

Humanities Institute
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Robinson Crusoe (1715)

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)

Background

Daniel Defoe was a British merchant, political pamphleteer and writer, the last activity a preoccupation throughout his life, though the full extent of his writing ability and practice became clear only after his midlife. (*Robinson Crusoe*, 1715; *Moll Flanders*, 1722; *Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722) Defoe was not in fact, of the writing elite, the Oxford Cambridge set to whom we have grown acquainted in these entries on early modern English literature, and yet he has been widely discussed as the first novelist in English. We are dealing here with a subtle and persistent worker, offspring of a middle class family, who proved ultimately to be one of the shaping voices of the modern imagination.

Defoe's father was a London butcher, and the young man's education was accordingly modest: he went to Charles Morton's Dissenting Academy at Newington Green, a strong marker of the family's Puritan and Dissenting bias; and a marker, which Defoe was to make his own, of the modest social environment out of which Defoe would draw his images of life. His parents wanted him to study law, but he refused, preferring the life of the sea, of which from youth on he had direct experience, having travelled to Guinea, gone into plantation investment in Brazil, had experience both as a slaver and an enslaved, and established himself as a merchant and trader in England, having settled into a basically commercial life. In all these bents he was implicitly formulating his very private imagination.

What we cannot document, about this individual's personal development, and what makes him fascinating, is the growth of his creative process. We know that, while busying himself in the business and political world for several decades--as a voluminous pamphleteer and, for example, a staunch supporter of King William; as a deeply involved trader in wines and wool-- he had at the same time been writing documentary items, notes, and tales which were to serve him wonderfully when it came time to enter the literary mainstream. (It has to be assumed, furthermore, that the spiritual inner Daniel Defoe /Robinson Crusoe was all the time also a militant anti-Catholic, cooking and maturing inside the mercantile and adventurous Daniel Defoe. That Daniel Defoe, who was a lifetime dissenter and ant-Catholic Puritan, was blending with the figure slowly growing inside him, to become his deepest representative. This representative would, in the nature of things, share with Defoe himself those concerns, with grace, redemption, forgiveness, repentance which were the spiritual guideline issues of the age's dissent. Protestantism in England grew out of a sense that the living core of such central issues as the above was lifelessly rigidified by Catholic ritual. Protestantism, by this account, expressed the intense questions raised by the direct experience of god.) Defoe was always learning from the lessons of his parents' dissent, and from the classroom lessons imparted at Charles Morton's Academy.

The Tale Robinson Crusoe had to tell

The tale Defoe created from his private experience and his creative imagination was to thrive on his age's fascinations, and to become a worldwide bestseller--it is such to this day, in every imaginable genre.

There are elements of the tale which have in themselves become literary landmarks; Crusoe's discovery, after a decade alone on his island, of a single footprint which leads him to realize that he is not alone, a realization of vast significance for the thinking of Crusoe; the discovery of hostile natives, on another part of the island, and the realization that he is dangerously not alone; the encounter with two well-disposed natives, of whom one, Friday to be named, determines to become Robinson's slave or devoted servant, and manifests that determination by numerous acts of absolute devotion. Issues like the nature of community, of the individual's relation to God, or of the nature of government and collectivity; all of these concerns are in a position to haunt Crusoe.

Robinson Crusoe has been shipwrecked off the Coast of South America and is the only survivor. He has been forgotten there for years with little solace except spiritual isolation and a welcome chance to meditate on spiritual matters. Let's look inside the mind of Robinson Crusoe on his island. (Italicized text is direct quotation from Defoe).

I had another reflection, he continues, which assisted me also to comfort my mind with hopes; and this was comparing my present situation with what I had deserved, and had therefore reason to expect from the hand of Providence. I had lived a dreadful life, perfectly destitute of the knowledge and fear of God. I had been well instructed by father and mother; neither had they been wanting to me in their early endeavors to infuse a religious awe of God into my mind, a sense of my duty, and what the nature and end of my being required of me. But, alas! falling early into the seafaring life, which of all lives is the most destitute of the fear of God, though His terrors are always before them; I say, falling early into the seafaring life, and into seafaring company, all that little sense of religion which I had entertained was laughed out of me by my messmates; by a hardened despising of dangers, and the views of death, which grew habitual to me by my long absence from all manner of opportunities to converse with anything but what was like myself, or to hear anything that was good or tended towards it.

Note 1

(Crusoe/Defoe falls readily into that medium of penitence and confession which had emerged, in Puritan England, as a blend of anti-Catholicism--that sect now banned from Churches in England, public careers largely out of questions for Catholics--and authentic meditative spirituality. We enter here into what will become Robinson's theme of and reflection on his worthlessness. This Protestant self-mistrust, the sense that there is a 'paradise lost' inside each of us--an original sin in the culture--is a much debated and affirmed theme in the culture of Defoe's England. It is the banner belief of the popular work of John Milton and John Bunyan, and dominated the pulpit in the seventeenth century. Instructive contrasts can be drawn between this mindset and the self-orientation of a thinker like Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) for whom the presence of nature, the simpler and purer the better, is a call to inner peace and to a sense of unity with God's purposes.

So void was I of everything that was good, or the least sense of what I was, or was to be, that, in the greatest deliverances I enjoyed—such as my escape from Sallee; my being taken up by the Portuguese master of the ship; my being planted so well in the Brazils; my receiving the cargo from England, and the like—I never had once the words “Thank God!” so much as on my mind, or in my mouth; nor in the greatest distress had I so much as a thought to pray to Him, or so much as to say, “Lord, have mercy upon me!” no, nor to mention the name of God, unless it was to swear by, and blaspheme it.

I had terrible reflections upon my mind for many months, as I have already observed, on account of my wicked and hardened life past; and when I looked about me, and considered what particular providences had attended me since my coming into this place, and how God had dealt bountifully with me—had not only punished me less than my iniquity had deserved, but had so plentifully provided for me—this gave me great hopes that my repentance was accepted, and that God had yet mercy in store for me.

Note 2

We observe the Protestant mind-turn again: Robinson is grateful to God for not having punished him more soundly--'had not only punished me less than my iniquity had deserved' --but had accepted his repentance.

With these reflections I worked my mind up, not only to a resignation to the will of God in the present disposition of my circumstances, but even to a sincere thankfulness for my condition; and that I, who was yet a living man, ought not to complain, seeing I had not the due punishment of my sins; that I enjoyed so

many mercies which I had no reason to have expected in that place; that I ought never more to repine at my condition, but to rejoice, and to give daily thanks for that daily bread, which nothing but a crowd of wonders could have brought; that I ought to consider I had been fed even by a miracle, even as great as that of feeding Elijah by ravens, nay, by a long series of miracles; and that I could hardly have named a place in the uninhabitable part of the world where I could have been cast more to my advantage; a place where, as I had no society, which was my affliction on one hand, so I found no ravenous beasts, no furious wolves or tigers, to threaten my life; no venomous creatures, or poisons, which I might feed on to my hurt; no savages to murder and devour me. In a word, as my life was a life of sorrow one way, so it was a life of mercy another; and I wanted nothing to make it a life of comfort but to be able to make my sense of God's goodness to me, and care over me in this condition, be my daily consolation; and after I did make a just improvement on these things, I went away, and was no more sad.

Note 3

One can contrast Robinson's complex decision to reject sadness in nature, with literary examples of more or less spontaneous pleasure in nature. While the ancient Greeks both respected and revered nature and its gods, they were rarely provoked, by natural presences, to query the deep structure uniting consciousness to that of the human's maker. (The play *Philoktetes*, by Sophocles, , features a young warrior, long abandoned on a rocky island, who finds his way into a unique spirit of harmony with the living sea creatures and birds. who nest in the crannies of his cave. More than a millennium after Sophocles, during the European 19th century, the Romantic movement in all the arts gave vent to a widespread rediscovery of the profound, lovely and healing power of nature. Since the scientific investigations of nature--with its laws or principles--in the seventeenth century, the delight in nature has in many cases yielded to interest in nature, not the same as the turn to nature for healing, but a new kind of step on the pathway to care, the care we now call the environmental movement.

Postlude

Defoe intends to enlarge our thought, by establishing on Robinson's island a kind of lab for reviewing pertinent issues of his own time. (Francis Bacon may be said to have done the same thing in *The New Atlantis* (1626), where he transports the reader to an imaginary island, on which the governmental, economic and social trends of the new world are being tried out.) We follow Robinson as he extends his industrial skills, making a table and a house to put it in, developing house rules to govern the social relation he has with the few natives who enter his orbit, establishing agricultural practices to enrich the small needs of his small community. It is of interest that, by the end of the narrative, Crusoe's island is referred to as a colony.