Imaginary Voyages in *Serious Reflections*
and *A Vision of the Angelick World*

MAXIMILLIAN NOVAK

UNLIKE the many critics who have dismissed *Serious Reflections* as a disorganized jumble of old materials that Daniel Defoe drew out of the drawers of his desk and patched together, I believe that, for the most part, he composed it pretty much from scratch or from materials on which he had been working for future books. On the other hand, I doubt he would have written it in quite the way he did—as a work very much lacking in organization—had not his publisher, William Taylor, been confronted with a series of crises. It was claimed that Taylor had grown wealthy on the returns from publishing *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Such claims may have been somewhat exaggerated, but it was certainly a financial success; and Taylor had to be eager to continue to profit from its publication.¹ Charles Gildon had cleverly revealed that the author of *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was not a person with the name of Robinson Crusoe but rather Daniel Defoe, a radical Whig journalist and poet, who, strangely enough, was known to be writing for the quasi-Jacobite newspaper, *The Weekly Journal*, as well as for another journal that supported the High Church, *Mercurius Politicus*. Fortunately, for Taylor, Gildon’s criticisms turned mainly on points of literary criticism and Defoe’s rendering of reality. For Gildon, it was enough to describe Defoe as a “Hosier” on his title page to suggest his inferior social status and hence his necessary failure as a writer; so that while Gildon may have contributed to the damage caused by those who objected to Defoe’s manner of writing, its two editions probably did little to cut into Taylor’s gains. More dangerous was the exchange between Taylor and T. Cox, who had published an abridgement of Defoe’s work. Cox threatened that if Taylor continued to proceed against him in the courts of law, he would reveal things about the author of *Robinson Crusoe* that might be truly harmful for the sales of a work that had quickly gone into many editions and enriched its publisher (Novak, “Novel or Fictional Memoir”). Taylor seems to have
quieted T. Cox, but he probably asked Defoe to produce a third volume to provide an explanation for how *Robinson Crusoe* might be true in some sense and yet be a work of fiction.

Seldom at a loss for something to say, Defoe created a series of essays that, for the most part, might have been compatible with Crusoe as a voyager. In the second volume, *The Farther Adventures*, Crusoe had been more of an observer of events than the active figure of the first volume. Thus in his voyage back to his island he witnessed scenes of passengers threatened by death: first, those fleeing from a ship that had caught fire, second, in encountering another ship that was adrift, having lost its masts. If the former had a display of the passions of those who had been saved, this latter experience involved scenes of starvation and thirst along with horrific descriptions of the sensations involved. Both cases raised the concept of “necessity” and the ways in which humans behaved when reduced to a condition in which they were forced to act upon the basis of self-preservation. The Crusoe of *Serious Reflections*, then, is in a position to expatiate on the ways in which people behave in a state of desperation. And in addition to being a voyager, the Crusoe of *The Farther Adventures* appears to be far more governed by his emotions than the Crusoe of the first volume, who was content, at least for a time, to be a successful sugar manufacturer in Brazil. At the beginning of *The Farther Adventures*, Crusoe’s “wandering Fancy” has grown to be an uncontrollable obsession. Such yielding to the passions should prepare us for the Crusoe of the third volume, whose opinions are often more vehement and less earth-bound than we might have expected.

In *A Vision of the Angelick World*, appended to *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, published on August 6, 1720, Defoe has Crusoe engage in a mental voyage through the universe to see whether the planets are inhabited. It follows a discussion of dreams as a way to the world of spirits and a warning against a too active imagination of the kind that had Crusoe believing that there was some monstrous creature sitting on his bed, when, in fact, he was suffering a physical illness—some temporary paralysis of his legs, which he calls a “Dead Palsie” (*VAW* 10). Crusoe, the voyager through interstellar space tells us:

> I say, that my Imagination, *always given to wander*, took a Flight of its own, and as I have told you that I had an invincible Inclination to travel, so I think I travelled as sensibly to my understanding, over all the Mazes and Wastes of infinite Space, in Quest of these Things, as ever I did over the Desarts of Karakathay, and the uninhabited Wastes of Tartary, and perhaps may give as useful an account of my Journey.

> When first my Fancy rais’d me up in the confines of this vast Abyss…. I mounted, and see the World below me, tis scarcely possible to imagine how little, how mean, how despicable every Thing look’d. (*VAW* 26)
We should not be overly surprised by this extraordinary flight of imagination from a character often thought to be a representative of the supposedly very unimaginative middle-orders. As an author, Defoe, himself, at least, was anything but earth bound. In his Consolidator, he used the plans of Mira-cho-cho-iasco, nominally an ancient Vice-Admiral of China but actually a voyager down to earth from the moon (from which, of course, all of China’s amazing inventions actually come), for his space ship. His ship borrows some of its ideas for propulsion from the plans for a steam engine in John Harris’s Lexicon Technicum, but Defoe’s science is mostly bogus of course. The important thing from a narrative standpoint was to find a way into an imaginary world. And some time after the publication of The Consolidator, Defoe began his series of pamphlets using the Second Sight phenomenon, supposedly possessed by some Highland Scots, which enabled them to see into the future. Defoe appeared to be entertained by the concept of Second Sight, but he believed in it hardly more than he believed in the invention of his moon-man turned Chinese Vice-Admiral. This writer, whom many nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics rightly loved to celebrate as the master of the real (Virginia Woolf’s vivid creator of Crusoe’s clay pots or of Moll Flanders amid the crowds of Bartholomew Fair), also enjoyed fantasy. I will return to Crusoe’s voyages through the universe later in this essay, but I want, first of all, to deal with Crusoe’s voyage into epistemology and ontology—what Jacques Derrida calls the Crusoe of Descartes’s cogito.

Derrida, of course, was dealing with the Crusoe of The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures and more specifically his time on the island. He is as much involved in making a connection between Descartes and Heidegger as he is with Crusoe, yet what he has to say about Defoe’s protagonist—about Crusoe the solitaire—is extremely interesting. As we know, although Defoe’s mentor, Charles Morton, still taught mainly in line with Aristotelian philosophy, he also incorporated elements of the New Science and certainly included enough of Descartes to give Defoe some notion of that philosopher’s ideas—probably enough to justify Derrida’s use of the phrase, “Cartesian-Robinson existence” (Morton 33: xxxviii, 149–51; Derrida 2: 53).3 Perhaps the most intriguing passages in Derrida’s study involve Crusoe’s sovereignty over his various pets. And his most inventive part of this section surely has to do with Crusoe’s relationship with his parrot—with Crusoe’s teaching the parrot the words with which the bird addresses him. “But it remains a circular auto-appellation,” Derrida writes, “because it comes from a sort of living mechanism that he has produced, that he assembled himself, like a quasi-technical or prosthetic apparatus, by training the parrot to speak mechanically so as to send his words and his name back to him, repeating them blindly” (Derrida 2: 86). It should be pointed out that in having Crusoe mockingly compare the parrot to a courtier in his royal domain, echoing the desires of his master, Defoe had a good grasp of how the parrot functioned under his sovereignty.
But in respect to Crusoe’s Cartesianism, I am more concerned here with what Defoe had to say about Crusoe when he had to come up with the series of essays about his work by way of explanation—the work we know as *Serious Reflections*. He had to contemplate Crusoe both as a fictional character created by mental and imaginative processes and as an example of a human being living in solitude. Defoe did not have as much leisure as Freud, in his “splendid isolation” imagining himself as Robinson Crusoe, and following the advice of Charcot, “to look at the same things again and again until they themselves began to speak,” but he had enough time to contemplate the potential meanings that might be drawn from what he already knew to be a monumental literary success (Freud 14: 22). And in addition to thinking about the significance of his *Robinson Crusoe* volumes, Defoe did something that was typical of his writings during the last part of his life; namely, he did a great deal of reading in everyone he could find who had written about the nature of solitude and some reading about the operation of the mind, more, it seems to me, in the writings of Michel de Montaigne and John Locke than in René Descartes. About the nature of fiction, he read Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and something about its status as a fictional narrative. But for the most part, he relied on his own inventiveness, a quality about which he had endless (if sometimes misplaced) faith.

I have dealt with Crusoe’s discussion of reality and narrative in *Serious Reflections*, as it has to do with the novel, more often than I would like to admit. Some of what he is attempting is clearly a deliberate obfuscation, an attempt to explain how *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures* and *The Farther Adventures* are both the “truth” and a kind of fiction (*Serious Reflections* sig. A3). But Derrida is right. Crusoe was also involved in the thinking about the subject that intrigued the world from the time of Michel de Montaigne and René Descartes to that of John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley, and David Hume—the relationship between the human mind and the world about us, our identity and how we know who we are. What better entry into this subject than Crusoe’s isolation on his island?

Crusoe claims that his character is based upon the life of a well-known figure, who had suffered “Violences and Oppressions” (*SR* sig A4). This has almost always been read in association with the arrest and imprisonment suffered by Defoe after the publication of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), yet Crusoe provides few details. Could this not almost equally suit Alexander Selkirk, about whose isolation on Juan Fernandez Sir Richard Steele had written so eloquently in his journal, *The Englishman*? But Crusoe then explains that “‘tis as reasonable to represent one kind of Imprisonment by another, as it is to represent any Thing that really exists, by that which exists not” (*SR* sig A5v), the motto that Albert Camus took for his existential
parable, *La peste*. In Crusoe’s argument, representation in a narrative may be of any kind. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* is judged acceptable because it is interpreted as a satire. A work of fiction should be serious, not a romantic account of love. And it may bear some resemblance to the experiences of the author or rather of his narrator in either the physical or imaginative world. “Facts that are form’d to touch the Mind must be done a great Way off, and by somebody never heard of,” Crusoe observes. In other words, fiction must seem to be real, to be part of the world of “Facts,” but has to appeal also to the imagination. A genuine autobiography, Crusoe or Defoe argues—take your pick—would have yielded little “Diversion” and hence gained no “Attention” (*SR* sig A6v).

Crusoe recommends the section on solitude as particularly important for conveying his message, and it is here that he makes his “Observations” on what is essentially a voyage within, as he concludes that “Life in general, is, or ought to be, but one universal Act of Solitude” (2). He then proceeds to present his view of a world of ideas and sense experience:

> Every Thing revolves in our Minds by innumerable circular Motions, all centering in our selves. We judge of Prosperity, and of Affliction, Joy and Sorrow, Poverty, Riches, and all the various Scenes of Life: I say, we judge of them by our selves: Thither we bring them Home as Meats touch the Palat, by which we try them; the gay Part of the World, or the heavy Part; it is all one, they only call it pleasant or unpleasant, as they suit our Taste. (*SR* 2)

As previously mentioned, the passage suggests that Defoe was reading Montaigne and Locke. For Montaigne, in his essay “On Solitude,” the recommendation was to voyage within, the soul was to retire within itself (“retirez vous en vous”). Such a voyage, Montaigne argued, with Defoe seconding him, might be taken in “the midst of cities and in king’s courts” (1: 237).

But it was Locke who, speaking of pleasure and pain, remarked that sensations of this kind “to speak truly, … are all of the mind; though some have their rise in the mind from thought, others in the body from certain modifications of motion” (1:340 [bk. 2, ch. 21, sect. 42]). It was the ideas that “rise in the mind from thought” that most interested Defoe, but he used that concept in a way that Locke would hardly have approved:

> [W]hen the Head is strong, and capable of the Impressions; when the Understanding is impowered to digest the infinite Variety of Ideas which present to it from the extended Fancy, then I say, the Soul of Man is capable to act strangely upon the Invisibles in Nature, and upon Futurity, Realizing every Thing to itself in such lively Manner that what it thus thinks of, it really sees, speaks to, hears, converses with, *etc.* as livelily as if the Substance was really before his Face; and this is what I mean by those...
that dream waking, by Visions, Trances, or what you please to call them; for it is not necessary to this Part, that the Man should be asleep. (VAW 25–26)

Locke certainly did not supply Defoe with as many imaginative images as Montaigne, but in addition to providing him—more than Descartes—with the concept of mind centered experience, Locke gave him two very clear concepts that he found useful. The first was the idea that liberty is achieved by having one’s chains struck off, even if one chooses to remain where one is because of the weather or the darkness. The second was the way free will consisted of the “power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of this or that desire” (1: 345 [bk. 2, ch. 21, sect. 48]). Crusoe makes a great deal of this in his discussion of morality. On the whole, then, Locke not only gave Defoe a mind-centered epistemology but also the ability to offer a theory of fiction that seemed ultimately centered in the mind of the creator.

When he comes to consider silence as an aspect of solitude, then, Crusoe rejects the voyage to caves and hermit cells. “A Man under a Vow of perpetual Silence, if but rigorously observed,” Crusoe writes, “would be even on the Exchange of London as perfectly retired from the World, as a Hermit in his Cell; or a Solitair in the Deserts of Arabia” (SR 6). It is notable that although Crusoe is supposed to be focused on the inner experience, his mind—that of the perennial voyager—is continually moving about, as he instances the cupola of St. Pauls and the top of Cheviot Hill as examples of physical isolation. In fact, Crusoe is very much involved with Quietism, which was still creating a considerable turmoil in France and Italy. His odd ideal, his antithesis to the hermit—is a laborer who is so wrapped up in his meditations that he rides his wheel barrel into a ditch. For Crusoe this is far better than anything done by St. Hilary in the wilds of North Africa, among the lions and crocodiles. Even in the midst of praising the inner religious life of a simple laborer, Crusoe’s mind flies off to a world of strange animals and saints.

Behind everything in Serious Reflections is a sense of the power of the imagination and the ability of the mind to travel where it will. This is apparent in the section entitled the “Present State of Religion in the World,” in which Crusoe indulges in a dialogue with an old Gentlewoman who prefers to believe with Shaftesbury that there is a general belief in God throughout the world and who upbraided his tutor, John Locke, for naïveté in believing traveler’s tales to the contrary. Crusoe is on the side of Locke. He argues that discovering true religion in the world—even in the Christian world—is almost impossible, and he attempts to destroy what might have been left of the concept of the wise Chinese as far as religion and morality is concerned that he had not already demolished in The Farther Adventures. The mind being capable of traveling where it will, Crusoe now decides to supplement his knowledge of places to which he had actually travelled by extensive reading. “Having some Warmth in my Search after Religion occasioned by [these]… Reflection[s],” he writes, “and so little of it appearing in all the Parts which I had
travel’d, I resolv’d to travel over the rest of the World in Books” (SR 142–43). Given his argument that the mind may use its imagination with almost the equivalent power as the encounter with physical reality, Crusoe proceeds with his mental flight. And having engaged in this survey, Crusoe then indulges in a hair brained, visionary scheme for Christian colonization of the entire world, settling in the end for subduing the North African pirates.

But the grandest flight—his wandering through the universe—takes place in his Vision of the Angelick World with which I began. There was a special currency to this voyage. This was a period that was extremely conscious of astronomy—a spinoff of the eclipse that occurred on April 22, 1715. William Whiston famously published several books explaining the Copernican system and its eclipses, while giving credit to Newton for clarifying the ways in which the solar system worked. Some sermon writers tried to remove notions that eclipses were a portent of anything strange or political, such as a takeover of the government by the invading Jacobites, while others exploited the wonders that such astronomical events seemed to portend. Defoe had made use of the occasion of the eclipse of 1715 in the first volume of his Family Instructor as a husband and wife engage in a destructive quarrel using the eclipse as a metaphor for their relationship. But it may have been Whiston’s Astronomical Principles of Religion, Natural and Reveal’d published in 1717, with its discussion of a universe filled with invisible spirits, that gave Defoe his own concept of a voyage through the universe.

Defoe prepares the reader for this voyage by a lengthy discourse about the imagination. He notes how close the imagination may come to insanity, comparing madness to a windmill that whirls about with ideas and images until, sometimes, it may move so quickly as to catch fire. He begins:

I could make a long Discourse here of the Power of the Imagination, and how bright the Ideas of Distant Things may be found in the Mind when the Soul is more than ordinarily agitated: It is certain the extraordinary Intelligence conveyed in this Manner is not always regular; sometimes it is exceeding confused, and the Brain not being able to digest it, turns round too fast; this tends to Lunacy and Distraction, and the Swiftness of the Motion these ideas come in with, occasions a Commotion in Nature; the understanding is mobbed with them, disturbed, runs from one Thing to another and digests nothing. (VAW 25)

Defoe was intrigued by Jonathan Swift’s severe view of the uncontrolled imagination when he read his Tale of a Tub in 1704, but it was never a viewpoint that he could accept. Through the imagination, Crusoe finds it possible to soar above the earth and to view the entire universe. If Swift’s satire left him with a sense of discomfort at the time, in 1720, eight years after Joseph Addison’s “Pleasures of the Imagination” series in The Spectator, Defoe may have felt that he could indulge himself somewhat.
Crusoe’s spectacular view of the planets allows him to ignore the pettiness of ordinary human life in the name of a seemingly timeless, disembodied state of being.

Crusoe then engages in a kind of education about the solar system, including a dismissal of any ideas about the planets being inhabitable, a poke at the possibilities held out by Bernard de Fontenelle in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*. But Crusoe is soon off on other parts of his journey, namely his sight of “innumerable Armies of good and evil Spirits” (*VW* 31), and his sight of the Devil keeping his court as prince of the air. It is at this point that Defoe’s creative imagination begins to fail, as he goes into a polemic on the reality of a world of spirits tempered by an attack on “the crazy Imagination of Hypochondriac Distemper’d Heads, which run Men out to so many Extravagancies…who think they are talk’d to from the invisible World by the Howling of every Dog, or the Screeching of every Owl” (*VW* 58). Defoe ends his work with an attack upon atheism rooted very much in the real world of which he was so strong and able an advocate. But this indulgence in a world created by the imagination was perhaps his last extended flight of this kind. He was to write much about the supernatural in the last five years of his life, but in the *Political History of the Devil* and works that became associated with the persona of Andrew Moreton, the possibilities of the supernatural are almost always tempered by the experience of what we know of the real world. There are few of the imaginative flights taken by that enthusiastic mental voyager, Robinson Crusoe.

It may be asked: how much of this type of thinking actually went into the writing of *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures* and *The Farther Adventures*? Certainly Defoe appears to have realized some of the possibilities of his subject in both of these works. His image of Crusoe as the monarch of his island, his sense of his animals as the equivalent of his subjects and courtiers, along with his sense of the island as his political domain and his naming of the geographical features of the island such as his Castle and Country House, involve a considerable amount of intellectual play, as does his assuming the role of Governor in dealing with the mutineers. In conceiving of his cave as a potential hermit’s cell and executive mansion, Crusoe reveals some of the imaginative possibilities that he was later to exploit in *Serious Reflections* (Novak, “The Cave and the Grotto”). And in the section of *The Farther Adventures* which has him telling the exiled Russian nobleman that he was once a ruler who had more despotic control over his subjects than the Tsar, Crusoe has clearly begun to organize some of the latent riches that lay in the imaginative dream world that he constructed on his real island.

But does Crusoe ever seriously doubt the reality of his world? Does he ever reduce his experience of elusive goats, drowned boys with a few coins in their pockets, and ferocious cannibals to Descartes’ cogito such as Derrida would ask us to envision? Certainly from a religious standpoint, Crusoe might be willing, with Shakespeare’s Prospero on *his* island, to admit the insubstantiality of “the great globe itself.” But that material world of the eighteenth century, that Britain with its circulating riches, its
weavers and woolen manufactures, its trade fairs and shop keepers, was too attractive to Defoe to give up easily. He had yet to write his *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–1727), *The Compleat English Tradesman* (1725–1727), *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728), and many other volumes about trade and social problems in the world he knew so well. Did Defoe, then, at some point realize the epistemological possibilities inherent in the Crusoe story? Almost certainly. Is that the world that he presented to us in the first two volumes of *Robinson Crusoe*? Surely not, despite his willingness to contemplate other possibilities in *Serious Reflections*. Instead he gave us something that continues to fascinate us—a voyage to a real enough island where Crusoe could labor to produce grains with which he could make his bread, tame and tend his goats, and learn how to make proper clay pots.

University of California, Los Angeles

**WORKS CITED**


**NOTES**

1 Henry Hutchins argued that the story of Taylor’s success was probably widespread in 1719 at the time of the publication of Defoe’s work. When it first appeared in printed form, in 1738, it was accompanied by what was certainly a false account of the difficulty that Defoe experienced in getting his manuscript published (44–46).

2 The *Vision of the Angelick World* (abbreviated parenthetically as *VAW*) is paginated separately from *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (abbreviated parenthetically as *SR*).

3 In his *Jure Divino* (1706), as part of a passage exalting reason, Defoe refers to the body as a “Carcass” (book 3, line 6) with clear overtones of contempt listed in the third section under that word in the *OED.* Seventeenth-century followers of Descartes, such as Arnold Geulincx, often treat the human body with considerable disdain.
Derrida mentions this moment in Freud’s life when he felt rejected by the Viennese scientific establishment (2: 159).

A second edition of Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage Round the World*, appeared in 1718, just a year before *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures*. It was first published in 1712 and gave an extended account of Alexander Selkirk’s experience on Juan Fernandez.

For a discussion of the debate on withdrawal from society versus the active life, as it was conducted during the Restoration, see the exchange between John Evelyn and Sir George Mackenzie in Irene Beesemyer, “Crusoe the Isolato.”

Montaigne has a similar admiration for a poor beggar in his essay “Of Solitude”: “when I see the poor man begging at my door, often more cheerfull and healthy than myself, I can imagine myself in his place; I try to clothe my mind after his measure. And, thus running over all the other examples in my mind, although I may imagine death, poverty, contempt, and disease to be treading on my heels, I easily resolve not to stand in terror for what a meaner man than I accepts with so much patience” (1: 240–41). Defoe was far from enthusiastic about beggars, but he showed more sympathy for what he considered to be an honest laborer.