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Robinson’s and Friday’s Island

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Mots-clés

- Cosmopolitanism
- Deism
- Enlightenment
- Exploration
- Freemasonry
- Religion
- Solitude

Résumé

The doctrine of natural law may well be the cornerstone of Daniel Defoe’s cultural formation. When Robinson Crusoe digs into his conscience, he discovers a universal reason, namely the *jus gentium*, the right common to all peoples, beyond their single historicity. While regressing to an uncivilized state of nature, Robinson can speculate in complete solitude, and later establish sociable relationships with the natives and the other persons he introduces into the social order of the island. Crusoe succeeds in socializing as far as he refers to his *civitas*, his *societas*, his own civilized world. He finds within himself the elements of divine natural law, i.e., moral values that, *ab origine*, range from religious items to self-respect and discipline.

It is well known that the Island in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is one of the key-elements that contributed to the creation of the ‘Crusoe myth’.1 Robinson Crusoe in his goatskin

became a symbol of the remote tropical island fantasy and his image has attracted the attention of artists, film-makers, communication media, as well as the common reader. Crusoe's accurate exploration of the island, his cultivation of the land, and his later impositions of his codes of belief and action on Friday, all activities methodically recorded in his diary, have frequently been interpreted as a fictional enactment of the processes of European colonization as well as of the empirical spirit in the age of scientific observation. Crusoe's Island is an 'ideal world of peace, harmony, clarity, order, and simplicity' where he is 'securely included',[2] as well as an alien environment, whose surroundings he gradually brings under his rational and practical control not as a proto-colonist but as a lonely exile.[3] The island is both realm and prison, safe haven and cannibal banqueting ground.[4] While it was traditionally discussed with reference to the rise of the novel in the context of European expansion and colonization, more recently it has also been considered in terms of post-colonial studies, and post-colonial rewritings such as for instance Derek Walcott's play *Friday*, and Coetzee's well-known novella *Foe*.

This is how the island is usually understood. An alternative interpretation of the island is to regard it as a 'site of social compromise' as it recalls eighteenth-century masonic lodges, which were more appropriately characterized as social spaces in which parts of the aristocracy and upper middle-classes — and part of the clergy too — could come together and interact with each other.[5] Robinson establishes a society on the island where three religious orientations, namely Protestantism, Paganism, and Catholicism coexist peacefully. This was not a common rule in England at the time. The ideology of the ruling class would mostly have been hostile towards masonic practices and tenets. Although Defoe himself explicitly merges the heretical or heterodox ideas of atheists, the irreligious, skeptics, Aryans, secularists and Freemasons under the common label of 'magic' to indicate 'a new invention [that] has gain'd upon Mankind by a general Infatuation',[6] the precise symbolic edifice elaborated in *Robinson Crusoe* appears as a product of an *Ars Combinatoria* that defines new architectures using fragments of a pre-existing world (namely the tools stowed in the wrecked ship). Moreover, Robinson himself states: 'I improved myself in this time in all the mecanick exercises which my necessities put me upon applying my self to, and I believe cou'd, upon occasion, make a very good *carpenter*, especially considering how few *tools* I had'.[7] This perspective is certainly quite unusual, but it is undeniable that Robinson accomplishes a great feat of human construction, just like the masters of the Guild of Bricklayers who, by raising Cathedrals, created a world through the action of imparting a rational order as, in fact, they had only stones that had to be smoothed, organized, built, transformed into Cathedrals *ad Dei gloriam*.

The Freemasons' creator God, the Grand Architect of the Universe, was supposed to transcend specific religious denominations.[8] Accordingly, Defoe appears as a supporter and a disseminator of contemporary ideas about the freedom of conscience:

> 'My island was now peopled, and I thought my self very rich in subjects […] I was absolute lord and lawgiver; they all owed their lives to me, and were ready to lay down their lives, if there had been occasion of it, for me. It was

> remarkable too, we had but three subjects, and they were of three different religions. My man Friday was a Protestant, his father was a pagan and a cannibal, and the Spaniard was a Papist: however, I allowed liberty of conscience throughout my dominions'. (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 203)

Cooperation, charity, a sense of responsibility, and peaceful interaction both among the members and between them and others in society were the values and behaviours fostered by eighteenth-century confraternities. In revealing a spirit of solidarity, a model of the growing liberalism during the eighteenth century, the quoted passage recalls the Masonic ideals of religious tolerance and equality among peoples.9

Defoe may have been completely unaware of having evoked something more than an aesthetic creation. Still, Crusoe is the *self-made man* who builds himself by struggling against nature; he is not constrained by authorities, tenets, social bonds, or imposed behaviours. In the context of the island, Robinson is apparently free from such socio-behavioural constraints. Even so, he maintains his allegiance to the doctrine of bourgeois ideology which invites us to build, making use of one's own productive forces. For this reason, Robinson Crusoe is an expression of the eighteenth-century utopian idea of advancement. Although Defoe is generally considered as one of the inventors of formal realism for presenting 'a circumstantial view of life',10 he has no interest in the description of the naturalistic aspects of the island; he is not an analyser of habits, he is not an ante litteram cultural anthropologist, with a curiosity for savages, for the world of differences with respect to Western rationality. He evokes a utopian world within which to realize the conditions of human improvement.

Civil society was a product of the Enlightenment and of elite sociability. Robinson, a purified and tempered man, may stand as well for the aesthete, the dreamer, the artist, the individual who recognizes the forces through which society is shaped and evaluates their actual reach in a world in constant transformation. Defoe does not write a novel to glorify individualism. For example, in the important episode of the discovery of a footprint in the sand, Robinson finds himself astray and recognizes that his solitude has reached an endpoint. Solitude is no longer sustainable, and Crusoe must accept that no man can be an island. In other words, from this point onwards, he finds himself obliged to think in terms of sociability and, hopefully, the possibility of building an harmonious society of different peoples. Having had no one to talk to except God, and his parrot Poll, '[a] sociable creature' (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 121), Crusoe is torn by a desperate longing for companionship:

> 'Thus I liv'd mighty comfortably, my Mind being entirely composed by resigning to the Will of God, and throwing my self wholly upon the Disposal of his Providence. This made my Life better than sociable, for when I began to regret the want of Conversation, I would ask my self whether thus conversing mutually with my own Thoughts, and, as I hope I may say, with

> even God himself by Ejaculations, was not better than the utmost Enjoyment of humane Society in the World'. (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 115)

Friday's appearance makes Crusoe overjoyed as he finally has a companion with whom to go 'on very sociably together' as was the case in Brazil with the 'Portugueze of Lisbon' (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 31). Friday and Robinson share a close friendship and are always deep in conversation:

> 'In this thankful Frame I continu'd all the Remainder of my Time, and the Conversation which employ'd the Hours between Friday and I, was such, as made the three Years which we liv'd there together perfectly and compleatly happy, if any such Thing as compleat Happiness can be form'd in a sublunary State. The Savage was now a good Christian, a much better than I; though I have reason to hope, and bless God for it, that we were equally penitent, and comforted restor'd Penitents; we had here the Word of God to read, and no farther off from his Spirit to instruct, than if we had been in England'. (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 186)

During the first three years of their companionship, they express each other's thoughts, feelings, and ideas; questions are asked and answered; information is exchanged: Crusoe learns from Friday about the strange marine currents around the island and soon realizes that he is intelligent and sensitive.

> 'Well,' says Friday, 'but you say, God is so strong, so great, is He not much strong, much might as the devil?' 'Yes, yes,' says I, 'Friday, God is stronger than the devil, God is above the devil, and therefore we pray to God to tread him under our feet, and enable us to resist his temptations and quench his fiery darts.' 'But,' says he again, 'if God much strong, much might as the devil, why God no kill the devil, so make him no more do wicked?' (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 184).

The impossibility of answering Friday's question about God's enigmatic choice of not eradicating evil implies that the novel is also a theodicy of sorts, i.e. an exploration of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil.11 Defoe is, in fact, a non-skeptical rationalist, who reveals his adherence to a creed of universal rules governing both the world of nature and the human world. The combination of colloquialism and reasoning in the above-mentioned passage shows that Defoe appeals to a modern consciousness. This can be seen in his provocative attitude, in his hostility towards conventions and his wish to make explicit what is usually left unexpressed: cultures should be regarded relatively, on their own terms. As a mariner, a man of trade and world traveller, Crusoe had encountered many

different cultures before the shipwreck. In the following description we see him becoming an amalgam of diverse ethnicities:

> ‘My Beard I had once suffer’d to grow till it was about a quarter of a Yard long; but as I had both Scissars and Razors sufficient, I had cut it pretty short, except what grew on my upper Lip, which I had trimm'd into a large Pair of Mahometan Whiskers, such as I had seen worn by some Turks, who I saw at Sallee; for the Moors did not wear such, tho’s the Turks did; of these Muschatoes or Whiskers, I will not say they were long enough to hang my Hat upon them; but they were of a Length and Shape monstrous enough, and such as in England would have pass’d for frightful’. (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 127)

In a way, Crusoe is always discovering himself when he encounters others. There is a political element to this since in the eighteenth century, the terms ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘world citizenship’ were often used not as labels to determine social theories, but to indicate ‘an attitude of open-mindedness and impartiality’.12 As a cosmopolitan, Robinson was not compliant to a particular religious or political authority, was unbiased by specific loyalties or cultural prejudice. In addition, he was fond of traveling, enjoyed a network of international relations, and felt comfortable in all places. The internationalist mode of Defoe’s literary production is one of the most outstanding examples of the Enlightenment idea of the cosmopolitan writer who was a citizen of the world. In the 18th century, cosmopolitanism was first and foremost a reaction against the atavistic feudal order that privileged the local city, class, or religious sect. In other words, cosmopolitanism was a reaction against localism. Far from conflicting with nationalism, cosmopolitanism was sometimes seen as the goal of nationalism, at least in its more liberal forms. Cosmopolitanism became recurrent in masonic discussions, in instructions by the grand lodges, in debates at local lodges, and in the contacts between lodges or individual freemasons. Considering themselves as protagonists of the eighteenth-century ‘moral International’,13 Freemasons sought to pay no heed to confessional, political, social, national, and continental boundaries.

Crusoe devotes much of his attention to other cultures, but it is particularly thanks to his sympathetic relationship with Friday that he can rediscover the original and constitutive principles of humanity. Robinsonrediscovers moral values ??beyond the general skepticism of extreme rationalism. In *A New Family Instructor* (1727)14 these principles will be imparted by a father as instructions to his son against the papist call, or against the conventional world order. In other words, Defoe believes that the divine has introduced universal, indubitable, and absolute moral values ??into man. His inspiration reveals thus an allegiance to the doctrine of natural law,15 which could be referred to Pufendorf,16 but more directly to Grotius. These natural law theorists assume that God instilled in humans a principle of sociability that connects all peoples into a world community**.** Correspondingly, Defoe seeks out a state of nature, in which everyone rediscovers universal values ??in one’s interiority. What he hopes for is, then, a spontaneous coordination between reason (dictating moral principles) and nature (dictating physical laws). In *Robinson Crusoe*, in particular, we

face a world directly innervated into the anthropological structure. This is an Enlightenment version of the doctrine of natural law quite similar to the prevalent view in seventeenth-century culture. As envisaged in the very title of *Jure Divino* (1706),17 Defoe believes that in a state of nature the presence of the feral aspect does not exclude the presence of a sense of justice. Although the right of nature (or the divine archetype) harbours his inner conscience, Crusoe must arrange his relationship to the natives of the island. This is due to the fact that his rediscovery of archetypal moral values implies setting aside fears, preconceptions and taking time to hear other voices and possibilities. As a result, collective wisdom may arise from a dialogue, as is the case with the conversational exchange between a father and his son in *A New Family Instructor*, or between Robinson and Friday, whose relationship is much like that of 'a Child to a Father' (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 176).

Even in a realistic setting such as an island where Robinson, a castaway, meets Friday, a primitive, and the two jointly discover systems of life, human resources, the means to exploit nature, and the laws of survival, Defoe is in effect describing a Utopia. In such a primitive condition of life, Robinson discovers a creative force lurking in man, which allows him to draw on a form of inner sensitivity similar to an initiation. Robinson initiates Friday and they build together a world where personal and social self-sufficiency is achieved. Defoe's mental simulation of a regression of civilization does not lead Robinson to the feral state, but to the rediscovery of natural law, which is not a right of material nature, but of divine nature, or better: of human nature constituted by the archetype that God instilled in men.

Robinson Crusoe can thus be considered an unconscious expression of the spirit of Defoe's time, as well as something more than a product of imagination. Although it is not known whether Defoe ever had any contact with a Masonic association, it is reasonable to think of his novel as a medium to disseminate the Masonic bourgeois ideal. Robinson uses his own productive forces to create, together with Friday, a new reality, which ultimately is in contrast with the world of the clergy and the aristocracy.

1. Pat Rogers, Classics and Chapbooks in Literature and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century England (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), p. 162-182.

2. Laura Curtis, The Elusive Defoe (London: Vision Press, 1984), p. 85, 72.

3. Michael Seidel, Exile and the Narrative Imagination (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Robinson Crusoe: Island Myths and the Novel (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1991).

4. Maximillian E. Novak, 'Imaginary Islands and Real Beasts: The Imaginative Genesis of Robinson Crusoe', Tennessee Studies in Literature (vol. 19, 1974), p. 57-78; William Bysshe Stein, 'Robinson Crusoe: The Trickster Tricked', Centennial Review, (vol. 90, 1965), p. 271-288.

5. Jan C. Jansen 'In Search of Atlantic Sociability: Freemasons, Empires, and Atlantic History', Schriftenreihe Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington, D.C. (vol. 57, Fall 2015), p. 73-99, p. 80.

6. Daniel Defoe, 'A System of Magick, or a History of the Black Art (1726)', in W.R. Owens and P.N. Furbank (eds.), Satire, Fantasy and Writings on the Supernatural by Daniel Defoe (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), vol. 7, p. 179-186, p. 179.

7. Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, ed. Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 122 (My italics).

8. On the conflictual relationship between Deism and the Anglican Church, see Justin Champion, The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies. 1660-1730 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

9. In this regard, see: Jessica Harland-Jacobs, Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927 (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

10. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), p. 32; Maximillian E. Novak, 'Some notes towards a history of fictional forms: From Aphra Behn to Daniel Defoe', Novel: A Forum on Fiction, (vol. 6, n° 2, 1973), p. 120–133.

11. See Nicholas Hudson, '"Why God no kill the Devil?" the Diabolical Disruption of Order in Robinson Crusoe', Review of English Studies, (vol. 39, 1988), p. 494-501. 'Crusoe's hesitant shifting between reason and impulse, between the desire to reduce the universe to some logical order and grudging acceptance of a universe beyond comprehension, reflects dilemmas that persist throughout Defoe's later writings on religion'.

12. See the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/#EarlModeEnliCosm)

13. Reinhart Koselleck, Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society [original German edition 1959] (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 79.

14. Daniel Defoe, A New Family Instructor. In Familiar Discourses between a Father and his Children (London: Warner, 1727).

15. See Maximilian E. Novak, Defoe and the Nature of Man (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 2, 5.

16. See Haara Heikki, 'Pufendorf on Passions and Sociability', Journal of the History of Ideas (vol. 77, n° 3, July 2016), p. 423-444, p. 425, 443.

17. Daniel Defoe, Jure Divino, ed. P. N. Furbank & W.R. Owens (Bloomsbury: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), vol. 2.

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Robinson Crusoe (1719)