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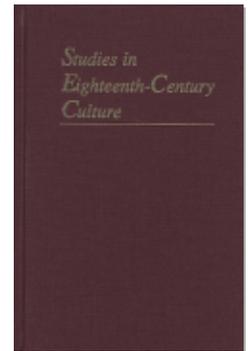
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Sarah Eron

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Why Memory Matters: Surviving Intentions

SARAH ERON

Recently, critical approaches to the novel have moved away from psychological accounts of interiority, or inwardness, in literary characters to a new materialism that equates persons with matter, and subjects with objects.¹ This understanding of the novel in its early form makes sense in the period of intellectual history that saw the invention of neurology and often conflated mental states with physiological phenomena. In many ways, the Enlightenment was obsessed with matter. The long eighteenth-century rise of market capitalism and social commerce, alongside the early modern scientific discovery of what neuroscience now calls the “embodied mind,” promoted a highly materialist understanding of personhood. The recent attention that eighteenth-century studies has given to the period’s philosophical materialism counters former critical accounts of the novel that considered the genre as a predominantly psychological form, which preempted Sigmund Freud and William James’s notion of consciousness.² In what follows, I begin to gesture toward a reconciliation of these two accounts of eighteenth-century personhood by telling a very different story about the role of novels in intellectual history.

My current work examines what happens to literary minds in states of emotional crisis and distress. Considering memory as a faculty that allows the mind to abstract itself from its present environment, I argue that the mind’s

ability to exist simultaneously in multiple temporalities (past, present, and future) is what allows eighteenth-century characters to survive moments of bodily and affective crisis. Memory triggers the extension of mind into world, facilitating survival, *Bildung*, decision making, and independent thought and action.³ In this sense, memory enables the creation of a “world” that makes it possible to endure and work through situations of crisis. Early novels frequently demonstrate the mind’s power to overcome the conditions of the immediate physical environment. My readings all highlight a dialectical relationship between mind and world, where the mind (understood as the abstracting force of memory) allows the brain (understood as a perceptual map of our material environment) to navigate physical and conditional challenges. Crusoe’s island, Toby’s map, and Evelina’s garden scene are all examples of this proto-Romantic account of the mind’s empowering and healing relationship to its world.

For the purposes of this short essay, I offer one example of this pattern from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. The memory displayed here is not the kind tied to associationist consciousness that we have long attributed to the novel form, much less the unconscious memory that famously undergirds the structures of high modernist prose or Freudian conceptions of trauma. Early novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* offer a conception of memory that takes us beyond what is to be found in empiricist philosophies of mind. Here, though the mind functions as a retainer, or memory storehouse, thought itself does not move along a linear axis; it is not mechanical or set into motion like a “train”—Defoe’s illustrations of memory sometimes even violate Humean notions of thought as expectations arising from recurrent relations of cause-and-effect.⁴ In *Crusoe*, we encounter instead an early illustration of the *conscious* memory that becomes the locus for a special kind of mind-brain relationship, one that allows characters to survive situations of distress and crisis. In this sense, memory has *intentional* qualities and *actionable* effects.

Midway into his time on the island, Robinson Crusoe recalls a moment from his boyhood when he would watch basket makers in the process of wicker weaving. “It came *into my Mind*,” he says, “how *they worked those Things*.” In this moment of Defoe’s narrative, the past uncannily converges with the present to furnish the protagonist’s mind with what it lacks. In his memory of the basket-weavers, Crusoe declares, “[he] wanted *nothing but the Materials*” to furnish his desires. Objects here become relegated to time in Crusoe’s efforts at survival when he realizes that he can create “any Thing as [he] had *occasion*” thanks to the powerful operations of time and memory (my emphasis). In describing his utilitarian efforts at basket-weaving, Crusoe declares “[I] employ’d a World of Time about it... I bestirred myself to see if possible how to supply [my] Wants.” This novelistic shift reveals memory

as the insubstantial thing that distinguishes humans from other animals in Crusoe's world.⁵ What intervenes to aid the survival of mind and body is a cognitive operation dependent upon the past's striking ability to inform the present:

This Time I found much Employment, (and very suitable also to the Time) for I found great Occasion of many Things which I had no way to furnish myself with, but by hard Labour and constant Application; particularly, I try'd many Ways to make my self a Basket, but all the Twigs I could get for the Purpose prov'd so brittle, that they would do nothing. It prov'd of excellent Advantage to me now, That when I was a Boy, I used to take great Delight in standing at a *Basket-makers*, in the Town where my Father liv'd, to see them make their *Wicker-ware*; and being as Boys usually are, very officious to help, and a great Observer of the Manner how they work'd those Things, and sometimes lending a Hand, I had by this Means full Knowledge of the Methods of it, that I wanted nothing but the Materials; when it came into my Mind, That the Twigs of that Tree from whence I cut my Stakes that grew, might possibly be as tough as the *Sallows*, and *Willows*, and *Ossiers* in England, and I resolv'd to try. (78)

The passage begins with a pun on the dual nature of time. Labor, or "employment," like thinking, takes time.⁶ But our labors are also shaped and limited by time, as in Crusoe's allusion to seasonal activities, "very suitable also to the Time." Moreover, these labors are frequently tied to mental states. There are times, as in the memory from his boyhood, when labor is desirable for Crusoe—when it entices or distracts his mind from other wanderings. Time informs labor, just as it informs mind. In this way, time influences both action and thought. Crusoe's first attempt at basket making fails because he begins by trying to acquire things from his immediate, external environment. Raw materials are not at hand; memory then fuels the imagination in order to supply Crusoe with what he lacks. Retention is made possible by feeling. Crusoe begins his autobiographical, narrative digression into the avenues of time and memory with the recollection of a feeling: "I used to take great Delight," he writes, "to see them."⁷ Unlike many of Crusoe's remembrances, this moment of self-conscious thinking is expository in nature; it rolls on, becoming revived in Crusoe's mind, while also becoming pleasurably accessible to the reader: memory is infused with details of both sight and feeling.

For this reason, it is not the material of the baskets that first comes to mind when Crusoe remembers his childhood interactions with the basket-weavers, but rather "the *Methods of it*." A past version of Crusoe observes not things

themselves but the working of things. *It* is subordinated to *time* here, but also to *action*; things are wrought and made, but time shapes thinking and acting. Time extends mind into world by giving humans the power to form things.⁸ Crusoe's "resolution," his *intention*, thus implies that actions are derived from our capacities of retention. In accounting for the use of the baskets, wrought by way of memory, Crusoe describes them as having the capacity to "carry or lay up any Thing as [he] had occasion." The figure of baskets is analogical to Locke's memory storehouse. Like the storehouse of memory, baskets "lay up" things, actions, impressions, and events. Thus, we might choose to read the baskets as a metaphor for the mind's retentive capacities, capacities that enable Crusoe to *carry* on, to exist and persist, on the island. Retention, however, is simply the blueprint for a memory that then lends Crusoe the ability to think within and across multiple temporalities. And here, in this depiction of memory's narrative and nonlinear qualities, Defoe begins to depart from his (often cited) empiricist predecessors. Retention, as the blueprint for memory, allows Crusoe the ability to think across time, beyond the crisis of the present moment. From the foundation of memory, Crusoe "bestir[s]" himself "to see if possible how to supply "his wants."

The passage demonstrates how memory fuels imagination, human progress, and survival, indicating how remembering informs our interactions with our immediate environment. Crusoe's "great Mind," his future prospects and potential for Enlightenment, all hinge upon such miraculous interventions of memory. For Defoe, memory becomes the operative force of human cognition that allows the mind to traverse time—to move from ingesting experience to extending into world and shaping one's environment.

Early novelistic insights into the operations and powerful effects of memory thus reveal that "intention," the human impulse to plan, project, and form future prospects, is tied to memory. Intention ballasted by memory is the formula for Crusoe's most successful survivalist efforts. Memory allows us to navigate and manage a multitude of material challenges—to intentionally survive conditions of distress in *conscious* ways.

One of Crusoe's last accounts of making something in the Journal is a ship that he abandons. Not being able to "bring it to the Water," he leaves it as "a *Memorandum* to teach me," he says, "to be wiser *next Time*."⁹ This *Memorandum* fails as a providential gesture, only to reveal the memorialized *thing* of the ship to be a signifier of time's ability to carry Crusoe forward into the realm of his future prospects. Time and time again, Crusoe revisits the ship, wrestling with his escapist desires. Time marked by things and as a marker of things, Defoe suggests, can free us from our station; a profane transgression, it is the force by which consciousness crosses over into a less material, finite state of being. Like desire, memory proves infinitely useful to Crusoe in this way.

NOTES

1. For examples of the first trend, Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For some recent, revisionary accounts, Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Julie Park, *The Self and It* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

2. In addition to accounts of subjectivity above, I am thinking here specifically of Jonathan Kramnick, *Action and Objects: from Hobbes to Richardson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) and Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

3. This relationship between mind and world is something that Jonathan Kramnick specifically addresses in *Action and Objects* and in his “Empiricism, Cognitive Science, and the Novel,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 48.3 (2007): 263–85. Kramnick’s main interlocutors from the philosophical tradition are John McDowell and Hilary Putnam. For John Richetti’s more dialectical account of mind and world, see *Defoe’s Narratives: Situations and Structures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

4. See John Locke’s theory of time and cognition in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

5. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed., Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton & Co., 1975), 78. For other work on distinctions between Crusoe’s subjectivity and that of other objects and animals on the island, see Deidre Lynch, “Money and Character in Defoe’s Fiction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84–101; Carol Houlihan Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Maximillian Novak, *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe’s Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983); Jonathan Lamb, “‘Lay Aside My Character’: The Personate Novel and Beyond,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 52:3–4 (2011): 271–87; and especially, Lynn Festa, “Crusoe’s Island of Misfit Things,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 52:3–4 (2011): 443–71.

6. For the relationship between time and processes of recording, see G.A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966); Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form 1660–1785* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), and David Marshall, “Autobiographical Acts in *Robinson Crusoe*,” *ELH* 71 (2004): 899–920.

7. For the feeling in Crusoe's relationship to things, Wall, *Prose of Things*, 109.

8. Crusoe's capacity as a "maker of things" has been attributed to his "imagination," his experimental methods, his labor, and his ingenuity. See Michael Seidel, "Robinson Crusoe: Varieties of Fictional Experience" in *The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 182–99; Ilse Vickers, *Defoe and the New Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ann Van Sant "Crusoe's Hands" *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32:2 (2008), 120–37; and Maximillian Novak, "The Cave and the Grotto: Realist Form and Robinson Crusoe's Imagined Interiors," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32:2 (2008), 457.

9. Vickers reads this as a failure of reason (*Defoe and the New Sciences*, 102), Lamb as a "joke" about the foibles of the imagination ("Lay Aside My Character," 279).