

# “Stick to facts”: Author Figures and Textual Authority in *Robinson Crusoe* and the Twentieth-Century Robinsonade

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## Abstract

While *Robinson Crusoe* is credited with having introduced the desert island and castaway tropes into English literature, it also foregrounds and firmly establishes narratological concepts such as the frame narrative and the inclusion of an author figure. The story of *Robinson Crusoe* comes to us in the guise of a first-person narrative based in part on a diary. This is where the writer Robinson Crusoe takes the vagaries of his life and shapes them into a coherent exemplary story of individual salvation. 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels have picked up on this metafictional aspect of the Robinsonade but usually to ends very different than is the case in Defoe’s original. One pertinent example can be found in Muriel Spark’s 1958 novel *Robinson*, which uses its author figure to convey anything *but* certainty. The essay compares authorial agency and control in Spark’s *Robinson* and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to then move on to the example of J.G. Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974). This urban Robinsonade forgoes the convention of having a first-person narrator generating its text, offering instead a third-person narration. My essay argues that the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Robinsonade virtually by default participates in discourse around the question of authorship and textual authority, even where an author figure is omitted.

**Keywords:** Robinsonade; Defoe; metafiction; textuality; author; narrator; narratology

## 1. Introduction: Robinson as Author

When we encounter the text of *Robinson Crusoe*, we do so in the form of a metatextual construct, a text justifying its existence *as a text* by coming to us in the guise of a retrospective first-person account sprinkled with contemporaneous journal entries. And so, while *Robinson Crusoe* is obviously credited with having introduced the desert island and castaway tropes into English literature, what is often overlooked is that at the very beginning of novelistic writing in England, it also foregrounds and firmly establishes a “metadiscursive tradition” (Kinane,

2017, p. 218). Ostensibly produced by an intradiegetic narrator, Defoe's novel draws attention to the process, the genesis of its narrative.

In fact, we could go so far as to say that the text is not only authored by one Robinson Crusoe figure but by two: contemporary Robinson, the man setting down his everyday adventures in his journal, and retrospective Robinson, author of a spiritual autobiography shaping a life to provide it with a religious *telos*. Looked at in more detail, what this double-narrator supplies us with is an incongruous mix of voices. The first provides emotional immediacy and ontological as well as epistemological disorientation:

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 Clothes to shift me, nor any thing either to eat or drink to comfort me. [...] 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 terrible Agonies of Mind that for a while I ran about like a Mad-man. (Defoe, 1994, pp. 35-36)

To this first voice representing the unknowability of providence is then added the second voice, a first-person narrator familiar from spiritual autobiography: someone capable of retrospectively discerning God's will and aiding the reader in interpreting the patterns, the tell-tale signs of the workings of providence in evidence throughout the narrative.

What this mixed mode, this double narrative, provides in the original *Robinson* text, is both the affective impact of vicariously experienced joy, despair, terror and helplessness of the narrator stranded on the island; and the omniscient sense-making function of the retrospective authority figure who has seen (and what is more: interpreted) the workings of providence. What they do not do is fundamentally contradict one another. Their combination simply points out that mired in the workings of the world we do not always understand the greater plan that will readily reveal itself to us with experience, knowledge and sufficient temporal distance.

The text frequently referred to as the first novel in English thus does not only feature the traditional aspects we have come to associate most closely with the form of the novel – such as psychological realism, for instance – it also provides the seeds of a debate on textual authority, on authorial control: who determines how reality is described, or perhaps whose reality is described? Whose knowledge can we base our experience of a text on and to what ends can that knowledge (or perhaps lack of it) be employed? This is not the case because Defoe's text articulates these doubts and competing claims: its two narrators, being the younger and older embodiment of the same person, never hold irreconcilable positions. They simply represent immediacy and proximity to events on the one hand and retrospective wisdom on the other. It is the case because the presence of two voices united in their authority over the text invites speculation on what a less unified, less authoritative combination of narrative voices might look like. Before discussing twentieth-century experiments in this portrayal of textual authority, however, it will be the present essay's concern to establish how Defoe's 1719 novel constructs its principal character's dominion over his story.

As has been noted above, it would be difficult to argue that Robinson Crusoe finds himself in control of his fate, his emotions, his island, or indeed anything else, right from the start. His general confusion is what makes his hardship easy to identify with on an emotional level. But behind the contemporaneous disorientation of the lonely castaway can be gleaned the more measured tones of the retrospective account of the survivor who has seen his own plans come to fruition in accordance with the workings of divine providence. What the reader follows in *Robinson Crusoe* is the process of achieving this state of retrospective serenity, a process maximally dependent on the establishment of Robinson Crusoe's authority over his island as well as his story. Given full reign over his story, Robinson Crusoe can turn it into "constructed personal versions of 'reality'" (Richetti, 2008, p. 121). From his decision to keep a journal to his later decision to restrict use of the journal, from his choice of a starting point for his tale to his idea of an adequate ending, Robinson Crusoe is in full control of his story:

The ultimate control that Crusoe imposes, the ultimate self-created world in which he is both orderer and ordered, is his autobiography. The extent to which, as narrator, he is conscious of exercising artistic control is perhaps best attested to by the passage where he talks of beginning his journal [...]. In other words, only when reason is in control can one make one's experience seem anything but pointless or meaningless. Not only does Crusoe frequently keep accounts as a way of imposing a sense of orderliness on his life, but he gives an account of his life that makes it add up to something. (Birdsall, 1985, p. 38)

One expression of Robinson Crusoe's need to exert linguistic power and bend reality to his will is the fact that "he is frequently concerned with putting names to the creatures he encounters" (Birdsall, 1985, pp. 37-38). Nowhere does this strike the modern reader as more poignant than in the naming of Friday. By giving his rescuee a name in a language he does not speak with a meaning that makes no sense to him, Robinson Crusoe clearly signals whose language and whose interpretation of events will dominate proceedings. The same linguistic expression of power is seen in a more playful light when it concerns Robinson Crusoe's naming of island topography: bit by bit, he tries to make the island his own, in part through the act of naming island features after vaguely perceived English equivalents. But his desire to change reality does not stop at the level of language: "Crusoe is by instinct an imperialist; he takes possession of his island as his property, [...] cultivating it and transforming it by his labor" (Richetti, 2008, p. 128). In fact, Robinson Crusoe's exertions on the island mirror the progress he makes in terms of making sense of his entire existence: "[W]hat Robinson Crusoe is restlessly seeking is a wholly fulfilling home – a structure of meaning, a scheme into which he can fit, a place that will insure not merely self-preservation but prosperity" (Birdsall, 1985, pp. 24-25). His shaping of the island and of his story are two things that can hardly be separated. The very notion of control is part of Robinson Crusoe's survival instinct: "[H]e can escape his feelings of helplessness and insignificance only by casting himself in the role of the all-powerful and hence the all-controlling" (Birdsall, 1985, p. 27). Just like he finally manages to establish order on his island, he retrospectively brings a sense of order into the seemingly random events of his life. Control over narrative and control over nature are seen as equally important.

## 2. The Struggle for Authorial Control: *Foe*

The parallel discourse of Robinson Crusoe's struggle to create a narrative and cultivate the island establishes a powerful link between story and reality, and it is this apparent agreement between epistemology and ontology in Defoe's novel that is exploited in adaptations of the twentieth century. This is perhaps most famously the case in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* of 1986, a novel at first glance concerned with two of its main characters vying for narrative control. When Susan Barton reveals that she was on an island with a man called Cruso and his mysteriously silent servant Friday in the novel's first part, the reader is exposed to an island story in blatant contradiction of the supposed facts of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: Cruso has salvaged neither tools nor a gun from the shipwreck (Coetzee, 1987, pp. 15-16), he "kept no journal" (p. 16), and his attempts at cultivating the island are uniquely futile (p. 33). In control of nothing much, really, Cruso has no authority over the text, and instead it is Susan who becomes the master of "the story of [Cruso's] island" (Coetzee, 1987, p. 41). Aware that she lacks the storytelling skills to turn the island tale into a popular piece of writing, however, Susan turns to the professional writer Foe. As Foe begins to exert his own influence over her story, Susan gradually feels not just her past but her entire existence slipping away: "Nothing is left of me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me?" (Coetzee, 1987, p. 133). As these characters vie for control of the story, a hitherto neglected presence is slowly foregrounded by the novel, as the reader realises that this struggle of control has been witnessed by the silent presence of Friday. And it is to the character of Friday that the novel turns in its enigmatic closing section, where it imagines the day when he will find a way of bringing his version of events into the world. In its postcolonial concerns, Coetzee's *Foe* finds an apt use for the Robinsonade's tendency to accommodate a certain degree of metafictional discourse. To demonstrate that this is not merely the product of Coetzee's major concerns in what must surely rank among the most famous twentieth-century Robinsonades, the present essay will proceed to look at a less famous specimen of that genre, Muriel Spark's *Robinson* (1958).

## 3. Authorial Uncertainty: *Robinson*

When the female narrator of *Robinson*, January Marlow, is stranded on Robinson Island after a plane crash, is she really a castaway? Not precisely, as there are several other survivors, the island is inhabited by a man seemingly in control of everyone's well-being, and it is only intermittently cut off from civilisation. Why does the novel forego the traditionally lonely setting of the Robinsonade? Because in this version of events, the truth is shrouded in the multiple perspectives of subjective experience. In order to give us these multiple perspectives amounting to maximum uncertainty or indeterminacy, Spark's *Robinson* requires a bigger cast: our narrator, the enigmatic Robinson, his cousin, an orphan Boy, and a weird confidence-trickster who makes make-believe his principal business.

There are two principal characters who may be thought of as in control of the narrative the reader encounters in *Robinson*. The first is the man called Robinson, who is identified with the eponymous island to a tremendous degree. He is the one to rescue the passengers from the plane crash, the one to provide them with food and shelter, the one who knows the island and knows when they can expect to be picked up and brought back to the mainland. It seems he is

in complete control, and yet, he remains mysterious to them, particularly in the second half of the book, when he feigns his own death. When they discover that he is still alive after all, the other characters are given this explanation of his inscrutable actions: "Yours is, of course, the obvious view. Well, my actions are beyond the obvious range. It surely needs only that you should realise this, not that you should understand my actions" (Spark, 1958, p. 170). Faced with a man whose own motives are thus shrouded in unknowability, it falls to the novel's narrator, January Marlow, to make sense of events on the island. In fact, it is Robinson who encourages January to keep a journal (Spark, 1958, p. 10), and he constantly reminds her to "[s]tick to facts" (Spark, 1958, p. 13). But in a world where everyone harbours secrets and interlocutors rarely prove reliable, facts are increasingly difficult to come by as January quickly discovers. Simple things like wishing they had never got on the plane that ended up crashing and stranding them on Robinson Island become complex questions of epistemology when January considers them: "If I had stayed at home, there might have been a fire in the house, or I might have been run over, or murdered, or have committed a mortal sin" (Spark, 1958, p. 37). Thus, the reader of Spark's *Robinson* is confronted not with a linear story of cause and effect but with a reality made up of the subjective ideas of a coterie of inscrutable castaways. Attempts at establishing a master narrative are undertaken, but given the unknowability of reality, they are never wholly successful:

[*Robinson* is] a sequence of apparently unrelated vignettes spliced with excerpts from the heroine's journal. Although it looks like a realist novel, it plainly is not. January scrutinises the "facts" but the facts will not explain the reality. She constantly changes her interpretation of data, laying out lists of events and possible motivations for the protagonists' actions and reactions, but the link between intention and action, cause and effect, collapses. (Stannard, 2009, p. 188)

On a much more superficial level, this is also reflected in the characters' names, none of which follow the simple pattern of authorial control at work in the naming of Defoe's Friday: the proprietor of Robinson Island is called Robinson, leading to a misunderstanding early on in the story (Spark, 1958, p. 5). The narrator is called January Marlow, prompting Robinson upon first acquaintance to say "You have told me the month and place of your birth. What is your name?" (Spark, 1958, p. 6). While there are interpretations of the significance of January's name, such as the contention that it refers to the Janus, "the god who looks both ways" (Richmond, 1992, p. 105), none of them are as clear-cut, simple and unequivocal as the story of Friday's name. Thus, verbal signifiers, the very building blocks of discourse are shown to be unreliable to an extent prohibiting the establishment of stable meaning.

In the absence of any one authority, discourse, which is ever present in *Robinson*, goes completely out of control, leaving characters as well as readers guessing what the meaning of a name or a phrase might be without any hope of ever arriving at a reliable conclusion. With its mystical island setting, its diary-keeping narrator, its cast of misfits caught up to various degrees in games of dissembling and deceit, *Robinson* generates potential meanings that can never be completely reconciled with the novel's other aspects, never allow the reader to nail down precisely what the point of something might be. Without an instance of textual authority, the novel suggests, we are all stranded in a life of dubious meaning. Discourse is present, and various characters undertake attempts at exercising authorial control over various narratives,

but in the end, the overabundance of stories, perspectives and possibilities creates a lasting impression of uncertainty, given that there is no single authority capable of weaving everything into a neat narrative. When, at the end of the novel, we learn that Robinson Island is sinking and is expected to disappear within the next few years (Spark, 1958, p. 185), it is an expression of the fact that goings-on there were never solidly reliable, never fully graspable in the first place. So, the book – in stark contrast to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* – is one of a pervasive, lasting unknowability rather than of seemingly random events retrospectively interpreted with authority. And what is more, the source of that unknowability lies in the domain of social interaction: the existential uncertainty pertaining to questions of food, shelter, and ultimately salvation is replaced in Spark’s novel by the eternal uncertainty and unreliability of human interactions: Hell, this novel seems to suggest, is not a lonely island – hell is other people, and as long as they are around, life is impossible to understand.

#### 4. Authorial Absence: *Concrete Island*

Where Spark’s *Robinson* locates our struggle with reality in the domain of social interaction, J.G. Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974) finds it in us and in the environments we construct for ourselves. The novel tells the story of Robert Maitland, an architect who on his commute one day accidentally drives his car off an overpass, stranding him in an area of derelict land isolated through several intersecting motorways. Uncharacteristically for a Robinsonade, the story is told by a third-person narrator, eradicating the idea of a first-hand account crafted by the central protagonist. Instead giving us an omniscient view focalised though it may be through protagonist Robert Maitland, the novel undermines the very idea of subjective textual control in favour of objective observation of external facts. Why would Ballard forego one of the central features of the Robinsonade, its focus on the struggle for textual authority, for the imposition of an organising narrative over the apparent chaos of the world?

As in other works by J.G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* is a book tracing the gradual submission of the human psyche to the brutalist logic of human-made structures and technology. As in the novel that preceded it, 1973’s *Crash*, and the novel that was to follow it, 1975’s *High Rise*, *Concrete Island* portrays the defeat of humanism by, of all things, structures created by humans. That defeat is never felt as such by the supposed hero, though:

[I]n Ballard’s contemporary social fiction [...] the hero discovers himself in a disastrous heterocosm that he prefers to the outside world (most especially in *Concrete Island* and *High Rise*). Even when these characters are offered the chance of rescue or escape from the disaster, they doggedly hold to chaos and sometimes certain death. (Orr, 2000, p. 479)

Maitland’s preference of the island he finds himself stranded on over the everyday reality he could return to if he really wanted, is the novel’s closely guarded secret. It is something the reader gradually comes to realise, even though it might be argued Maitland never fully does. Had Ballard decided on a first-person narrator, thus letting Maitland shape his own story, that limited perspective would have had to have been employed to justify or at least rationalise his own behaviour, which is at times unforgivable. It would also have entailed either withholding all knowledge of the subconscious processes propelling him onward or making him fully

aware of them, neither of which presents a happy solution in narratological terms. The third-person narrator can reveal just enough of the surprise in store for the reader to offer a discernible trail (at least at a second reading) without giving the game away right from the start.

Beyond the finer points of narratology, the glaring omission of an intradiegetic author figure signals the book’s reluctance to credit human agency with any kind of control or power: no attempt is made to rationalise the goings-on on the traffic island, no ultimately explanatory narrative is given. Instead, what seemed a vaguely implausible premise at the start of the novel – that Maitland would not be able to leave a traffic island in the middle of London – is revealed to be a subtle exercise in self-manipulation as it transpires that Maitland does not want to leave, does not have any intention of rejoining so-called civilisation and is steadily pursuing his subconscious goal of becoming one with the island. In the end, *Concrete Island* cannot bestow narrative authority on anyone since narratives are human and the ultimate winner in the book, the one who in the final analysis has the upper hand, is the island itself. Having once been created by humans, the built environment takes control and subjugates humans to its will, threatening their very existence. What is perhaps the most frightening expression of the power of the built environment over human agency and imagination in Ballard’s Robinsonade is the very absence of any discourse it performs.

### 5. Conclusion: Authorial Control in the Robinsonade

As has been demonstrated, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* goes out of its way to foreground the very process of its unfolding narrative, giving its readers two complementary perspectives, *viz.* that of the older and more reflective Robinson looking back on his island adventure and that of the younger Robinson *in extremis*. In doing so, it has helped to sow the seeds of the “meta-discursive tradition” (Kinane, 2017, p. 218) that the novel in general and the Robinsonade in particular participate in. In pursuing the project of questioning intradiegetic authorship and textual authority in the Robinsonade, of offering “a self-reflexive, critical meta-commentary on the remediation at work in the genre more generally” (Kinane, 2017, p. 217), Robinson-related novels from different periods, but particularly those of the twentieth century, have been engaged in performing a constant renewal of a concern at the very heart of the form of the novel: the question of who gets to tell a story, where they derive their knowledge from and in how far that knowledge itself ought to be subjected to critical investigation. The examples cited above serve to illustrate the tremendous versatility with which these questions can be brought to bear on a whole host of complex issues, from mid-twentieth-century epistemic uncertainty as on display in Muriel Spark’s *Robinson* to the vexed question of how to let the subaltern speak without speaking for the subaltern and thus depriving them of voice and agency once more in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*. It has also been shown that even in novels in which no attention is drawn to metafictional concerns, where they are ostensibly absent and thus elude interpretation, their very absence can become a significant interpretive clue. So pervasive has the aspect of authorial control in the Robinsonade become over the past century that it seems that any innocent omission of it is impossible. Instead, any Robinsonade told in third-person omniscient narration will immediately elicit the question of why that is the case, why the performance of authorial control through some intradiegetic figure has been relinquished

in favour of a type of narrative championing supposedly objective facts over the fashioning of a narrative reflecting an individual experience.

The story of the novel itself is a story of shifting notions of discourse and power, and as the first British novel, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is active in fostering these discussions to the present day through its long line of successors. Regardless of whether an explicit negotiation of authorial control is present or absent, as a genre, the Robinsonade cannot be contemplated without close attention being given to the role ascribed to authorship in each individual specimen.

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