literature. As Andrew O'Malley and others have shown with regard to the children's literary tradition alone, Defoe's novel is the progenitor of a multifarious narrative tradition as, over three centuries, it has appeared in a bewildering number of versions, from broadsides and popular editions, to lantern shows, comic books and illustrated children's versions.¹²

8 See, for instance, Wolfgang Iser: *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*. Paderborn 1976, and Wolfgang Iser: *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*. Berlin 1991.

9 This is explored at greater length in Bill Bell: *Crusoe's Books. Readers in the Empire of Print, 1800–1918*. Oxford 2021, pp. 23–26.

10 Jerome J. McGann: *The Textual Condition*. Princeton 1991, pp. 77, 82–83.

11 Gerard Genette: *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge 2001.

12 Andrew O'Malley: *Children's Literature, Popular Culture, and Robinson Crusoe*. London 2012.

Three Idiosyncratic Readings: Rousseau, Marx, Coleridge

One of the most influential early attempts to tame *Robinson Crusoe* is to be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile; ou de l'éducation*, his 1762 work on model pedagogy. Rousseau recommended it as the exemplary text for his hothouse pupil for whom it would constitute 'his whole library'. Stripped of its 'irrelevant matter', according to Rousseau it would furnish Émile with a fund of literary material, 'both for work and play.' As an emblem of the solitary life, the novel would teach the child independence of mind and self-reliance. Thus would Émile be encouraged to dress and act, to imagine himself, as Robinson Crusoe, but only after the abridged narrative was 'disencumbered of all its rigmarole'.¹³ More crucially, it would be divested of its religious content.

Rousseau intended to adapt the novel in line with this prescription but never got around to it. It was left to one of his German admirers, Joachim Campe, to fulfil the ambition in his *Robinson der Jüngere* (1779–80). In accordance with Rousseau's prescription Campe was to render the novel down to what he saw as its narrative essentials, at the same time supplementing the story with many pedagogical lessons for his child readers, not least to correct one of the central problems for educators, namely Robinson's disobedience to his parents. While there is no indication that Defoe intended it as such, through the influence of Rousseau and his best-selling German disciple the novel had, by the early nineteenth century, achieved European-wide status as a children's classic.

Yet even among its admirers, Defoe's tale could divide readers. Recognizing that it was one of the most interesting and entertaining books available for children, one early nineteenth-century educationist believed that it might profitably be used to instruct young boys in 'what ingenuity and industry can effect, under the divine blessing'. Nevertheless, Sarah Trimmer went on to warn about its potentially corrosive moral consequences in the hands of unsupervised readers, citing the example of two boys who ran away to sea after having read it, causing the death by anxiety of one's mother.¹⁴ In her 1830 preface to *The Children's Robinson Crusoe* Eliza Wade Farrar agreed with Rousseau that the story still stood as a 'great instrument in the education of children.' Unfortunately, so marred was Defoe's original by 'profaneness, vulgarity, and superstition', according to Farrar,

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Emile, or On Education*. Edited and translated by Allan Bloom. New York 1979, p. 185.

¹⁴ Sarah Trimmer: *Review of Robinson Crusoe*. *The Guardian of Education* 3 (1804), pp. 297–300.

that it had to be rewritten for the child reader. *The Children's Robinson Crusoe* would take care to expunge many elements that would be incomprehensible as well as those whose effect on impressionable minds would be less than edifying. Other editors took even more liberties. The most child-friendly version of the novel, and undoubtedly the most redacted, was Lucy Aikin's *Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable* of 1867, which did more or less what it said on the title page and was so popular that it went into many editions in Britain and the United States.

Although it was recommended for young emigrant readers by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1850, the Society's edition nevertheless included a preface cautioning against misreading. The Reverend Plumtre thought the novel 'not to be without its faults and dangerous tendency.' In a familiar vein, immature readers, he wrote, were in danger of drawing the wrong lessons from a novel that glamourised disobedience to parental authority. Only 'where the mind and temper have been properly regulated,' he opined, 'can it safely be used.'¹⁵ The good Reverend's disquiet about the suitability of Crusoe as an exemplar for the young is just one among many examples of how morally divisive one of the favourite stories of the age had become.

Compelling as it remained for educators, the novel soon found favour with social commentators, many reducing it to a tale about Protestant self-reliance and the rewards of labour. 'Since Robinson Crusoe's experiences are a favourite theme with political economists,' remarked Marx in *Das Kapital*, 'let us take a look at him on his island'. What results is one of the most wilful readings of the novel, Marx's forceful rendering of Crusoe as *homo economicus* causing him to employ strategies of both supplementation and redaction. Like Rousseau, Marx relegated the significance of the religious content, divesting it of the providentialism that drives the narrative: 'Of his prayers and the like we take no account, since they are a source of pleasure to him, and he looks upon them as so much recreation.' So central had Crusoe's piety been to Defoe's intentions that it is difficult to imagine what kind of work Marx might have been imagining. Transforming Crusoe into a model capitalist, Marx's Crusoe is portrayed as an early devotee time-and-motion studies:

This our friend Robinson soon learns by experience, and having rescued a watch, ledger, and pen and ink from the wreck, commences, like a true-born Briton, to keep a set of books. His stock-book contains a list of the objects of utility that belong to him, of the op-

¹⁵ "Preface." *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (SPCK, n.d.), iv. Among its other chief dangers, according to Plumtre, was the novel's theologically heterodox commitment to Calvinism.

erations necessary for their production; and lastly, of the labour time that definite quantities of those objects have, on an average, cost him.

Defoe may have had Crusoe rescue many items from the wreck but a watch and ledger book that Marx finds were not among them. Could Marx have misread it? Was he relying on a liberal adaptation, or simply a bad translation? Did he just make up Crusoe's inventory to suit his argument? Either way, Marx's whole understanding of Crusoe as an emblem of modern industrial man was founded on textual details that were not included by Defoe. Thereafter Marx goes on to rewrite the story of the solitary castaway fighting for personal survival in favour of a community of social beings 'carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are here repeated, but with this difference, that they are social, instead of individual.'¹⁶ Thus it was that Marx presented 1860s audiences with yet another radical reinvention of Crusoe, and one that still crops up today: relying on the same misreading, Gayatri Spivak concludes that it is 'time, rather than money' that defines the concept of production in the novel.¹⁷

While Rousseau, Marx, and others take extreme liberties with the story, censoring and supplementing the text in ways that suit their programmatic purposes, one of the most unfortunate nineteenth-century readings was to be found in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's praise for the novel in 1830, in which he offered fulsome evidence for Defoe's stylistic brilliance. In the passage that describes Crusoe's indecision about the rescue of money from the sinking ship, Coleridge transcribes his remark as follows: 'However, upon second thoughts, I took it away; and wrapping all this is a piece of canvas', a passage that Coleridge judged 'Worthy of Shakespeare; and yet the simple semi-colon after it, the instant passing on without the least pause of reflex consciousness is more exquisite and masterlike than the touch itself.'¹⁸ The fact was that this exquisite punctuational detail did not appear in the text until almost a century after the original, introduced by an unnamed compositor as he prepared Charles Whittingham's 1812 edition for the press, on which Coleridge was relying. And, as Irving Rothman concludes, 'Coleridge well appreciated Defoe's [...] powers as a narrative artist. He just did not

¹⁶ Karl Marx: *Capital*, vol. 1. Edited by F. Engels (1867). New York 2007, pp. 88–90.

¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's Foe Reading Defoe's 'Crusoe/Roxana.'" *English in Africa* 17:2 (Oct. 1990), pp. 1–23.

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Miscellaneous Criticism*. Edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor. London 1936, pp. 293.

have the best text available to him when he read *Robinson Crusoe*.¹⁹ Although McGann might reply that Coleridge's misplaced praise of Defoe's style was simply one of the steps in the process of the interpretation of a text in process it might be one of the more poignant examples of McGann's 'socialization of text' in the history of criticism. But, given the novel's bibliographical fate, it is possible that there is no other literary text with as many variants as *Robinson Crusoe*. Coleridge's glaring error is only the tip of a hermeneutic iceberg that has been haunted for generations by the textual instability of its object of study.

Reading and Writing Back

Within a few decades, in the hands of missionaries at the height of empire fever, *Crusoe* was taking on yet stranger intensities and meanings. In some Victorian minds it became a virtual *manual* for empire, a text-book for subduing savage races and grabbing far away lands in the name of God. The fact that in the original *Crusoe* spends much of the novel in a state of misery, even finding himself at one stage a victim of slavery, was lost in many of these earnest rewritings as the moral ambivalences in Defoe's text were increasingly sidelined. James Joyce seems to have been one of the first to diagnose this tendency in a lecture he delivered in Trieste in 1912: 'The true symbol of the British conquest is Robinson Crusoe, who [...] is the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday (the trusty savage who arrives on an unlucky day) is the symbol of the subject races.' By the beginning of the twentieth century, as Joyce saw 'in the light of subsequent history' the novel had undergone yet another radical transformation.²⁰

Remarking on how *Robinson Crusoe* acted as a touchstone for the fiction of empire Richard Phillips maintains that 'few stories [...] have been more conservative, more naively realistic (and politically loaded), than *Robinson Crusoe* as it was retold and imitated in nineteenth-century Britain.'²¹ The final clause is all important and sets Phillips's reading apart from some of the more simplistic postcolonial renderings, which often result from two of the most basic herme-

¹⁹ For an extended account of the debate around Coleridge's error, see Irving N. Rothman: "Coleridge on the Semi-colon in Robinson Crusoe. Problems in Editing Defoe." *Studies in the Novel* 27:3 (Fall 1995), pp. 320–340.

²⁰ James Joyce, lecture on Daniel Defoe, Università Popolare, Trieste (March 1912), quoted in Patrick J. Keane: *Coleridge's Submerged Politics. The Ancient Mariner and Robinson Crusoe*. Columbia 1994, p. 140.

²¹ Richard Phillips: *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure*. London 1997, pp. 16–17.

neutic errors: first, that the text is wholly responsible for its historic reception, replicating the same ideological codes through time and space as they pass from reader to reader; second, a failure to recognise the dramatic irony that distinguishes the thoughts and actions of fictional characters from their creators.

It might be argued that, in an age of explicitly ideological reading, many approaches to the novel find themselves caught within the double bind of a *hermeneutic paradox*, in which the contending influence of a poststructuralist disavowal of teleology contends with ideologically invested grand narratives. The paradox of a multivalent *Robinson Crusoe* which might at the same time have fixity of ideological content was articulated by Susan Arndt who, in 2017, reflected on ways that her own reading of the novel had shifted over time, from the ludic to the doctrinaire. As a youngster, remembered Arndt, ‘I read [the novel] like every other child, and found it really compelling [...] When I started taking a look at racism, I developed a completely different view of the novel.’ Consequently, as a privileged adult reader and now an African studies professor, Arndt had come to embrace a different (to her mind a more valid) *Robinson Crusoe*, ‘a handbook of how Europeans could efficiently colonize territories in Africa and the Americas, and exploit both the resources and the working people there.’ Such conversion narratives bear witness not only to the fact that the novel can represent different things to different people, but that it can even operate at different times in different ways on the consciousness of single readers. For Arndt at least, what was once read as an innocent adventure story for children now takes on the aspect of a political manifesto with a historical author imagined as a ventriloquist who speaks through his protagonist: ‘That shows that for the first-person narrator Robinson, with *no critical distancing on the part of the author*, it is normal and legal for whites to enslave black people, but not white people.’²²

That for some of today’s readers the novel’s primary fascination is as a manual for imperialism is evident from an article on ‘Robinson Crusoe at 300’ on 19 April 2019, in which Charles Boyle argued in the *Guardian* that it was ‘time to let go of this colonial fairytale.’ Once again, we can see the same hermeneutic paradox in operation. The terms of Boyle’s analysis are familiar: ‘simple in design, with strong contrasting colours overriding any psychological shading, Crusoe became a flag for empire, and travelled in the luggage of merchants, mission-

²² Emphasis mine. Arndt attributes her politically innocent reading of the novel to her exposure to an abridged children’s version, while her mature judicious reading was based on an understanding of the unredacted text. <https://www.dw.com/en/avoiding-racism-the-struggle-to-use-the-right-words/a-37767796> (01.01.2022)

aries and generals.²³ Whether or not we agree or disagree with the claim for the novel's simplicity, Boyle wants, on the one hand, to hold the text responsible for its reception, privileging those moments that he deems the most offensive, while at the same time recognising *Crusoe* as an open signifier, so that, in his concluding remarks – 'Crusoe himself is a two-dimensional cardboard figure on to whom every reader can project their identity' – Boyle's ethical objections to the novel are partially undone. That this reading of *Crusoe*, as is so often the case, is tethered to the reader's own time is evident in Boyles' recent part-memoir, part-novel, *Good Morning, Mr Crusoe* (2019), a parable pressing *Crusoe* into the service of a life lived in provincial private schools of the 1970s, English World Cup football, and Brexit.²⁴ Thus we can see how the accidental, but potent, collision of the biggest geopolitical crisis in British politics for generations with the tercentenary of *Robinson Crusoe* became an occasion for seeing *Crusoe* as a novel about the ambitions of empire, isolationism, and racial politics.

What is not always apparent in such belated attempts to 'write back' (one thinks of the *Robinsonades* of Coetzee, Derek Walcott, Elizabeth Bishop and a host of others) is that arguably they present a challenge, not so much to Defoe's novel as to what the novel had come to represent in the nineteenth century, a period when, according to Simon Frost, editors and authors 'took *Crusoe* into regions unimaginable to its early eighteenth-century origins – into the realms of national romanticism and even abject imperialism.'²⁵ It is clear to see how many responses, sometimes with unwitting irony, tend to draw out some of the ambivalences already to be found in the original text. While some would place the emphasis on a lineage from Defoe's novel to racism and white supremacy which requires resistant reading, others have seen quite different continuities evidenced in the *Robinsonade*. At least one critic has observed the influence of Defoe's narrative on Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. Laura Doyle sees in the classic memoir of abolitionism a subversive discourse that does not simply displace its predecessor but works within its shadow with 'twists, turns, and historical ironies.'²⁶ None of this is new. It did not seem strange for the American abolitionist, Nehemiah Adams, to see in 1854 the recent publication of *Uncle Tom's*

23 Charles Boyle: "Robinson Crusoe at 300. Why It's Time to Let Go of this Colonial Fairytale." *The Guardian*, April 19, 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/19/robinson-crusoe-at-300-its-time-to-let-go-of-this-toxic-colonial-fairytale>. (01.01.2022)

24 Charles Boyle ['Jack Robinson']: *Good Morning, Mr Crusoe*. London 2019.

25 Simon Frost: "The Romanticization of Close Reading: Coleridge, *Crusoe* and the case of the missing comma." *Bibliologia* 8 (2013), p. 85.

26 Laura Doyle: "Reconstructing Race and Freedom in Atlantic Modernity: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*." *Atlantic Studies* 4:2 (2007), p. 196.

Cabin as the continuity of the Defoe tradition, ‘the *Robinson Crusoe* of involuntary servitude.’²⁷

Crusoe the Reader

However we might want to describe its political effects on readers over the past three centuries, Defoe’s novel included within it a series of meditations on the act of reading itself. A few days after his arrival on the island, Crusoe realises that he will lose track of time without reading and writing implements. Consequently, he makes his way out to the sinking vessel, where he secures a number of items, including ‘three very good Bibles’ and other reading matter. Thereby is Defoe able to provide his castaway with a carefully chosen catalogue of items essential for survival in the precarious world in which he finds himself.²⁸

As experience has already taught the well-travelled Crusoe, of prime importance to orientation in an unfamiliar landscape are the precious commodities of books, ink, and paper. Remarkably, it takes Crusoe the better part of a year on the island to fall back on his own resources as a reader. It is not until a third of the way into the novel that the protagonist finally takes up one of the books he had rescued from the waves a full nine months before. Searching among his belongings for tobacco to counteract his physical and mental distress, he accidentally discovers one of the volumes, something for which he has had no prior ‘leisure’ or ‘inclination’:

In the interval of this Operation, I took up the Bible and began to read, but my Head was too much disturb’d with the Tobacco to bear reading, at least at that Time; only having open’d the Book casually, the first words that occur’d to me were these, *Call on me in the Day of Trouble and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify me.*²⁹

In retrospect, he writes, the *sortes*, although they were ‘very apt’ to his case, had at this stage no profound effect on him: ‘the word had no sound, as I may say, to me; the thing was so remote so impossible in my apprehension of things.’³⁰ A week later he opens the pages again:

²⁷ Nehemiah Adams: *A South-side View of Slavery; or, Three months at the South*, in 1854. Boston 1854, p. 162.

²⁸ Daniel Defoe: *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. London 1719, pp. 74–75. All subsequent references are to this first edition.

²⁹ Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 110.

³⁰ Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 108.

In the Morning I took the Bible, and beginning at the New Testament, I began seriously to read it, and impos'd upon my self to read a while every Morning and every Night, not tying myself to the Number of Chapters, but as long as my Thoughts shou'd engage me: It was not long after I set seriously to this Work.

Only after he submits himself to an intensely systematic reading regime, can he begin 'to construe the Words mentioned above, *Call on me, and I will deliver you*, in a different Sense from what I had ever done before.'³¹ Crusoe's exemplary hermeneutic involves a move from the 'casual' and uncomprehending towards deeper understanding and a systematic (submissive) internalisation of the text. Thereafter were his 'Thoughts being directed, by a constant reading of the Scripture, and praying to God.' In a second bout of mental breakdown a year later, he again turns to his Bible for a solution to his existential crisis. Thereafter he comes routinely to frame his experience in the world in terms of biblical precedent, having learned to submit to the 'Hand of Providence', his 'Mind being entirely composed by resigning to the Will of God.'³² The advice he earlier gives his own reader in an aside is intended 'to hint to whoever shall read it, that whenever they come to a true Sense of things'³³ would indicate that, among the lessons that his account has to teach his audience is *how* to read.

Although Crusoe spends years poring over the Bible that Providence has left him in his solitude, with the arrival of Friday his hermeneutic assurances are thrown into a state of crisis. Crusoe's theocratic world is more fragile than he at first imagines, finding itself shattered almost as soon as it is established. A few pages after his religious conversion, he discovers the iconic footprint in the sand, at which moment he reflects 'my Fear banish'd all my religious Hope.' With the arrival of Friday, Crusoe's relationship with reading dramatically changes. Attempting to take on the role of missionary and 'Master', a series of theological questions soon arise as the technology of literacy provides Friday with a means of challenging the European mythmaking of Crusoe. While Crusoe has been willing to embrace a narrative handed down to him by theological tradition, Friday responds to the white man's prescriptive reading with common sense logic: 'But, says he again, *if God much strong, much might as the Devil, why God no kill the Devil, so make him no more do wicked?*' To which Crusoe confesses 'I was strangely surpriz'd at his Question, and after all, tho' I was now an old Man, yet I was but a young Doctor, and ill enough quallified for a Casuist, or a Solver of Difficulties; And at first I could not tell what to say, so I pretended not

³¹ Defoe: Robinson Crusoe, pp. 112–113.

³² Defoe: Robinson Crusoe, p. 160.

³³ Defoe: Robinson Crusoe, p. 114.

to hear him.' After further conversation, Crusoe finds himself 'run down again by him to the last Degree,' leading him to 'divert the present Discourse between me and my Man' finally distracting Friday from his persistent questions by sending him away.³⁴

Thus were the first readers invested in these '*Strange and Surprizing Adventures*' invited to share in the 'strangely surpriz'd' response of their hero to the shattering of his Eurocentric religious beliefs. If Crusoe was at first the exemplar of an ideal Christian reader, submitting his critical capacities to the authoritative word, 'having more sincerity than knowledge', Friday turns out to be the superior casuist. On reflection, confesses Crusoe, Friday was actually the better Christian. While Friday may have allowed himself to be 'mastered' by Crusoe in other respects, in matters of theology he speaks for the voice of insubordination, the philosophical and rationalist enquirer rather than submissive reader.

Whatever the ambivalent complexities of such episodes, simplistic variations on *Crusoe* continue to proliferate, many bearing only the most oblique Understanding *Robinson Crusoe's* Place in the Literatureaffiliation with the original. Many would be classified today as 'fan fiction'. In the hands of different readers, Defoe's original is never as straightforward as it seems. Far from being 'heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working the soil of language' writes Michel de Certeau, 'readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.' Finding himself in an unfamiliar textual landscape Certeau's heroic reader 'produces' gardens that miniaturize and collate a world, like a Robinson Crusoe discovering an island; but he, too, is 'possessed' by his own fooling and jesting that introduces plurality and difference into the written system of a society and a text.' In such situations, argues Certeau, the reader 'deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him'.³⁵

For three centuries *Robinson Crusoe* has given itself over to a bewildering variety of axiomatic readings. Seen through the lens of history, the act of reading provides a salutary reminder of the instability, as well as the temporality, of hermeneutic protocols. The strange and surprising afterlives of the novel also serve to remind us that after writers' deaths their works are often – to quote W.H. Auden – fated to become 'modified in the guts of the living'. Had he known it, the author might have reflected on how, in Auden's words, his own most fa-

³⁴ Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*, pp. 258–259.

³⁵ Michel de Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Stephen Rendall. Berkeley 1984, pp. 173–174.

mous work was ‘wholly given over to unfamiliar affections’. One year on from the tercentenary celebrations of *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel was once again in the news. Recent events had brought political questions about the text, and its author, to the surface. In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, revisionist histories are now arising with unusual intensity. As I write these words, the British press is reporting that Defoe is among the figures whose blue plaque is about to be reassessed by English Heritage along with others ‘to determine which ones celebrated figures who were racist or who had links to the slave trade.’³⁶ Presciently, in 1986 Coetzee made an anachronistic reference in *Foe* to ‘a plaque bolted to the wall’, on the house in Stoke Newington where *Robinson Crusoe* was composed and in which Coetzee has his protagonist and manservant find themselves. ‘*Daniel Defoe, Author* are the words, white on blue, and then more writing too small to read.’³⁷ Coetzee’s conceit is more than just a meta-fictional trick. Rather, this anachronistic episode serves to disrupt the assumption that literary works and their authors are always confined to their moment of production. Even in the case of the celebrated work that is reputed to be one of the first examples of fiction in the English language, Coetzee’s reworking of the text demonstrates, can through acts of readerly appropriation, still be seen to continue its work in unpredictable and unpremeditated ways. Such afterlives, as I have hoped to show, are themselves part of the ongoing saga that is *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, in whose long shadow they sit. While recognising that no reading is ever innocent, perhaps, three centuries on, after generations of appropriation, translation, reduction and redaction, one of the challenges for today’s reader is to see this remarkable text as the bewildering and richly complex thing it was before the arrival of Coetzee’s ‘cannibal horde’.

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³⁶ The Sunday Times, June 15, 2020.

³⁷ Coetzee, J. M.: *Foe*, p. 155.

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