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THE ISLANDNESS OF ROBINSON CRUSOE'S ISLAND

The island, in all its possible meanings, is not the only feature of *Robinson Crusoe*, but it is certainly its most obvious characteristic, the one that immediately attracts the readers' attention and lingers on in their memory. As such, it fulfils the archetypal function of standing at the centre of the "mariner's" experience as it stands at the physical centre of both books: in the present essay I intend to discuss both *The Life and Surprising Adventures* and *The Farther Adventures* (making use of *Serious Reflections* only here and there, to support my argument). I shall deal with *Life* first: self-referential as this may sound, the island in this book stands off for its isolation, devoid as it is of human characters, between a first and a third part of the first novel (Crusoe's adventures before and after his stay on the island) crowded to the point of attracting the readers' attention away from Crusoe himself. Also, despite Crusoe's fears, the island stands out as a place of safety and calm if compared to the dangers of shipwreck, imprisonment and wild animals which are present at the beginning and at the end of the novel. A close reading of the peculiarities of the shipwreck itself that brings Crusoe to the island will confirm this as a place destined to a particular experiment, which I would confidently define as utopian. At first reading, the utopian quality is obvious in *Farther Adventures* rather than in *Life*, but it should be quite clear that utopianism is fostered in the first volume not only as, nearing the end of the island episode, the island itself acquires inhabitants, but also very much so during the long solitary years spent there by the shipwrecked protagonist: the complex experiment of a model community which takes place in *Farther Adventures* could not be imaginable without the former acquisition of the island on Crusoe's part as a premise to a debate on how political power could or should be exerted in the case of the shared experience of a group. This starts a more general discussion on the shared use of a country and its resources, which reverberates back to Crusoe's original community and to Defoe's Britain, which was far from a stable political condition on the morrow of the Hannoverian succession. A consideration of Cru-

soe's island in all its implications thus leads to moral and political, as well as stylistic and structural, reflections.

At the beginning, we do not know it is an island, we are not told so right away, the disclosure has to come as a surprise: as the storm rages in the tropical region of the Southern Atlantic Ocean, we are simply told "In this distress, the wind still blowing very hard, one of our men early in the morning, cry'd out, *Land*... we knew nothing where we were, or upon what land it was we were driven, whether an island or the main" (Defoe, 1972: 42. All quotations from this edition). Together with Crusoe, who is our eye-witness and our informer, we only discover the truth, dismal to him, ten pages later: "I travelled to the top of that hill, where … I saw my fate to my great affliction, (*viz.*) that I was in an island environ'd every way with the sea" (52). In the meantime, the event which, in my view, gives the book all its meaning has taken place, that is to say the shipwreck proper and Crusoe's landing on the island[1]. The pages that tell this story should be read carefully if we want to catch all its meaning: first, the big ship – to which we shall return – becomes stranded on a shallow sandy bottom and has to be abandoned; the eleven men on board (Defoe is never vague with numbers in order to generate and sustain his well-known realistic illusion) move into the ship's boat and start rowing ashore, to an unknown and perhaps frightful goal: "What the shore was, whether rock or sand, whether steep or shoal, we knew not … as we made nearer and nearer the shore, the land look'd more frightful than the sea." (44) Defoe wants to make sure that we do not miss the fact that Crusoe will end up being the only survivor of the ill-advised expedition to the African coast. Thus a single huge wave, clearly a providential wave, is made to rise from the tossed and stormy ocean; it overthrows the boat, drowning ten of its passengers and burying them forever at the bottom of the sea, it picks up Robinson in its gully as if in the palm of its hand and carries him safely ashore, clearly performing more acts than it would be realistically possible to anything but the hand of Providence. Crusoe is at this point breathless for being overtaken by the water, but most of all he has evident proof of his utter impotence: during the whole episode he, like his mates, has not been able to act independently and swim ashore, but has rather been carried by a force far more powerful than either thought or action of his own; the prose style employed in this episode has a Biblical sound, unlike the rest of the

[1] Lincoln (1997) does not appear to perceive the peculiarities of this not-simply-adventurous landing.

novel, which is often considered the quintessence of *sermo humilis*. All this is done in order that he may be given a chance of life which is denied to his fellow-travellers. In short, he is safe but humiliated. He is no "mariner", despite being so defined in the long title of the novel. Thus his and our adventure on the island begins, an adventure which will last "eight and twenty years, two months, and 19 days" (278), or, I would add, 234 pages in a volume that counts 306 (this is in the Oxford English Novels edition of 1972, which I use for quotations throughout this paper).

The island story will be the topic of the present paper, but first: what does then happen in the opening 44 and in the final 28 pages of the book, that is before and after the island episode? Most readers tend to forget it – whatever it is – and to equate *Robinson Crusoe* with the island episode itself, overlooking the very fact that the latter becomes memorable for its being surrounded by the sea (that is, by all the protagonist's voyages), as well as by a crowd, a host of characters as much as the island is uninhabited for the first nineteen years of the long episode and only at the end it becomes very slowly and scantily populated. The island, which over the years has become a myth in modern European literatures[2], stands out in the novel because it rises from a sea of waves and faces and voices. It is not by chance that one of Crusoe's first comments on his situation (after reaching physical safety on the island) stressed the absence of human sounds, in the midst of all sorts of natural sounds, "And now being to enter into a melancholy relation of a scene of silent life ..." (63); and again, when drawing up what he calls "the state of my affairs in writing" (65), as if tidily bringing his ledger up to date, he summarizes his condition thus: *"I am singl'd out and separated … from all the world", "I am divided from mankind" , "I have no soul to speak to"* (66, italics mine). Estrangement from his fellow creatures, from human society (symbolized in the first place by voices), is one of the points of the book, narrative as well as moral. Crusoe as a young adult has to be taught a lesson, after refusing, as a youth, to accept his father's advice to settle into a stable way of life: in the first pages of the book he refuses to fit into the perfect outcome of a process of social stabilization, the middle class, inside which, over the years, a web of human relations had been woven that could work, in old Crusoe's view, as a safety net for a young person just starting into the world. After a number of minor adventures and risks,

[2] On *Robinson Crusoe's* reception in Europe see Ullrich (1898), Trisciuzzi (1970), Green (1990), Spaas and Simpson, eds. (1996), Engelibért (1997).

Robinson appears to have reached a reasonable amount of stability and prosperity (not immoderate riches, of course) in his Brazilian plantation, but he cannot stop there: in telling his story as an old man, he appears to regret the memory of himself as "the wilful agent of my own miseries" (38), with all the layers of meaning implied in the word "wilful". The Brazilian plantation, though thousands of miles away from home, comes, in its proximity to the then capital of the country (Salvador, recalling London), very close to the definition of a "middling station" and is placed inside a social web similar to the original English one. Both for his narrative as well as for his moral purposes, Defoe at this point has to remove his protagonist to an isolated location, which alone can become the site for a pedagogical experiment, teaching the reluctant and humbled hero how to value and how to conquer back, at a very high personal price, what he twice (in England and in Brazil) scornfully refused to keep and something which he could have had just for the asking at the beginning of his life.

As everybody knows, Defoe never marks any divisions in his novels by means of chapters and parts, but their episodic structure can be said to scan his narrative time: this is exactly what happens with Crusoe and human presence on his island. If silence – in the specific sense of lack of human sounds – is his first complaint after the first few days on the island, then something resembling a human voice is his first delusion in that heart-rending yearning of his after human society: we are talking about the few words uttered by his parrot Poll (119 and 142), which, heard when he is, as it were, off-guard, when waking from a nap, can be taken for a proper human utterance. A mysterious and unexplained human presence is then evoked by the single print of a naked foot in the sand (153) and the lustre of eyes in the dark, which turn out to belong to a dying goat (177-80), briefly give him the illusion of looking into a human soul. Then a Spanish ship is stranded near the island, but only dead sailors are to be found in it: the single human features of the previous encounters now make up a complete being, but no communication, no company is yet possible, Crusoe's purgatorial progress towards a relationship with real men is not done yet. He still has to go through his meeting with the heathen Friday, a sort of zero degree of humanity, whose utterances are meaningless as far as human communication goes and in any case worthless to Crusoe, a European and a Christian, that is to say "civilized"; then he goes through the meeting with the Spaniard, a prisoner of the local cannibals, who is far closer to Crusoe, being a European and a Christian, but still he is a "papist" (241). It is as if Crusoe were to be apprenticed, or trained back to hu-

man presence; this long march will lead to the landing on the island of the band of mutineers, who are English and protestant, but not yet up to Crusoe's moral standing being criminals: yet they will be the means by which Defoe's much bruised but constantly resilient hero will reach his own country once again; he can thus become once again fully a part of that humanity which he had, in the thoughtless confidence of his youth, so light-heartedly despised.

It has been often observed that Crusoe leaves his island carrying with him a very scanty baggage, as if hardly anything from that fictionally primitive place, which is the site of an experiment, were worth taking back into the real world: "I carry'd on board for reliques, the great goat's-skin-cap I had made, my umbrella and my parrot" (278) he tells us as he boards the ship that will free him from his island captivity. But this is exactly the point Defoe wants to make: what Crusoe really carries away from the island is what he has preciously learnt about himself and about life, which could only be bought at the very high personal price of humiliation and pain. One question remains to be asked at the end of this overview of the plot and it remains, in my view, unanswered and unanswerable: where does Friday come into the picture? Is he one of the "reliques"?

I do not intend to enlarge on all the manual work Crusoe is made to perform on the island, but it is quite clear that here again, as a form of punishment, he has to make with his own hands what could be bought ready-made on any English market (pottery, for instance), in order to be aware of its proper value. Suffice it to dwell on the story of bread, a significant example: this type of food may not be necessary to Crusoe's nourishment, living, as he does, on a very fertile tropical island, as he himself tells us "I was not driven to any Extremities for food; but rather plenty, even to dainties" (109). Yet he is, by his author, made to go through all the long and tiring process of preparing bread, from grain to baked loaf – a biblical sort of punishment: in five different hints and reminders, spread over forty-five pages, he is painstakingly made to tell all his laborious acts aimed at obtaining the staple of human nourishment as well as the symbolic Christian food. The unnecessary quality of bread to Crusoe's life on the island can also be perceived from the fact that he is made to do everything by himself, whereas for the necessary purposes of feeding and defending himself he is generously given by his author all the contents of the original ship, which, though deprived of all human presence, is yet providentially made to become stranded near the island, so that Crusoe can acquire from it all sorts of civilized implements: he is on the island in order to be taught a moral lesson, not in order to be taken back to a desperate and unproductive primitive

state, which is of no interest to the middle-class-minded Defoe .

Concluding my look at this first and solitary part of the story, I will only add that, despite Crusoe's fears, the island stands out as a place of safety and calm if compared to the dangers of shipwreck, imprisonment and wild animals which are present at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Yet, the fact that Crusoe's solitude, indeed captivity, on the island is to last for such a long time is made clear by the repeated failures of his efforts to build himself a boat, with which to escape, surprising but significant failures if compared to the sure success with which most of his endeavours meet.

We can now move on to that part of our story which deals no longer with solitude, but with a richer and richer human society, a part which spans roughly the final third of *Life and Adventures* as well as most of *Farther Adventures*, the sequel to the story written and published by Defoe in the same year 1719 as *Life and Adventures*. The island, imagined and described by Defoe in all its necessary physical details, now turns from the site of a moral experiment for the benefit of a single sinner to the site of a more vast political project and thus takes on a more proper utopian hue; although it should be said right away that our novel is never mentioned in the general histories of utopias[3]. I tend to use the two titles (*Life and Adventures* and *Farther Adventures*) rather than to speak of volumes one and two, because I feel that each one is a complete and independent book in its own right, rather than a part of a single long work; there is also, of course, a third and equally independent book, not a proper sequel to the events contained in the previous two, but rather a commentary on them, not by chance entitled *Serious Reflections*, which was published in 1720 and which I shall not be looking at in the present paper. They are independent books and yet a link there is, and a strong one between the first two books: had Defoe stopped telling Crusoe's story on the latter's return to England and his reinstatement into that society which he had sinfully forsaken as a youth, then the human beings inhabiting his island would be nothing but the necessary instruments of his moral progress and of his final escape, as I suggested above. But, shortly after handing over his manuscript to the press, Defoe apparently remembered all those people stranded on a no-longer-desert island off the coast of South America and may have started to imagine what could be their fate:

[3] Both R. Trousson (1975, 1999) and F. and F. Manuel (1979) simply mention *Robinson Crusoe* as the starting point for the fashion for Robinsonaden. But neither does it appear in Fortunati and Trousson, eds. (2000).

having an island at his disposal, out of these thoughts it would appear the ideal society of *Farther Adventures* was born.

Out of these thoughts a more openly utopian story develops; this utopia is appropriately set on an island, like most English utopias, which take advantage of the experience of England's seafaring expeditions in the early modern age, as well as of its colonial history, by 1719 now fairly long; most contemporary Continental utopias, on the contrary, rather tend to imagine ideal cities as their setting. But what first strikes the reader about the utopianism of this book is that here no unfortunate traveller is thrown unawares into a complete model society: as is the case with most utopias, the island is there and so is the shipwreck, but the model community is not found there ready-made by the traveller; rather it will be built up by the author step by step, as necessity and verisimilitude call for new characters and new features: a procedure which may account for the book's hardly being considered in general studies of utopias, as I remarked above. Because of this feature, I would like to define *Robinson Crusoe* as "a story-teller's utopia" and I shall now enlarge on this point, which I deem to be more interesting if compared with previous utopias - indeed newer - than its utopian features properly so called, I mean the political solutions suggested and the final teaching to be derived from it. Being a narration, *Farther Adventures*, unlike a model utopia, is steeped in time and change; it is thus not perfect, but rather perfectible; moreover, Defoe thus succeeds in holding his readers' attention by bringing ever new elements into the picture. This is, at the same time, the outcome of Defoe's narrative mode of writing as well as of the culture of empiricism in which he himself was steeped which, one would imagine, led him to visualize and offer new elements as they came into the picture of narrative necessity: I only mentioned the latter point about empiricism, but shall not enlarge on it, because we know so little about Defoe's readings – as well as, more generally, about his life – that I would be treading on dangerous ground were I to suggest specific philosophical antecedents to his methods of perception and representation[4]. Which antecedents could be mentioned for Defoe's awareness of the existing tradition of English utopia, it would be hard to say, but one example at least cannot be omitted: Defoe's master (the founder of the Newington Green

[4] Also recent biographies are of necessity quite unsatisfactory: Backscheider (1989), Novak (2001), Richetti (2005). A lot of biographical problems are also raised (and not really solved) by the work operated by Furbank and Owens in their three books on Defoe's canon (1988, 1994, 1998) and in their "political" biography (2006).

Academy which he attended as a youth), the reverend Charles Morton, had written a utopian text now lost, *Eutaxia*, the title of which probably says enough about its intentions.

Now, to come back to the text itself, I myself am bound to proceed in time: when Crusoe sails away from his island, he leaves on it the rescued Spaniard and three mutineers from the English ship; in a short time Friday's father also arrives, bringing with him sixteen more Spaniards rescued from mainland savages; which means that the small settlement already contains its lot of evil, the mutineers soon proving to be trouble-makers. First and uppermost, they refuse to work, then they resort to pure violence. But Defoe – as the able storyteller he is – had concealed up to this point from his readers two more dwellers, two English sailors turned out of the island community by the above-mentioned wicked three. Left to shift for themselves, the new characters just now brought into the picture resort to work as the obvious way out of their problems, following Crusoe's father's maxim of 'application and industry' as a sure way to success in the world. The innocent and solitary power which Crusoe had formerly exercised over the island cannot be directly handed over to a numerous society: a number of foreseeable conflicts thus arise among men with no possibilities to escape their isolation - Crusoe left no boat behind. The first Spaniard to reach the island becomes "governor", but his power comes from the absent Robinson rather than from either personal assertion or general consent: a sort of old-fashioned *jure divino* power. His first step towards becoming a leader of the community is the peace he brings about between his own group and the two English sailors – respectively living in Crusoe's cave and in a shed in the fields, two separate settlements. What makes him leader is really his appeal to reason, whereas the three 'rogues were no more capable to hear reason than to act reason' (Defoe,1895: vol. ii, 40. All quotations are from this edition). Reason will prove all the way through a key to a correct reading of Defoe's utopian attitude, in *Robinson Crusoe*, as well as in the colonial parts of *Captain Singleton* and *Colonel Jack*, where the issue of slavery is touched upon.

The next step is that slaves also enter our island: the wicked trio, whose leader is one Will Atkins, go slave-hunting on the mainland, bringing back a number of natives, indiscriminately captured; this group thus contains an issue which could not be reasonably delayed in the building up of a society – that is the presence of women. The governor asks Will Atkins a very blunt question about them, how did they mean to use them, whether as servants or as women; the answer, just as blunt, is "they would use them as both" (p. 75). Which makes it clear that women have no defined social standing, its only

clear aspect being subordination. Although strict monogamy is exacted by the "governor", proper matrimony is postponed to Crusoe's return – which is not anticipated to the reader, but does take place after years – when the women will have a chance to be converted to Christianity, thus acquiring social status in the end. Defoe, following the empirical pattern which I am trying to trace in the text, has an order of priorities in mind for a society in the making when he shows us the boat from England being unloaded: to begin with, goods are mentioned before people, starting with what Defoe repeatedly considers as the main distinction between savage and civilized, that is clothes. The sequel of human beings coming off the ship is again meaningful: a tailor comes first, then a smith and a carpenter, who will be needed by a stable community; the last person to land is a priest, who, when primary needs have been satisfied, will establish the beginnings of a church on the island, again a permanent institution. Upon his return there, Crusoe repeatedly reminds the reader that "I came to establish them here, not to remove them" (p. 113) – and I shall come back to this point.

At this stage Defoe has supplied us with a basic description of a fairly numerous colony realistically pictured in its needs and its conflicts. Yet, for all its apparent matter-of-factness, it seems to me to turn out to be a fairly utopian one in its balanced solution of any dissent: the whites give up the idea of proper slavery in their relations with the natives, who, in turn, appear to be quite willing to accept and adopt their conquerors' language, their religion and their way of life. This picture of harmony seems to find its metaphor in the "basket-house" – that is a house made of entwined wicker-work - which Will Atkins, at this point shown as become virtuous, builds for his family and the description of which is full of the mention of numbers and symmetries, which in turn refer back to the world of industrious bees, mentioned – not unintentionally in my view – just a few lines above the long description of the house: when Crusoe goes to inspect the settlement, its inhabitants "look, at a distance, as if they lived all like bees in a hive" (p. 105). And now for the house itself: "It was one hundred and twenty paces round in the outside (...) the walls were as close worked as a basket, in panels or squares of thirty-two in number, and very strong, standing about seven feet high. In the middle was another, not above twenty-two paces round, but built stronger, being eight-square in its form, and in the eight corners stood eight very strong posts, round the top of which he laid very strong pieces, pinned together with wooden pins, from which he raised a pyramid for the roof of eight rafters (…)

"The outer circuit was covered, as a lean-to, all round this inner

apartment, and long rafters lay from the two and thirty angles to the top of the posts of the inner house, being about twenty feet distance; so that there was a space like a walk within the outer wicker wall, and without the inner, near twenty feet wide.

"The inner place he partitioned off with the same wicker-work, but much fairer, and divided it into six apartments (...) and out of every one of these there was a door: first, into the entry, or coming into the main tent; and another door into the space or walk that was around it; so that walk was also divided into six equal parts." (105-6)

Defoe describes at length this prodigy of geometric exactness, concluding his description with the words "Such a piece of basket-work, I believe, was never seen in the world" (106), words which seem to mirror his own perfect creation: the community which he has been ingeniously and patiently labouring to imagine and to offer to his readers, a piece of work the world had never seen.

Defoe has thus worked out, at this point, the fundamentals of his utopian society, but he does not seem willing to go beyond this stage, either because he feels that from now on the social and political pattern of Britain could and should be followed, or because he would rather stop at this agricultural – that is pre-financial and pre-industrial – stage as the happiest for mankind: I tend to incline to this opinion and the way the novel ends seems to me to prove this; it could of course be argued that Defoe is at this point pessimistically reflecting on the condition of Britain at the time of his writing *Robinson Crusoe*, that is in the very first years of the new Hannoverian monarchy, but it should be observed that he had at this point withdrawn from public life and political engagement which, again I would suggest, seems to be the point of the way the island episode ends, to which I shall soon come. Here, as well as elsewhere, I am trying to keep a light touch on biographical matters, but, from what we know, in 1719, when he was away from political strife, he may have wanted to say, by means of his peculiar utopian construct, that Britain too could start all over again in the new "whig" climate of ideas: it should be kept in mind that Crusoe is made to be away from England between, if my calculations are correct, 1659 and 1689; that is to say that he is sent away on the eve of the Stuart restoration and is brought back on the morrow of the Glorious Revolution, as if he were to be kept away during the years in which not only the actual government, but also the general political climate, was the furthest from Defoe's choice.

Back to the story then: the only further stage of political development which takes place on the island away from the fulfilment of basic needs is the settlement of the property of land. The first settlers to

assert their proprietory rights are the two sailors who go to live by themselves and who "enclose" the piece of land they have chosen to work upon; but other settlers then follow the same practice. In all cases no figure is given as to the extent of these pieces of property, although they appear quite clearly to recall John Locke's statement that "The measure of Property, Nature has well set, by the Extent of Mens Labour, and the Conveniency of Life". (1967: 310). Again we stand confronted with a utopian choice made by Defoe – just enough land to live upon – a choice made when, empirically, the time has come for the property of land on the island to be divided and handed over to the several settlers. A reference to John Locke seems in order at this point, but it should be kept in mind that Robinson is here handing over, piecemeal, the right to a property which was his in principle according to the notion of right to property as expounded in the work of Pufendorf and Grotius in the case of the discovery of an uninhabited land - that is the island we have been looking at today.

Before leaving the island once again, never to come back to it, Crusoe exacts of all its inhabitants - by now, its citizens - an agreement to future peace, but, most of all, he goes to great lengths to make sure the island remains isolated; he therefore hides from the colonists the fact that he could leave them in the possession of a sloop, lest, "they would … upon every light disgust, have separated, and gone away from one another; or perhaps have turned pirates, and so made the island a den of thieves" (p. 174), thus revealing at the very last his original and unspoken plan of setting the island up as a "plantation of sober and religious people".

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