

Fears, Apprehensions and Conjectures Suspense in *Robinson Crusoe*

Riccardo Capoferro
(Sapienza Università di Roma, Italia)

Abstract The importance of *Robinson Crusoe* in the origins of the novel depends not only on its progressive plot and empirical style, but also on its pioneering narrative devices. Defoe's work is characterised, in particular, by a new approach to the creation of suspense, considered by narratologists as one of the universals of narrative. This approach is based on a consistent, highly diversified use of hypothetical thinking. Crusoe's emotionally charged previsions have the function of presenting possible plot developments, staging, and causing, the oscillation between fear and hope that is characteristic of suspense. Defoe's work with suspense shows that epistemological change, in particular the rise of the modern notion of probability, had relevant implications also at the level of narrative discourse.

Summary 1 Emotions, Cognition and Narrative. – 2 Desire and Probability. – 3 Crusoe's Hypotheses.

Keywords Robinson Crusoe. Suspense. Curiosity. Hypothetical thinking. Probability. Narrative. Epistemology.

1 Emotions, Cognition and Narrative

In the emergent novel, and most notably in *Robinson Crusoe*, emotions became tightly interwoven with cognition, itself more relevant and nuanced than in preexisting fictional genres. The emotional experience of private individuals became one with their perception and understanding of the world; it appeared to be a response to, and a condition for, empirical knowledge. Along with this dual focus on emotions and cognition went crucial transformations at the level of narrative discourse. The impact of *Robinson Crusoe* was to a large extent enabled by the narrative appeal of Crusoe's mental life. His exploration of the alien environment of the island is shown, for example, to spark powerful emotions – 'fears' and 'apprehensions' – and to inspire 'conjectures', hypothetical scenarios that orient his action and define his targets, stimulating interest and involvement.

In this essay, I will focus on Crusoe's hypotheses and their narrative uses. Crusoe's hypothetical thinking, I will argue, has the function of raising expectations, tensions, and inferences, which concern the past as well

as the future. It generates effects that an important branch of narratological discourse has identified as universals of fiction. Among these effects, I will concentrate, in particular, on suspense, whose deployment in *Robinson Crusoe* marks a sea-change in the history of fictional genres.¹ Occasionally, however, I will also touch on curiosity (often interwoven with suspense), surprise, and on a state of suspension that can be associated – in eighteenth-century terms – with “wonder”.

Usually considered to be an oscillation between fear and hope, suspense is generally attributed to the narrative of actual events, of an impending danger that raises, in readers even more than in characters, emotionally-laden inferences. The workings of suspense need, however, to be historicised, especially if one sets out to understand novelistic realism, its aesthetic devices, and the ontology it implies (Pavel 1986; Doležel 1998). It is by now a commonplace that, both in theory and in practice, the evolution of realism between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was inseparable from epistemological change and, concomitantly, from a growing interest in interiority and subjective perceptions, nourished by protestant introspection and the early modern interest in the workings of the mind. This new focus, and the cognitive and emotional structures that informed it, entailed, inevitably, new narrative devices, new tools to stimulate readers’ involvement. Crucial among these devices were the techniques for the creation of suspense, exemplified and to a large extent inaugurated by Defoe’s experiments in *Robinson Crusoe* (essential, from a broader angle, for the work of Richardson and, later, for that of Jane Austen, both masters of suspense).

In other words, fine-tuning the notion of suspense also implies concentrating on ‘culture’, namely on a new set of cognitive models that constituted new materials for narrative discourse. While narratology has highlighted that novelistic writing deploys models of cognition that circulate in contemporary culture, the practice of narrative analysis has not displayed a keen, widespread interest in how cultural change affects fictional devices.² However, a focus on context becomes essential if the object at hand is a ground-breaking work like *Robinson Crusoe*. Assessing the innovation and force of *Robinson Crusoe* requires, I will suggest, a combined investigation of narrative and its cultural fabric.

1 On suspense, see, in particular, Sternberg 1978, 1992, 2001, and 2003; and Vorderer, Wulff, Friedrichsen 1996. Sternberg also focuses on curiosity and surprise, the other ‘universals’ of fiction.

2 On cognition and experience, see Fludernik 1996. On contextualist narratology, which is a minor branch of narratology, see Chatman 1990; Sommer 2007; Nünning 2009.

2 Desire and Probability

Early modern cultural transformations provided pioneering writers of fiction with new ways of understanding, evaluating and describing experience, only some of which could be put to use in storytelling. It is useful to highlight, in the first place, that passions became more tightly knit to cognition. In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a marker, and a gauge, of epistemological and ethical change (all the more because Defoe's familiarity with Locke's philosophy is unquestionable) passions were regarded as corporeal fluids that influenced mental activity, and gained legitimacy also in the sphere of cognition. This shift is an important one, as it has relevant implications in the realms of politics and economy, laying the ground for the 'pursuit of happiness'. One passion, in particular, gained unprecedented latitude: desire. In Locke's model, desire is triggered by ideas derived from pleasant sensations, and can urge reason to remove causes of unhappiness (Armstrong, Tennenhouse 2006). Locke argues that

Nature [...] has put into man a desire of happiness, and an aversion to misery: these indeed are innate practical principles which (as practical principles ought) do continue constantly to operate and influence all our actions, without ceasing: these may be observed in all persons and all ages, steady and universal; but these are inclinations of the appetite to good, not impressions of truth on the understanding. (Woolhouse 1997, 76)

Focusing, in this case, on innate faculties, Locke defines a model of the mind whereby emotions and cognition are no longer at war. His interest is in the way human beings apprehend, understand and act in the world, namely in the fruitful interplay of reason and passions.

According to the *Essay*, the human being is not a split, dual entity: reason, propelled by desire, responds to 'misery', which represents a range of negative emotions. And reason can be used in many ways. Locke's view of human understanding includes a wide array of modes of cognition, some of which shed light on the narrative texture of Defoe's realism. In particular, Locke's *Essay* provides evidence of the increasing relevance of hypotheses. Locke has often been considered to be critical of hypothetical thinking, especially in relation to the atomistic theories of contemporary philosophers. Following on from seventeenth-century natural philosophers such as Hooke and Boyle, however, he is also aware of the role played by hypothesis in the understanding of the physical world, a section of his *Essay* being devoted to "the true use of hypotheses" (Woolhouse 1997, 572). On the one hand, his commitment to empirical evidence presupposes a keen awareness of the dangers inherent to hypothetical thinking, on the other, he is also aware of its utility, especially for our knowledge of

unobservable natural phenomena (Laudan 1981, 59-71). Crucial both to experimental science and to the understanding of subcorporeal – that is, subatomic – phenomena, hypotheses are, for Locke, indispensable, as long as they are informed by consistent analogies with verified experience.

Hypothetical thinking was not only part of a new, intrinsically ‘scientific’ frame of mind, it came to be a flexible, pervasive tool, whose dissemination went along with that of the modern notion of probability. Probability was no longer primarily based on the authority of the speaker, but on a subject’s ability to produce empirical evidence (Hacking 2006; Patey 1984). Despite its interest in matter of fact, empirical knowledge encouraged inferences, since it provided ways to test their validity, inviting explanations of the workings of nature and human societies. Historiography began, for example, to value probable inferences on the past, with a view to achieving a rational understanding of causes and effects. Hypotheses, of course, were liable to criticism, all the more since probability was also used rhetorically. It became part and parcel of what Michael McKeon (1987) has defined “naive empiricism”, a mode of presentation that was characteristic of the many genres – from travel accounts to works of fiction – that built their credibility by displaying empirical truthfulness.

In other words, probability entered the divided realm of public debate and ideological strife. In particular, it became crucial to the progressive conception of civil society that was then on the rise. Progress, made possible by reform proposals, could be imagined and pursued by advancing reasonable hypotheses on the future. Discourses on social change, tightly intertwined with plans for technical improvement, were intrinsically hypothetical, vulnerably poised between vision and project.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Daniel Defoe’s writings. Being invested in social and technical progress, Defoe was closely involved in these trends. In *An Essay upon Projects*, his description of how England may improve if his reforms were put in practice is fundamentally hypothetical. The *Essay* defines a set of experiments and vigorously shows their intended outcome. In devising plans for public improvement, Defoe makes extensive calculations and stresses the probable advantages of his projects, trying to persuade his audience of their effectiveness (one of its most frequently occurring verbs being, significantly, “might”). Being aware that his discourse is hypothetical, in his “Conclusions” Defoe also appears open to criticism, acknowledging – with a characteristic profession of disinterestedness – that he may in fact have been wrong on some points: “However, I do not willingly assert anything which I have not good grounds for. If I am mistaken, let him that finds the error inform the world better, and never trouble himself to animadvert upon this” (Defoe 1697, 335). Defoe’s use of hypothetical thinking is no less evident in his *General History of Discoveries and Improvements* (1727), which delineates a history of empirical science, with the same approach already used in the

first chapter of the *Essay*. Besides making probable inferences about the past, Defoe proposes plans for improvement and for the search for ‘useful knowledge’. As he remarks in the preface, these plans are hypothetical, but their success is highly probable:

In our accounts of Improvements and Discoverie, which are yet behind, and which Mankind have before them for the Incouragement of their Industry, we shall not amuse our Readers with remote and suggested Possibilities, or run them among dangerous and impracticable Projects [...] This would be to perplex our Readers with dark schemes and unintelligible Proposals, which have neither probability of Success to encourage the Attempt, or rational Foundation, to make them entertaining to the reader. (Defoe 1727, vi-vii)

3 Crusoe’s Hypotheses

That the realm of hypothetical thinking was rapidly expanding is confirmed by *Robinson Crusoe* (Molesworth 2010; Campe 2013). All fiction, however, focuses on experience – on “experientiality”, to use a successful category introduced by narratologist Monika Fludernik (1996). In Defoe’s novel, the sphere of cognition blends with that of emotion, in a manifold narrative experiment. But Defoe did not reject the past wholesale. The form and themes of *Robinson Crusoe* also draw from preexisting genres, informed by different approaches to temporality and agency (McKeon 1987).

The inconsistencies in Crusoe’s narrative serve, needless to say, a specific purpose. They articulate, and mitigate, a contradiction between traditional and modern ways of conceiving of the world and its workings. As a matter of fact, Crusoe’s hypothetical thinking comes to the fore gradually, as he departs from a more restrictive epistemological regime, one that implies the Christian cosmology of spiritual autobiography.³ Crusoe’s father ‘foresees’ that his son’s decision to leave his family will result in tragedy and disaster. Retrospectively, Crusoe’s older self concedes that his father’s words were ‘prophetic’, and his young self too regards them as such at one point: “I look’d back upon my father’s Prophetick discourse to me” (Defoe 2007, 18). At the beginning of *Robinson Crusoe*, therefore, we are not yet in the domain of rational thinking: both the young and the old Crusoe – who seems, at this later stage, to endorse his father’s view – subscribe to a way of envisioning the future that is fundamentally teleological. Crusoe’s story seems set in the world of Christian ritualized

3 On Defoe and spiritual autobiography, see Starr 1965 and Hunter 1966. On Defoe and the supernatural, see Baine 1968 and Capoferro 2014.

history, where individual future can be predicted by means of typological parallels (Damrosch 1985, 190-1). Soon after leaving his family, the young Crusoe is threatened by a stern and vengeful providence, turning into an incarnation of the prodigal son.

In narrative terms, the function of these teleological overtones is already to generate suspense. By portending forces that will punish Crusoe for his forbidden acts and desires, they make us aware of impending risks. On the one hand, therefore, the narrative foreshadows possible developments, already showing its tendency to suggest previsions and thus arouse readers' expectations. On the other, it stages a traditional Christian temporality, refraining from narrative experimentation. Soon, however, Crusoe breaks free from Biblical parallels and an unexpected horizon of action dawns. This change ushers in different narrative devices. Facing new adventures, Crusoe feels no longer doomed. He demonstrates, on the contrary, a productive inclination to hypothetical thinking. He tends, in particular, to make plans on the basis of empirical-rational data. Planning is, of course, a key activity in many kinds of fictional character, ranging from epic heroes, who set sail towards their native island, to romance heroes, eager to save a damsel in distress. In novelistic realism, however, preparation, debate and self-debate are remarkably more developed and nuanced, along with the scrutiny of empirical information. After having been taken prisoner by the Moors, Crusoe contrives ways to escape and, before putting his life on the line, tries to probe the future:

Here I meditated nothing but my Escape; and what method I might take to effect it, but found no Way that had the least Probability in it: Nothing presented to make the Supposition of it rational; for I had no Body to communicate it to, that would embark with me; no fellow-slave, no *Englishman*, *Irishman*, or *Scotsman* there but my self; so that for two years, tho' I often pleased my self with the Imagination, yet I never had the least encouraging Prospect of putting it in Practice. (Defoe 2007, 18-19)

Wholly bent on the future, Crusoe shows a problem-solving mindset informed by Lockean epistemology. He appears intent in the production of scenarios and in the rational assessment of their validity, that is, their probability. In the passage above, his production of hypothesis is represented indirectly, by way of summary. Nevertheless, it defines his desire for action, not easily quenched, while also highlighting that escape will not be an easy accomplishment. In the ensuing section, Crusoe tries to fulfil his plans, all the more risky in light of his previous evaluations:

I got all things ready as he had directed, and waited the next Morning with the Boat, washed clean, her Antient and Pendants out, and everything to accommodate his Guests; when by and by my Patroon came on

board alone, and told me his Guests had put off going, upon some Business that fell out, and order'd me, with the Man and Boy, as usual, to go out with the Boat and catch them some Fish, for that his friends were to sup at his House, and commanded that as soon as I got some Fish I should bring it home to his House; all which I prepar'd to do.

This Moment my former Notions of Deliverance darted into my Thoughts, for now I found I was likely to have a little Ship at my command; and my Master being gone, I prepar'd to furnish my self, not for a fishing Business, but for a Voyage; though I knew not, neither did I so much as consider whither I should steer; for any where to get out of that Place was my Way. My first Contrivance was to make a Pretence to speak to this *Moor*, to get something for our Subsistence on board; for I told him we must not presume to eat of our Patroon's bread. (20)

In this episode, Crusoe's actions unfold in the time of adventure, in a regime in which facts matter more than thoughts, the grip of narrative arising from the proximity of danger. The focus, however, is also on Crusoe's mind. Finding himself in a situation that appears promising, he revises his previous evaluations: escape looks now possible. This realisation revamps narrative tension by figuring a goal to achieve and reminding us of impending threats, as Crusoe's "notions of deliverance" may never translate into actuality. Unable to plan everything out, Crusoe has to rely on improvised 'contrivances'. Most traditional heroes, of course, used to improvise, but they did not devote too much attention to the possibility of danger. Neither they nor the narrations that conveyed their story showed a similar penchant for hypothesis and rational planning. In *Robinson Crusoe*, conversely, the tendency, and at the same time the inability, to form exhaustive scenarios alert us to the unexpected.

Later on in the narrative, Crusoe's tendency to hypothetical thinking increases. After being shipwrecked, he finds himself in the wilderness, surrounded by a multitude of dangers. The alien nature of the island fires up his imagination and fears. It is at this stage that Crusoe's hypothetical mindset becomes fully evident, expressing itself in long previsions that convey his anxiety, seek to compensate for his ignorance of the surroundings, and, concomitantly, build narrative tension. Hypothetical thinking functions, in the first place, as a reminder of danger. Shortly after the shipwreck, in a memorable passage, Crusoe realises that survival is against all odds:

After I had solac'd my mind with the comfortable Part of my Condition, I began to look round me to see what kind of place I was in, and what was next to be done; and I soon found my Comforts abate, and that in a Word I had a dreadful Deliverance: For I was wet, had no Cloaths to shift me, nor any thing either to eat or drink to comfort me, neither did I see any Prospect before me, but that of perishing with hunger or be-

ing devour'd by wild Beasts; and that which was particularly afflicting to me, was, that I had no Weapon either to hunt and kill any creature for my Sustenance, or to defend my self against any other creature that might desire to kill me for theirs. In a word, I had nothing about me but a Knife, a Tobacco-pipe, and a little Tobacco in a Box; this was all my Provision, and this threw me into such terrible Agonies of Mind, that for a while I ran about like a Mad-man. Night coming upon me, I began with a heavy Heart to consider what would be my Lot if there were any ravenous Beasts in that country, seeing at night they always come abroad for their Prey. (41)

In this passage, danger is mediated by previsions, which are shot through with fear. Hypotheses express Crusoe's emotional state, the reminder of danger operating, as I will show extensively, not only on the strictly cognitive level. On the one hand, Crusoe's previsions define a set of 'probability rules', possibilities that expand the ontological underpinnings of his fictional world (Kukkonen 2014). On the other, they possess emotional resonance, appealing to our empathy. Thus they generate suspense. And suspense entails curiosity, because Crusoe's hypotheses are yet to be verified. In this case too, a mode of cognition associated with the new epistemology – the search for empirical evidence – is put to narrative use, while also retaining its epistemological and ideological significance.⁴

Danger is also mediated by a risk assessment that defines possible developments while simultaneously leaving latitude for action and further discovery. The oscillation between fear and desire that is a basic working of suspense depends, in other words, on a character's assessment of what is most probable, though not absolutely certain, both positive and negative outcomes still appearing possible.

This is not Defoe's invention, of course. However, in Defoe's work, and the tradition it contributed to shaping, the subjective apprehension of danger is more pervasive and grounded than in most pre-modern fiction. Danger becomes virtual: overtly and consistently, it exists by virtue of a character's cognition and emotions – in this case, hypothetical cognition – that are closely interwoven. Inevitably, therefore, suspense goes hand in hand with curiosity, the perception of danger being a sustained interrogation of a character's surroundings, whose truth-value has bearing on his welfare. Success depends on the ability to understand the world and carry out reliable risk assessments with hypotheses also expressing anxiety and lack of control. Robinson's effort for survival unfolds in a slew of minor episodes, in which the plans he makes – he decides, for instance,

4 Needless to say, surprise – the third universal of narrative – also plays a key role in *Robinson Crusoe* (Novak 2015, chap. 7).

to bake bread, grow corn and explore the island - also include an evaluation of risks that foregrounds the possibility of failure (Defoe 2007, 66, 93-4, 99, 133, 151).

Nowhere is this technique more evident than in the rightly famous section that centres on Crusoe's discovery of a footprint on the other side of the island and on the fears and conjectures that ensue. It is not a coincidence that this sequence has become emblematic of *Robinson Crusoe*, echoing in hundreds of other stories, especially adventure fiction, influenced by Defoe's work. Not only, in fact, does the footprint episode epitomise Crusoe's encounter with a hostile environment, it also epitomises Defoe's narrative style, highlighting the role of hypotheses as agents of suspense and curiosity, as well as surprise. Initially, Crusoe's response to the footprint is one of utter amazement - "I was exceedingly surpriz'd with the Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore, which was very plain to be seen in the Sand" (130) - that calls for an attempt to scan the surroundings and identify threats.

Immediately after the discovery, however, Crusoe's hypotheses constitute not so much attempts at explanation as harrowing visions of danger. He goes so far as to surmise that, given the absence of other humans, the footprint must have been left by the devil himself. Fear prevailing, hypothetical thinking is no longer governed by reason. Crusoe falls back to a supernaturalist model of understanding: a disempowering frame of mind, far more conservative than his providential interpretation of events, which is ultimately reconcilable with an empirical approach. In light of the fictional world of *Robinson Crusoe*, however, and of the thrust of the narrative, Crusoe's fear of the devil should not be regarded as a cause for hesitating over the nature of reality, as in apparition narratives and what we now call the fantastic. It represents, conversely, an event in his emotional life, because passions overrule cognition, and his ability for planning and action falters. Nevertheless, Crusoe's previsions still contribute to suspense, expressing fear and impending danger (see Gerrig 1996).

No longer oriented by desire, hypotheses convey a state of cognitive checkmate. This state, however, is soon overcome: Crusoe - and the readers - should be on the alert. Empirical reality demands new attention and hypotheses seem to regain hold on facts:

I presently concluded then, that it must be some more dangerous Creature, (*viz.*) that it must be some of the Savages of the main Land over-against me, who had wander's out to Sea in their Canoes [...] Then terrible Thoughts rack'd my imagination about their having found my Boat, and that there were people here. (Defoe 2007, 131-2)

Crusoe's return to balance goes along with a sharper focus on the future. Immediately after the discovery of the footprint his fear took centre stage,

overshadowing other concerns. Gradually, he enters a state of uncertainty, his emotions shifting from fear to anxiety. Some of his hypotheses, however, still appear groundless, not wholly consistent with the expectations the narrative has raised so far, and with the plot summary on the title page. He goes so far as to question the very presence of human beings: "In the middle of these Cogitations, Apprehensions, and Reflections, it came into my Thought one day, that all this may be a meer Chimera of my own; and that this Foot might be the print of my own Foot, when I came on shore from my Boat" (133-4). In this sequence, hypotheses generate suspense by way of both cognition and emotions. On the one hand, some of Crusoe's hypotheses have defined multiple possibilities. Moreover, his attempts, both grounded and groundless, to understand his predicament mark narrative progression, arousing our expectations. On the other hand, however, Crusoe's hypotheses also convey fear and bewilderment, contradicting and undermining his determination to understand his surroundings. Crusoe even attributes the footprint to himself, then discards the hypothesis, to find himself prey to new and fearful conjectures:

when I came to measure the Mark with my own Foot, I found my Foot not so large by a great deal; both these Things fill'm my Head with new Imaginations, and gave me the Vapours again, to the highest Degree; so that I shook with cold, like one in an Ague: And I went home again, fill'd with Belief that some Man or Men had been on Shore there; or, in short, that the Island was inhabited, and i might be surpris'd before I was awake; and what course to take for my security I knew not. (134)

These new hypotheses result in a year-long preparation of countermeasures, intermingled with bouts of fear.

Defoe further diversifies his suspense-generating techniques by turning Baconian descriptions of manual labour to a new use. Far from forestalling danger, Crusoe's precautions - he uses his gun sparingly, fortifies his home, finds a strategic position to shoot intruders, etc. - raise questions over their effectiveness. The establishment, through material preparation, of positive presuppositions (Crusoe will certainly manage to shoot intruders) is inseparable from that of negative ones (unexpectedly, intruders will come from another direction). Spurred by his previsions, Crusoe has shaped his world, defining a new level of narrative possibilities. But the future exceeds all precautions. The narrative maintains its emotional focus by emphasising that Crusoe's labour was a response to his "apprehensions", and that he lived "in the constant Snare of the Fear of Man" (138).

When, finally, savages do appear on Crusoe's island, his speculations become grounded in more specific assumptions, narrowing the scope of his anticipations - he has now something to observe - and informing new 'contrivances'. It is now the proximity of danger that enables suspense.

But the logical and emotional patterns of the footprint sequence persist. Crusoe continues to scan his surroundings, make hypotheses, sketch positive and negative possibilities, devise plans. And bouts of fear continue to impinge on his predictive ability.

This demonstrates, once more, Defoe's firm grasp on the fundamental workings of suspense, and his consistent use of a new narrative device. In order to be fully effective, suspense cannot depend only on cognition, on a simulation on rational-empirical thinking, but also on emotions, which are conveyed, in *Robinson Crusoe*, by irrational cognition. After spotting the savages, Crusoe falls prey to fears and nightmares:

The Perturbation of my Mind, during this fifteen or sixteen Months Interval, was very great; I slept unquiet, dream'd always frightful Dreams, and often started out of my Sleep in the night: In the Day great Troubles overwhelm'd my Mind, and in the night I dream'd often of killing the Savages. (156)

It is indicative of Defoe's talent as a narrator, however, that this train of thoughts is interrupted by an unexpected occurrence: "as I was reading the Bible, and taken up with very serious Thoughts about my present Condition, I was surpris'd with a Noise of a Gun as I thought fir'd at Sea" (of a different kind. His previsions have, therefore, laid the ground for this surprise, caused by the arrival of a ship, that complicates the power balance of the island, sparking new hypotheses, observations, strategies, possibilities. New conditions for suspense have established themselves. While Crusoe's focus is on the ship and its crew, it is obvious that its arrival and the conflict it seems to have carried can have long-ranging consequences. The ship enriches and diversifies the potential for change, adding new reasons to oscillate between hope and fear, suggesting new "notions of deliverance".

Drawing to a conclusion, I would like to broaden the category of suspense by focusing on one more use of hypothetical thinking in *Robinson Crusoe*, one that ventures into the domain of counterfactuality. Not only does Crusoe ask himself questions on what has happened, but also on what *could* have happened. Both his old and his younger self reflect on the fact that things might have been far worse. By means of counterfactual thinking, they highlight how, despite all, they have managed to survive:

I could not tell what Part of the World this might be, otherwise than that I knew it must be Part of America, and, as I concluded by all my Observations, must be near the Spanish Dominions, and perhaps was all inhabited by savages, where, if I had landed, I had been in a worse condition than I was now; and therefore I acquiesced in the dispositions of Providence. (93)

Counterfactuality conveys Crusoe's sense of danger and his wonder at having survived against all odds. It conveys his awareness that adventures such as those he experienced have, more often than not, unhappy outcomes. Crusoe often implies that his life has been special and on various occasions appears thankful to providence. In doing so, he echoes – and simultaneously tones down – the rhetoric of seventeenth-century literature of wonder, which showed the intervention of God in human affairs (Hunter 1990). Counterfactual thinking conveys a subdued suggestion of wonder. Remarking that, in spite of all, things have not been so bad means – given Crusoe's pious invocations – that there may be design in the world after all. As has often been noted, in *Robinson Crusoe* supernatural powers survive, if only as an interpretive possibility. Though intermittently, a providential pattern shimmers underneath an apparently random train of events, enabling a hesitation over the nature of reality that lends Crusoe's world an air of enchantment and loosens the constraints of everyday life. Moreover, Crusoe's world becomes more and more benevolent, compensating for the scepticism of the new epistemology. *Robinson Crusoe* takes us to a mutable world. At different points of the narrative, events seem governed by an angry and vengeful God, seem shaped by purely material forces – Crusoe's faith being not exactly steady – and, especially when Crusoe's lot improves, show signs of a good providence.

Much depends on one's interpretive angle. In light of Crusoe's final triumph and of the *Further Adventures*, *Robinson Crusoe* could be considered a providentialist work. Its overall meanings, however, cannot be subsumed by an overarching providential/teleological pattern. Crusoe's narrative unfolds in a perpetual oscillation, which makes providential intimations far more wonderful, and the logic of materialism far more threatening. The fear and hope that are distinctive of suspense concern, in other words, the very essence of the reality explored by Crusoe. Alternately, a vengeful god, chance and a benevolent god appear on stage, with each ontological regime evoking its opposite. Narrative expectations in *Robinson Crusoe* centre, therefore, both on the physical and on the metaphysical realms, suspense operating at different levels (this suggestion of wonder re-enacts, moreover, an age-old narrative ritual, highlighting that the story departs from the uneventfulness of everyday life).

That all this is achieved by using a mode of cognition associated with the new epistemology constitutes further evidence of Defoe's pioneering experimentation. Not only does *Robinson Crusoe* focus on an experience that is meant to resemble that of a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Englishman, it also makes a compelling story out of that experience. While, in the wake of Ian Watt (1957), realism has often been reduced to its ideological and epistemological content, it is also a narrative artefact. At the same time, however, narrative cannot be understood if it is not brought back to its context. The transformation of narrative techniques –most no-

tably the rise of the novel – cannot be understood if it is not historicised.

These assumptions raise questions of method, which, if not relevant to all strains of eighteenth-century studies, are certainly relevant for our understanding of literary genres as aesthetic constructs. What is, exactly, the relation between ‘culture’ – that is, models of cognition and of emotional experience – and ‘narrative’: does it presuppose an ‘aesthetic selection’ of relevant materials? Is this selection driven, to a certain extent, by pre-existing fictional and interpretive conventions? Does the relation between narrative and cultural materials in moments of transition follow recurrent patterns, or does each text, and each period, constitute a special case? And, last but not least, does the fictional rendering of cognition and emotions challenge, undermine and modify ‘culture’? These are only some of the questions that a historically aware study of emotions, cognition and narrative can raise, and that *Robinson Crusoe* poses with formidable strength.

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