Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe

Arts One

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Juan Fernández / Robinson Crusoe Island
A Tour of the Island

- Novels
- Narrative
- Boredom
- Providence
- Progress
- Monsters
- Habit
NOVELS
At Last, a Novel!

- Our idea of literature shaped by the novel
- The first novel we’ve read
- One of the first novels many people read?
- The first novel in English?
Novels as commodities

- Novels are written
- Novels are written to be read (silently)
- Novels are written to be printed
- Novels are written to be sold
- Both public and private
“The Rise of the Novel”

• C18th: Defoe, Fielding, Richardson
• Rise of industrialism, bourgeoisie, market
• A “lower” genre: middle class, feminine
• For (and about) a community of individuals
Antoine Wiertz’s “Reader of Novels”
Novels as Narrative

• Novels tell a story
• Novels have beginnings and endings
• Novels have middles
• Novels have direction
• Novels have a point of view (narrator)
• Novels construct (and envelop us in) a world
“How Do We Read?”

• Read Three Times
• First: A preliminary foray, assessment
• Second: Read for flow, plot, narrative
• Third: Re-read for detail

• Read selectively and reflectively
Narrative vs. Image

• **Robinson Crusoe** has often been reduced to an image
• An image is **not** worth a thousand words
• Images particularly subject to condensation, density
• The **time** of reading
Title page, first edition (1719)
History as Narrative

• In most Romance languages, history = story
• Historia, histoire
• Other terms: relación, crónica, informe
• History as a branch of literature
• History as emplotment: a narrative logic
Reading for Flow, Plot, Narrative

- “One damn thing after another”
- What follows what?
- Plots and subplots
- Flashbacks and flashforwards
- Are there diversions, eddies, undercurrents?
- Narratives have narrators
- Narratives encode time
Robinson Crusoe as Narrative

- Life on the Island: 37-219
- 1-15: Upbringing and trip from Hull to London
- 15-20: London to Guinea and enslavement
- 20-33: Escape, passage to Brazil, settlement
- 33-37: Slaving voyage, interrupted by wreck
- 219-227: Travels around England
- 227-238: To Lisbon, across Pyrenees to France
- 238-241: Return to Lisbon, Island, and Brazil
Robinson Crusoe as Narrative

• A series of repetitions (with difference)
• Repeated signs and warnings
• Repeated travels
• Repeated enslavements
• Repeated tales of progress

• Final rendering of accounts
“If ever the story of any private man’s adventures in the world were worth making publick, and were acceptable when publish’d, the editor of this account thinks this will be so. [...] And whoever thinks, because all such things are dispatch’d, that the improvement of it, as well as to the diversion, as to the instruction of the reader, will be the same.” (3)
Robinson Crusoe as Narrative

• Nested narratives
• Establishing narrator and narrative voice
• Robinson Crusoe’s “middle state”
• Establishing a (realist) fictional world
• England’s maritime connections
Robinson Crusoe as Narrative

• A narrative redoubled and interrupted
• “told him my whole history” (203)
• “every part of my own story” (218)
• Potential mise-en-abyme
• Breaking the frame
“I began to keep my journal, of which I shall give you here the copy (tho’ in it will be told all these particulars over again) as long as it lasted, for having no more ink, I was forc’d to leave it off.” (56)
Robinson Crusoe as Narrative

• Edition – Narrative – Journal
• Double account: 57-79 (ten months)
• Repetition; incorporation of archive
• Interruptions: 62-64; 70-73
• Dream within Journal within Narrative
• Fever
“To this hour I’m partly of the opinion, that I slept all the next day and night, and till almost three that day after; for otherwise I knew not how I should lose a day out of my reckoning in the days of the week, as it appear’d some years after I had done. [...] But certainly I lost a day in my accompt, and never knew which way.” (76)
Robinson Crusoe as Narrative

- The narrative threatens to be derailed
- It is more than mere sequence of events?
- Especially when events are scarce
- Anxiety of representation

- Is this a problem with narrative or with life?
BOREDOM
“I cannot say that after this, for five years, any extraordinary thing happen’d to me.” (108) “In this disposition I continued, for near a year after this.” (137) “The visits which they thus make to the island, are not very frequent; for it was above fifteen months before any more of them came on shore there again.” (145) “I was heartily tir’d of it, for it was above a year and a half that I waited.” (158)
Times Passes

• Frantic pace of frame as compensation
• On the island, almost nothing happens
• Difficulty of rendering account of time’s passage
• How to put experience into words?
Time Passes

- No wonder this novel is reduced to images
- Narrative at war with the image?
- Narrative as attempt to provide meaning?
- Narrative as naturalization of the sign?
“It happen’d one day about noon going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surpris’d with the print of a man’s naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand: I stood like one thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an apparition.” (122)
Time Passes

- Image threatens to overwhelm narrative
- Another twelve years before savages sighted
- How to reconcile the event with time?
- How to mark or give account of time?
“In the middle of these cogitations, apprehensions and reflections, it came into my thought one day, that all this might 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: This cheer’d me up a little too, and I began to perswade myself it was all a delusion.” (125)
PROVIDENCE
“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 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.” (75)
A Narrative of Conversion

• Crusoe becomes a reader as well as a writer
• A series of firsts: reading, prayer, repentance
• Crusoe’s as a life redeemed
• Moral and spiritual reflection and instruction
• In turn, Friday exists to be converted

• But is Friday fully converted?
“It is God that has made it all: Well, but then it came on strangely, if God has made all these things, He guides and governs them all, and all things that concern them; for the power that could make all things, must certainly have power to guide and direct them. [...] I was brought to this miserable circumstance by his direction, he having the sole power.” (74)
A Narrative with Direction

- Direction: governance and movement
- God as director: moving story along
- God works through Nature via Providence
- Narrative replays and explains Providence
PROGRESS
A Narrative of Direction

• From Primitivism to Society
• Parody or Replica of Civilization?
• The myth of “homo oeconomicus”
• Progress as patience and hard labour
A Wealth of Things

• Continuous technological development
• House, seeds, transport, umbrella
• Goats, parrot, people
• Land as possession; people as possession
“It is impossible to express here the flutterings of my very heart, when I look’d over these letters, and especially when I found all my wealth about me. [...] In a word, I turned pale, and grew sick; and had not the old man run and fetch’d me a cordial, I believe that the sudden surprise of joy had overset Nature, and I had dy’d upon the spot.” (224)
A Wealth of Things

- With the passage of time, wealth increases
- Meticulous accounting required
- But wealth is also threatening
- The shock of industrialization?
MONSTERS
Screenshot from 1913 film version
A Meer Chimera?

- Crusoe: Indian ways, Islamic mustache
- Friday: preternaturally skilled
- Cannibals: reasons of their own
- Pirates and rogues
- Monstrous capitalism?
HABIT
"I went on with my husbandry, digging, planting, fencing, as usual; I gather’d and cur’d my grapes, and did everything necessary as before." (181)

“Tiredness and waiting, even despair are the attitudes of the body.” (Gilles Deleuze)
The Body’s Repetitions

- Not only the narrative repeats
- Crusoe’s “infinite labour” marks out time
- A narrative written on the body
- But habit threatens to undo narrative

- How to give voice to the body?
- How to construct meaning from repetition?