

Dunkerley, James (2019), *Crusoe And His Consequences*. London: OR Books. ISBN 9781682192023

After I had solaced 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 anything either to eat or drink to comfort me; neither did I see any prospect before me but that of perishing with hunger or being devoured by wild beasts; and that which was particularly afflicting to me was, that I had no weapon, either to hunt and kill any creature for my sustenance, or to defend myself against any other creature that might desire to kill me for theirs. 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 provisions; and this threw me into such terrible agonies of mind, that for a while I ran about like a madman. Night coming upon me, I began with a heavy heart to consider what would be my lot if there were any ravenous beasts in that country, as at night they always come abroad for their prey.

Thus begins the story of Robinson Crusoe on a desert island, the survivor of a violent shipwreck, marooned and utterly alone. But also, of the archetypal ‘True-Born Englishman’ abroad, the prospective self-made man and eponymous hero of the very first Robinsonade. Defoe’s novel has, according to James Dunkerley in this new book, exercised “a profound impact not just on literature but also on how succeeding generations debated the nature of individual solitude, work, colonial and racial relations, economics, dreams, ‘providence’, and human relations with the rest of the animal world” (4). In his classic study, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt linked the emergence of the new genre (*novella* meaning news) to that of the English middle classes who wanted to read, not of aristocrats at court, but of their own bourgeois selves – their births, marriages, family intrigues and fortune-hunting careers. Dunkerley’s study follows on from Watt in characterizing Defoe’s novel as “a core mythic text of Western and capitalist civilization over the last three centuries” (6). As Professor of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London, Dunkerley is certainly well placed to explore both the historical and literary aspects of this defining early work of documentary fiction. Dunkerley’s detailed knowledge of the period and exemplary clarity of style help to draw the reader not only into a fascinating narrative of Defoe’s own life, but also how it became intertwined with the fate of the world’s most famous maritime castaway.

Since its first publication in 1719, the story of Robinson Crusoe has always involved the act of writing back at what has gone before, starting with the several different versions that Defoe himself wrote, the first of which was *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, followed quickly by *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe; Being the Second and Last Part of his Life, and of the Strange Surprizing Accounts of his Travels Round three parts of the Globe* and then finally the third, published in 1720, offering more *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: with his vision of the Angelick World*. Not only was this sequel of texts a case of Defoe, the hack journalist, trying to squeeze a good story for all it was worth. He was also reinventing and embellishing the account of Alexander Selkirk, a “dissident pirate”

(67), whose real-life account of a five-year-long stay on a tropical island Defoe shamelessly plagiarized. Despite his trilogy of Robinsonades, Defoe never made his own fortune, plagued as he was by the innumerable pirated copies of his novel, for which he received no compensation. Sadly, while on the run from his London creditors, Defoe died it was claimed of 'lethargy' in 1731. However, the posthumous chase to re-appropriate his novel was about to begin in even greater earnest.

In his didactic Bildungsroman, *Émile* (1762), Rousseau canonized Defoe's story as the only book he would allow his young protégé, Émile, to read. Thus, Crusoe came to be seen as a consummate product of the Enlightenment: a white western man endowed with the prime faculty of reason with a dose of English common sense thrown in for good measure. Surrounded by the island's riotous natural abundance, he nevertheless insists on carving out a private space for his own domesticated livestock and garden cultivation. Not without help from his 'Man Friday' of course, the native whose role as Black servant completed the Hegelian master-slave equation. In Rousseau's view, Robinson's was not only an heroic individual fate, but also the measure against which society in general could be judged: "His condition, I confess, is not that of a social being, nor is it in all probability Émile's own condition, but he should use it as a standard of comparison for all other conditions" (84). Not surprisingly, Robinson later came to also personify the burgeoning system of laissez-faire capitalism, the *homo economicus* of the liberal Manchester School of Economics, who used Defoe's novel as a textbook for budding industrial entrepreneurs bent on transforming the face of Victorian Britain. In radical contrast, Karl Marx considered Crusoe's isolated condition as a case of profound social alienation in which his manic bookkeeping of personal possessions, increases in island production and labour expenditure were precursors to the "rise of economic individualism" that would eventually reduce thousands of human beings to reified factory 'hands' (96).

Dunkerley's monograph contains a dramatic account of Defoe's ever shifting career as a journalist, novelist, shipping merchant, land speculator, political pamphleteer, government spy and religious intriguer at a time when Britain was being decisively reinvented as a nation of colonial empire builders under a safely constitutionalized monarchy. However, the most interesting and challenging part of Dunkerley's study is his discussion of more modern critical responses to Defoe's text by French poststructuralist thinkers like Roland Barthes Pierre Macherey, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. The latter's deconstructionist take on the narrative for example is rich in existential connotations relating to questions of "solitude, insularity, violence, boredom, and death" (123), not least in relation to the famous footprint in the sand:

He then wonders even more anxiously if this bare footprint is not that of his own foot. His own foot on a path he has already taken. Just as Poll the parrot returns to him only the echo of his voice, so the bare footprint is the more *unheimlich*, uncanny, for being quite possibly his own, on a path already trodden, that he has always described without knowing it ... He does not really know ... Is it me? Is it my track? Is it my path? Is it the spectre of my print, the print of my spectre? Am I coming back? Am I or am I not returning? Am I a revenant of myself? (125)

In his concluding celebration of the lasting impact of the novel, Dunkerley discusses several of the fictional texts that have been inspired by it, from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) to more recent narratological shifts away from Robinson himself. These include Michael Tournier's *Friday, Or, The Other Island* (1967), which fundamentally questions Crusoe's place in the tradition of Enlightenment heroes. A similar radical re-orientation is found in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, published in 1986, which is an eloquently postmodern interrogation of language and power. The first-person voice in Coetzee's tale is however neither that of Robinson nor Friday (who has had his tongue cut out), but a woman, Susan Barton, who writes letters to (De)Foe in a playful exchange of interlocutors, as Dunkerley observes: "So, when we are sitting comfortably we can savour the sense of Coetzee writing about Susan Barton writing to Foe about his own writing" (136).

Does Dunkerley's new study make the reader want to return to Defoe? The answer is unequivocally affirmative. Despite a certain proclivity for sometimes obscure historical detail, this is nevertheless a fascinating and extremely illuminating explication of one of the most enduring iconic figures within western culture. It made me also want to explore other examples of the crossover kind of journalistic 'faction' practiced by Defoe. Not least his harrowing account of the last major outbreak of bubonic plague in London between 1665 and 1666 in which 100,000 people died: *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). Here Defoe captures with brilliant anecdotal insight the contradictory responses to this mass contagion: from expressions of madly hedonistic *carpe diem* to stoically reflective personal fortitude. As an afterthought in this context, I recall that the epigraph to Albert Camus's uncannily prescient novel, *The Plague*, is also taken from *Robinson Crusoe*: "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not". Clearly, Defoe continues to challenge our perception of how we live with ourselves and with one another.

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