

‘All Day, All Night the Body Intervenes’: Representation of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee and ‘Wyspa’ by Olga Tokarczuk

Agnieszka Łowczanin (University of Łódź)

Abstract

This article explores representations of Friday in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), J.M Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986) and Olga Tokarczuk’s short story ‘Wyspa’ [‘The Island’] (2001). In all three works, Friday is mediated and filtered by the process of narration. This article demonstrates how the narrator(s)’s understanding of corporeality affects the representation of the companion, from a source of useful manpower to a silent reservoir of stories, to a trigger which necessitates crossing gender boundaries. Friday’s corporeality reflects the contemporary philosophical understanding of the relation between body and mind, debates around the status of the colonial body, and, more recently, human relations to the environment around us, in tune with new materialist sensibilities.

Keywords: *Robinson Crusoe*; *Foe*; Olga Tokarczuk; Friday; body; gender boundaries

Introduction

Interpretations of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* have traditionally focused on religion, economy and politics: the novel has been read as a spiritual autobiography, an instance of travel literature, a eulogy of protestant entrepreneurship and imperial expansion. Recent interpretations apply critical standpoints from the fields of postcolonial, feminist, and ecological theories. In a similar manner, the novel’s rewritings read the eighteenth-century original from contemporary perspectives to problematise the issues it explored or bring to attention those it ignored. Brett C. McNelly goes so far as to suggest that ‘some of the more provocative postcolonial analyses of Defoe’s novel appear not in criticism

Łowczanin, Agnieszka. 2024. “‘All Day, All Night the Body Intervenes’: Representation of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee and ‘Wyspa’ by Olga Tokarczuk.” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 23(1): 68–89. <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.2024.23299>. Copyright (c) 2024 Agnieszka Łowczanin. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

but in postcolonial literature [...], works that “write back” to Defoe’s “master” narrative of empire’ (2003: 1). McNelly’s comments focus on *Robinson Crusoe*’s postcolonial rewritings, but the same can also be said about contemporary readings which respond to the novel from angles other than postcolonial. One such theme, as proposed by the Editors of this Special Issue is the physical materiality of Friday, who, despite being one of the most famous ‘support’ characters in literature, remains one of the most underresearched and, at the same time, one whose role has been rebalanced in contemporary remakes and responses.

This article explores Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and two of its relatively recent rewrites by Nobel prize laureates: J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986) and Olga Tokarczuk’s short story ‘Wyspa’ [‘The Island’] from the collection *Gra na wielu bębenkach* [*Playing on many drums*] (2001). It will examine how representation of Friday’s corporeality is essential to substantiating Robinson’s island experience. Defoe’s Robinson and Friday, Coetzee’s Cruso, Susan, and Friday, and Tokarczuk’s nameless characters are all presented as enmeshed in their bodies. It is claimed that their embodied experience becomes a key to their and our understanding of the notions of identity and being, race, religion, and relation with the world around us, and is vital to the processes of communicating with each other and narrating the story.

Robinson Crusoe’s narration and the relation between body and mind in Defoe’s novel

In Defoe’s original, Friday is saved to be created anew by Robinson’s first-person narration. He remains a mediated character, moulded by Robinson’s narratorial practice and turned into a persona fit to be presented to his readers. As a character, Friday reaches us after he has been subjected to the process of double filtering, first in the fictitious Editor’s (Defoe’s) consciousness, and then in the narrator Robinson’s consciousness. Friday, therefore, is fiction within fiction, a product of Robinson’s narrative stratagem, and thus the most blatant mockery of the Editor’s assertion from the Preface that he is presenting to his readers ‘a just History of Fact’ devoid of ‘any Appearance of Fiction’ (Defoe 2020: 3). This process of double filtering distances Friday from reality, from the possibility of ever coming closer to the truth about this character, a fact poignantly summed up by Cruso in Coetzee’s *Foe*: ‘How will we ever know the truth?’ (1997: 23). This ontological dilemma has become one of

the challenges and threads picked up in contemporary responses to and reworkings of Defoe's narrative. It also explains why any analysis of the character of Friday is inevitably closely tied to that of his maker, Robinson Crusoe, whose consciousness creates and whose pen moulds Friday in order to present him, and himself, to the world. Speaking of Robinson in her concluding passages on Defoe's novel, which she considered 'a masterpiece', Virginia Woolf said: 'There is no escaping him' because Robinson 'proses on, drawing, little by little, his own portrait, so that we never forget it' (1968: 73, 71).

In the second decade of the eighteenth century, in the early stages of the development of the novel as a literary genre, Defoe was well aware of the specificity of the written account he was producing, of the tension between fictitiousness and truthfulness, and between narratability and reality. To make Crusoe's experience 'a just History of Fact' 'to the Instruction of others by this Example' Defoe erased himself as an author (Defoe 2020: 3); as Everett Zimmerman has it, 'Crusoe is alive because he is independent of an author' (1975: 22). He knew that the transmission of the essence and the pinnacle of Crusoe's story, his island dwelling, required compelling substantiation, that it will be given credence only once he can plausibly pass it on to others. Therefore, Defoe, the novel's anonymous Author, genius of marketing strategies, 'one of the great describers and detailers of eighteenth-century British fiction', has him record his daily, oftentimes hourly struggles and successes in a durable form of an almost day-to-day journal packed with 'bare novelistic minute particular' in a manner characteristic of eighteenth-century 'inscrutable particularity' (Davidson 2015: 264, 269).

In another essay Woolf laments the fact that 'literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear [...] is null, and negligible and non-existent,' whereas in real life, 'the very opposite is true' (1967: 193). As Woolf continues,

All day, all night the body intervenes [...], the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record. People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come into it [...]. They show it ignoring the body [...]. Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it [...] are neglected. (1967: 193–194)

In Robinson Crusoe's account of his daily existence on the island 'all this daily drama of the body' is recorded and the 'great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it' that Woolf talks about are not neglected. In this sense, the materiality of Robinson's bodily experience is encapsulated in the materiality of its written record, his journal. As Mary Mulvey-Roberts reminds us, 'The proximity of the body to writing also occurs in religious belief,' and 'for Christians it manifests through the corporeality of the Logos' (2016: 1–2). Robinson Crusoe's experience of self-discovery—both his religious growth and the formation of his economic and colonial consciousness—is articulated through the body and recorded in the tangible form of the journal. Even in the moments of physical frailty he keeps adding entries almost daily, so that his own corporeality is aided by the need to record his life and the therapy he gets from keeping the journal. The very process of writing also structures Robinson's experience. Written from the perspective of time and experience, the story is a product of his narratorial craftsmanship in which we can discern an 'internal competition between storytellers/versions (young-Crusoe; hindsight-Crusoe)' (Swenson 2018: 20). It is thanks to this time distance and self-censorship imposed on the journal that the novel acquires its didactic and religious value. It is the rigour of writing for an audience that turns it into a message board for them: a survival manual, a spiritual autobiography, a conversion diary, a planter's account.

In Robinson's island experience attention is put on the proliferation of sensations that constitute his everydayness and ultimately contribute to the shaping of the most essential turning points in his life, all of which happen to and are transmitted through his body. The novel seems to expound the view that the body and its reactions influence thinking and decision-making, and thus also determine identity. The body, Defoe seems to be saying, constitutes the self. This stance, on the one hand, reflected the philosophical aura of his times when 'after Hobbes, after Locke, and in spite of Descartes, the body, at least in eighteenth-century England, would not go away easily. It became instead matter difficult' (Flynn 1990: 1). On the other hand, however, as Maximilian E. Novak reminds us, 'As a child of his age, Defoe formulated his own scheme of natural law, and by borrowing, combining and emphasizing various concepts in the writings of Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, and many other philosophers, he was able to achieve a certain eclectic originality' (1963: 2). Writing on Defoe and Swift, Carol Flynn proposes that when they 'employed strategies to

contain or escape from the body, they reflected the struggle against materiality that characterized their age. Both writers understood the difficulties of knowing a self trapped in a world of sensation' (1990: 1). Aware of the Cartesian distinction between mind/soul and body, Defoe's novel problematises this clear-cut distinction between the thinking mind and the subservient body, and challenges the notion of the self conceived of as a mental substance and the body as being essentially different. Robinson Crusoe's account of many of his experiences on the island first concentrates on recording the bodily sensations, so that often what happens to the body is depicted as having a direct impact of the shape of the thoughts. The interrelation between the body and mind seems to be always at the centre of this character's consciousness.

Robinson Crusoe's narrative is driven by emotions, which find an outlet through his body. Benjamin Boyce singles out fear as the main driving force in Defoe's novels; especially *Robinson Crusoe*, he says, 'is loaded with fear' (1976: 47). Interestingly, however, Robinson's very first contact with the island, the near drowning and being cast ashore, both deep bodily experiences, cause a surge of unrivalled and surprising emotions, yet, fear is not listed among them. Narrating from the perspective of time, Robinson tries to bring the intensity of this experience home to his readers by referring to a situation they might relate to and compares the sensations accompanying his unexpected rescue to those a criminal feels when receiving pardon on a scaffold:

I believe it is impossible to express to the Life what the Extasies and Transports of the Soul are, when it is so I sav'd, as I may say, out of the very Grave; and I do not wonder now at that Custom, *viz.* That when a Malefactor, who has the Halter about his Neck, is tyed up, and just going to be turn'd off, and has a Reprieve brought to him: I say, I do not wonder that they bring a Surgeon with it, to let him Blood that very Moment they tell him of it, that the Surprise may not drive the Animal Spirits from the Heart, and overwhelm him. (Defoe 2020: 45)

Robinson recreates the intensity of the shock he experiences by conveying the somatic reaction of surprise mixed with overwhelming joy. Only once he is safe on shore does he fully understand why a surgeon is needed when execution is called off: to blood the criminal so that sudden joy does not kill him. The first emotion he experiences on the island is not fear of some external danger, but of the reactions of his own body he might not be able to control, fear that he might die as a consequence of ecstasy caused by deliverance. He expresses his joy through his body by running about the

shore, 'making a thousand Gestures and Motions which I cannot describe' (Defoe 2020: 45).

This passage belongs to the pre-journal part of the story, written by what Swenson calls 'latter-day' or 'hindsight-Crusoe' (2018: 21), who is fully aware of the fact that in order for his story to be narratable, it needs to be relatable. This is one of the reasons why the story is so down-to-earth as a record of both physicality—material, full of 'particularity', and corporeal—and, often implied, emotionality, as in the record of the first contact with the island discussed above. Robinson returns to this moment, or rather to the narratorial possibilities of this moment, three times. In a metafictional comment he confesses that had he included it in the journal it 'would ha' been full of many dull things', that is, bodily reactions such as vomiting salt water, wringing his hands, beating his head and face, exclaiming, being unable to sleep 'for fear of being devour'd' (Defoe 2020: 64). Therefore, for the sake of the plausibility of narration, he extracts this passage from the journal in order to reach out to his readers and stir their emotions.

However, further on into the journal Robinson departs from its assumed fictitious faithfulness, as he knows that too 'many dull things' will make for too dull a reading. Whatever accounts he includes, he does it with full awareness of his readers and caters to what he understands are their needs, that is to be instructed and diverted. Therefore, he devises and follows a simple recipe: instruction by means of familiarity and relatability through references to the corporeal, and diversion by means of exoticism. Such is the account of Robinson's conversion, the most important turning point in his life, a deeply spiritual experience expressed through his body. It first happens when Robinson suffers severe symptoms of an ague. It is when he crumbles physically, when his body is at its weakest that his religious fears materialise in the form of a terrible dream in which he sees a god's envoy descend from a cloud to kill him. In this dream Robinson hears 'a Voice so terrible, that it is impossible to express the Terror of it' (Defoe 2020: 78). The physical sensation of fear combined with bodily fatigue prompts his first self-examination and realisation of years spent in 'seafaring wickedness'. Although at this stage Robinson makes it clear that the horrors he experiences are those of the soul, and not of the body—'No one, that shall ever read this Account, will expect that I should be able to describe the Horrors of my Soul at this terrible Vision' (Defoe 2020: 78)—his reaction is fully corporeal and he initiates his recovery by aiding his

body. He then goes on to satisfy his earlier powerful urge for tobacco, justifying himself and explaining to his readers that in this he is following the Brazilians, who ‘take no Physick but their Tobacco, for almost all Distempers’ (Defoe 2020: 82). Looking for tobacco, he finds the Bible: ‘I went, directed by Heaven no doubt; for in this Chest I found a Cure, both for Soul and Body’ (Defoe 2020: 82). The next paragraph is devoted to the account of experimenting with the preparation of tobacco: he chews it, inhales smoke from tobacco fire, drinks rum infused with tobacco leaves. Robinson Crusoe’s reading of the Bible begins in a state of full intoxication when he is physically weak, looking for a solution to aid his failing body: ‘In the Interval of this Operation, I took up the Bible and began to read, but my Head was too much disturb’d with the Tobacco to bear reading’ (Defoe 2020: 83).

It is symptomatic that the onset of Robinson’s religious rebirth is enmeshed in somatic sensations. Robinson’s cognitive processes are subordinated to the state and dictates of his body. Following the positive commentaries of Defoe’s consideration of the castaway’s psychology offered by Woolf (1967: 127) and Novak (1963: 248), I would suggest that during his conversion, Robinson’s mind and his soul are to a great deal regulated by the body. The closer Defoe probes the solitary ordeal of his castaway character, the closer he gets to the understanding of the degree to which the body assists if not affects Robinson’s mind and through it, the recovery of his soul. Before David Hume, Defoe’s literary enmeshment with the body allows him to illustrate that ‘a perfect serenity of mind’, to use Hume’s expression (1757), is affected by hindrances of external nature which in turn affect our internal organs. Other momentous events on the island, like the meeting of Friday, also expose the relationship between mind and sensation, ultimately shaping the depiction of the companion. Contemporary authors, like Coetzee and Tokarczuk, follow suit in applying a bodily filter to represent this iconic relation.

Friday’s corporeality in Robinson Crusoe

The first experience of another human being on the island is transmitted through the markers of the body. Robinson sees ‘the Print of a Man’s naked Foot on the Shore. [...] I stood like the one Thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an Apparition. [...]. Thus my Fear banish’d all my religious Hope’ (Defoe 2020: 127–131). This single disembodied trace of a human haunts him for months, makes him change his place of habitation; it is

powerful enough to unbury the terror he was paralysed with at the beginning of his island dwelling. When faced with fear of the unknown, the mature, latter-day Robinson-the narrator interprets this occurrence in a very matter-of fact way:

the Discomposure of my Mind had too great Impressions also upon the religious Part of my Thoughts, for the Dread and Terror of falling into the Hands of Savages and Cannibals, lay so upon my Spirits, that I seldom found my self in a due Temper for Application to my Maker [...] I must testify from my Experience, that a Temper of Peace, Thankfulness, Love and Affection, is much more the proper Frame for Prayer than that of Terror and Discomposure; [...]. For these Discomposures affect the Mind as the others do the Body; and the Discomposure of the Mind must necessarily be as great a Disability as that of the Body, and much greater, Praying to God being properly an Act of the Mind, not of the Body. (Defoe 2020: 138)

In the two-year interval between seeing the footprint and meeting the 'savages', Robinson lives in a state of 'Cogitations, Apprehensions and Reflections' and varying degrees of fear, 'which banish[es] all his religious Hope' (Defoe 2020: 134, 131), that is, in a state cognitive uncertainty which Puritan spiritual autobiographies cultivated. Debilitating fear of the unknown, prompted by the marker of a body which he cannot see, ultimately leads Robinson to a conclusion that

Fear of Danger is ten thousand Times more terrifying than Danger itself, when apparent to the Eyes; and we find the Burthen of that greater by much, than the Evil which we are anxious about. (Defoe 2020: 135)

Defoe's distinction between the 'Fear of Danger' and 'Danger itself' brings to mind Edmund Burke's theories on the aesthetics of terror from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), considered to be the first theoretical speculations important for the Gothic. The effect the material trace of human body and its body-less fragmentality have on Robinson's mind displays the haunting quality characteristic of the later Gothic mode, which, combined with the island's geographic position, places his reactions in the category of its hauntology. With regards to the potential of the impenetrable exoticism of remote locations, such as Crusoe's island, scholarship of the Gothic reminds us that

the tropics have long been employed as an expression for Western narratives of cultural fears and desires for domination. Imagined and Gothicised as the birthplace of the ultimate Other—one to be 'civilised' or eradicated by modern Western forces—

tropical and sub-tropical milieu have been used as a vehicle for imperialist and colonial discourses. (Lundberg, Ancuta, and Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska 2019: 2)

Certainly in Defoe's novel, '[t]he cannibal provides a convenient benchmark of civilization, that place we like to think that we depart from', 'the barbaric "other" that defines social worth' (Flynn 1990: 150). When after two years Robinson does finally encounter a sight of human activity, the remains of cannibals' feast, his reaction is one of physical abhorrence and 'Horror of the Degeneracy of Humane Nature' (Defoe 2020: 139). On the shore he sees a tangible outcome of their rituals, a heap of bodily remnants: 'Skulls, Hands, Feet, and other Bones of human Bodies' and 'a Circle dug in the Earth [...] where it is suppos'd the Savage Wretches had sat down to their inhuman Feastings upon the Bodies of their Fellow-Creatures' (Defoe 2020: 139). Robinson's immediate reaction to cannibal practices is somatic; it is his body responding to the sight of human bodies: 'my Stomach grew sick, and I was just at the Point of Fainting, when Nature discharg'd the Disorder from my Stomach; and having vomited with an uncommon Violence, I was a little reliev'd' (Defoe 2020: 139). Robinson's horror at the sight of the mutilated corpses, at the wholeness which becomes transformed into a heterogeneous jumble of disintegrated parts, results in his conceiving the Native people as a homogeneous mass to be duly destroyed. Their corporeal rituals define them as less-than-human beings: they are cannibals. This shorthand reference becomes a mode of Robinson's European moral superiority. Robinson thanks God for being 'distinguish'd from such dreadful Creatures as these' (Defoe 2020: 139), thus, in this initial reaction, employing an imperial dichotomy between himself as a representative of the civilised British and them, the barbarous 'others'.

However, it would not do justice to Defoe's text to say that the cannibals and their rituals are used merely to allow Robinson to establish a binary opposition between civilisation and barbarism, an opposition which was certainly fundamental to the creation of Eurocentrism. Especially in eighteenth-century culture, the cannibal was also used to 'serve as a mythic marker in the history of a civilization. *We used to eat each other in the shadowy past before we knew better*' (Flynn 1990: 151). In Robinson's attitude to the cannibalistic practices of the indigenes and especially in his subsequent paternalistic attitude to Friday, it is evident that Defoe employs 'the cannibal not just to explore a reprehensible "other", but to make that "other" part of the corporate sensibility that

includes “ourselves” (Flynn 1990: 151). To make his story plausible, Robinson Crusoe needs to remain honest in depicting the fluctuations of his emotions and the altering state of his consciousness. With the passing of time his impending fear of death from the hands of the cannibals abates. After indulging in and finding ethical justification for his initial ‘murdering Humour’ (Defoe 2020: 154), Robinson disengages from these instinctive emotions, and, in accord with the didactic purpose and tone of the novel, distances himself from his previous murderous designs:

What Authority, or Call I had to pretend to be Judge and Executioner upon these Men as Criminals, whom Heaven had thought fit for so many Ages [...] to be, as it were, the Executioners of his Judgments one upon another. [...]. How do I know what God himself judges in this particular Case? (Defoe 2020: 143)

This is the moment Robinson meets Friday: a physically beautiful individual, a ‘comely handsome Fellow, perfectly well made’ (Defoe 2020: 171), depicted in stark contrast both to his ravenous brethren and to the dismembered heterogeneity of their victims devoid of aesthetic completeness and human semblance. It seems that the moral hideousness of the cannibals and the haunting horror of human disfiguration they generate come to work when Friday is saved, to produce a negative background for the representation of his bodily perfection. On the one hand, all the ‘Sweetness and Softness of an *European*’ in the description of his countenance can be seen as the result of applying imperial visual filter to make Friday more palatable for his readers (Defoe 2020: 171). The novel is, after all, written in a period of a large-scale process of colonisation of the New World, which at this onset ‘had provided the Old World with its most devastating experience of the Other’ (Kavanagh 1978: 417). Interestingly, however, the distinctiveness of Friday’s facial features is contrasted with all the other ‘others’ with whom Robinson’s fellow Europeans were becoming more familiar for all the wrong reasons at this historical moment: he is not ‘ugly yellow nauseous tawny, as the *Brasilians*, and *Virginians*, and other Natives of *America* are’, he is not black, his nose is ‘small, not flat like the Negroes’ (Defoe 2020: 171–172). I suggest this visual attractiveness of Friday can also be read as a sign of being more than a ‘racist buffet’ (Swenson 2018: 19) offered by Defoe, more than a colonial objectification of white man’s prospective subject. The depiction of Friday from the very beginning seems to prepare ground for the development of his relationship with Robinson: in passages such

as these, Robinson, a Christian, is reaching out to another of God's creations, convincing himself and his readers of similarities between them, if not of essential human sameness.

The positivity of their relationship, expressed through the body, is inaugurated in a gesture of subservience and servitude Friday performs as a token of gratitude: he kneels down, kisses the ground in front of Robinson, then takes his foot and places it on his head. At this stage, Friday has no tongue to communicate either his genuine gratitude or his willingness to attend his saviour; all he can do is use his body to express his intentions and emotions. Robinson does not oppose but yields to the ritual, musing: 'this it seems was in token of swearing to be my Slave for ever' (Defoe 2020: 170). In his analysis of colonialism and *Robinson Crusoe*, McInelly reminds us that

Defoe had no direct experience with plantations, South American coastal peoples, oceanic voyages, the slave trade, or a colonial economy. What he 'knew' came through the play of his imagination on information from travel narratives, trade, geographies, etc., all with a view to engaging 'the reader in a mental journey that merely resembles the experience of colonialism. (2003: 3)

And thus Friday is depicted as capable of literally absorbing Robinson's teaching programme: he eagerly learns Crusoe's language and acquires his skills, gradually adopting his religious and moral values. To become a good educator for Friday, Robinson needs to summon all the best within himself and transform his knowledge of the world and his understanding of religion to a didactic syllabus, fit for his newly-acquired disciple and the potential readers of his journal. As a consequence, 'Crusoe, in a paradoxical reversal, is "improved" as a result of his contact with Friday' and 'becomes a better Christian through their relationship' (McInelly 2003: 20).

J. M. Coetzee's Foe and the problematisation of Friday's corporeality
Coetzee in *Foe* relies on the same technique of the first-person narrative; however, by giving voice to a woman, one of those absent in the intertext, he capitalises on the benefits of a different perspective and on the potential of the unsaid. While in Defoe's novel a plethora of words come from Robinson himself, a first-person narration of the agent of the island experience, Coetzee's novel—with the exception of the last chapter—is narrated by Susan, who strives not only to grasp, process, and then

plausibly and attractively convey what she went through but also to make sense of the island experience not for herself but in its entirety for Crusoe and Friday as well. However, narrating a reality where words do not come easily or do not come out at all, she is doomed to plod on guessing, imagining, forcing answers, drawing conclusions, forever unable to grasp the sense of the island and Friday's experience. Impenetrability and uncertainty are embodied in the characters, in their past, and constitute the flesh of Coetzee's text.

In Defoe's novel, Robinson Crusoe begins his journal once he has comfortably settled, ordered his existence on the island, that is, once he has made himself a chair and a table, large shelves for his 'Tools, Nails, and Iron-work', once his habitation 'look'd like a general Magazine of all Necessary things', and 'it was a great Pleasure to [him] to see all [his] Goods in such Order' (Defoe 2020: 63–64). Before he achieved a sense of material stability which ensured his security, he was 'in too much Hurry' and 'in too much Discomposure of Mind' (Defoe 2020: 64).

By contrast, there is never such a sense of confident settlement, order or security on Crusoe's island. Coetzee's Crusoe's island experience is a splintered, unverified scrap without order or finality. His unexpected silence and wasteland island environment that suffice for him trigger in Susan a need for constant references to Defoe's story. At first she questions and challenges Crusoe continuously:

'May I ask Sir ... why in all these years have you not built a boat?' (13)

'Would you not regret it that you could not bring back with you some record of your years of shipwreck?' (17)

'How many words of English does Friday know?' (21)

'Who cut out his tongue?' (Coetzee 1997: 23)

While on the island, Susan feels a sense of obligation which urges her to read her own, Crusoe's and Friday's island experience through the story of Defoe's Robinson. Though Susan realises that his experience is a far cry from theirs, the compulsion is so strong that Defoe's text becomes a filter, a figurative dead body whose vision is so compelling that it effectively obscures her expectations and her comprehension of reality. But Crusoe remains impervious to Susan's demand that he conform to her book-built expectations and insists on being a poor communicator. When it turns out

she cannot extract from him any details necessary to make his experience relatable and thus believable, she regrets that their ‘life begins to lose its particularity’ (Coetzee 1997: 18), and in this way irretrievably departs from Defoe’s narrative matrix and lacks one of its most important features defined as ‘inscrutable particularity’ (Davidson 2015: 269): ‘All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway, sunburnt, lonely’ (Coetzee 1997: 18).

Susan is also disappointed with Friday. She finds him ‘in all matters a dull fellow’ (Coetzee 1997: 22), using exactly the same adjective to describe him that Robinson Crusoe used to speak of the details in the account of his life as a shipwreck he did not want to narrate: dull. As an instigator of communication on the island Susan is finally defeated: ‘So I became deaf, as Friday was mute; what difference did it make on an island where no one spoke?’ (Coetzee 1997: 35).

I suggest it is this void of particularity that characterises Cruso’s and Friday’s island experience that urges Susan to literally flesh it out in her narration. Her own carnality, suggestions of her ‘body-centered’ past, her physical relation with Cruso before his death not only fill in those spheres of human existence that were missing in Defoe’s narrative, but also provide a source of otherwise missing particularity. Yet, despite Susan’s attempts, it is also in this carnal sense that Friday proves to be a disappointment. Unlike Robinson’s Friday, a beautifully muscled human being whose abilities Robinson perfects and whose physical strength he puts to practical use, Cruso’s Friday is ‘a shadowy creature’ (Coetzee 1997: 24). On the island, he functions for Susan as merely ‘an imbecile incapable of speech’ (Coetzee 1997: 22). When she hears the truth-evading story of his maiming—‘[p]erhaps the slavers [...] hold the tongue to be a delicacy [...] perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday’s wails of grief [...] [p]erhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story [...] [p]erhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took’ (Coetzee 1997: 23)—whenever he is in her presence, she shuns him ‘with the horror we reserve for the mutilated’, she shrinks at ‘the very secretness of his loss’ and cannot speak ‘without being aware of how lively were the movements of the tongue in [her] own mouth’ (Coetzee 1997: 24). And yet, although Susan is desperate to get the facts and glue Cruso’s and Friday’s island experience into a believable story, she evades the confrontation with one of its most intriguing mysteries: the contents of Friday’s mouth. When Cruso grips him by the hair and forcibly opens his

mouth, Susan sees 'nothing in the dark save the glint of teeth white as ivory. [...] "Do you see?" [Cruso] said. "It is too dark", said I' are all the details we ever get of what she dreads to see (Coetzee 1997: 22). Friday does not speak, Cruso claims he has been maimed, but has he? Friday's conjectured tonguelessness has been read as a symbolic representation of the maiming of the slaves in imperial past. It stands for a literary void, lack of surviving stories concerning the Middle Passage passed on by the slaves. In Coetzee's novel Friday's silence stands also for a rich narrative potential.

Susan begins to get a clearer, more independent vision of her, of their truth once she literally leaves the island and with it, the dead body of Defoe's canonical text behind. In the absence of the physicality of the island and Cruso, Friday's mute presence is gradually endowed with new meaning. For the first time she is able to consider him as a thinking human being, his tonguelessness not necessarily being the equivalent of dullness: 'I knew he knew something; though what he knew I did not know' (Coetzee 1997: 45).

The tongue, Coetzee seems to be saying in *Foe*, its invisible physical movement in the mouth, conveys the contents of the mind, and thus becomes a bridge to the soul. The tongue is a bodily transmitter of non-physical thinking, a carnal springboard of ephemeral thoughts which it transforms into equally transient speech. Speaking of colonial meaning of the body, Brian May says that 'the body in Coetzee is [...] potentially, a friend to the mind—a force in its own right' (2001: 393). Thus, the conjectured lack of tongue in Friday's mouth opens up a narrative potential: Susan can make up his past and spirituality, but she can also try to find ways to evade, bypass it by teaching Friday to convey his thoughts in writing. She believes that '[s]peech is but a means through which the word may be uttered, it is not the word itself. Friday has no speech, but he has fingers, and those fingers shall be his means' (Coetzee 1997: 143). Thus, as May suggests, 'Coetzee's fiction [...] depicts the body as a seed-ground for curiosity. There the body gives rise to intimations of desire and possibility that suggest a certain potency, one that is creative as well as critical' (2001: 393).

However, as Susan gradually discovers, Friday resists communicating in writing. The literal darkness inside his mouth comes to stand for the impenetrability of his past and the impenetrability of his spirituality. Thus, Friday acquires profundity in his death as a communicator. His silence,

imposed on him by the assumed or real excision of his tongue, augmented by his gradually revealed inability or unwillingness to engage in any other channel of intercourse with Susan, paradoxically gives him voice which will never be heard and becomes a source of storytelling possibilities which will never see the light. The darkness inside his mouth can thus be read not only as a symbol of the unspeakable horrors of slavery and of the silencing of the slave's marginal world in colonial discourse but also as an abyss separating different versions of stories about him further and further away from the truth.

Friday will never be a creator, a storyteller himself; the stories will always be told for him. Susan tries hard to inscribe him with a past and present: 'Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. [...]. What is the truth of Friday? [...]. No matter what he is to himself [...] what he is to the world is what I make of him' (Coetzee 1997: 121–122). Later, when Foe undertakes to write Susan's and Friday's story, he, too, feels compelled to enliven Friday's silence and recognises it is only they who can make it speak. The island ritual in which Friday casts buds and petals which then 'sink to settle among the bones of the dead' can be narrated by Susan and Foe. Friday rows his log of wood as if 'across the dark pupil—or the dead socket—of an eye staring up at him from the floor of the sea'. Foe recognises that Friday leaves 'the task of descending into that eye' to them (Coetzee 1997: 141). Friday's asset lies in his voiceless pointing to the potential of his story, which makes Susan and Foe look down at of the bottom of the ocean, where they see the past of his forefathers and thus no longer ignorantly 'sleep without dreaming, like babies' (Coetzee 1997: 141). In the final part of the novel, the narrator, in a repeated manoeuvre, slips overboard into the depths of the ocean 'among petals floating around' and 'like a rain of snowflakes' descends into 'the eye of the story' only to discover that 'this is not a place of words'. Then comes the recognition that 'it is a place where bodies are their own signs' (Coetzee 1997: 156).

The transformative power of the body in 'Wyspa' by Olga Tokarczuk

The short story 'Wyspa' by Olga Tokarczuk is not only a reworking of the Robinson Crusoe myth but, in its attention to strategies and awareness of the difficulties of narration, it is also a response to *Foe*, and an echo of *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding in its depiction of the island as a

natural environment sheltered from the blasts of wartime explosions. In Tokarczuk's story narration is returned to the Robinson figure, who, in a manner similar to Defoe's eighteenth-century original, recounts his island experience from the perspective of time, nearing the end of his life. However, because his aging arthritic body makes it impossible for him to write, he records his story on a Dictaphone, ceding control over the final shape of the narrative to the addressee, an absent anonymous female editor, a version of Coetzee's eponymous Foe.

The nameless castaway is a male character who is the survivor of a sea disaster between Greek islands and the coast of Africa en route to Palestine at the close of WWII. He distinctly remembers plunging into the depths from the sinking ship, his eyes wide open not to miss witnessing his own death. As instinct made him push his way upwards, however, he could not help observing other human bodies either moved by some mysterious force to the surface of the foamy green water, or drowning, freezing half-way and motionlessly facing the seabed. The first days of his stay on the island were spent waiting for those he hoped made it to the shore, but he soon turned out to be the only one to survive. This experience made him realise that 'what happened is equally cruel for those who perished and for those who survived because neither in the deaths of one group nor in the lives of the other was there anything personal, no choice was made, there is no predestination at work, nothing but mechanical laws of chance' (Tokarczuk 2007: 89).¹ This is the moment he starts doubting his existence and questions whether he is still alive: "'there isn't" and "there is" are equal' (Tokarczuk 2007: 89). A few days into his stay on the island he adopts a new persona, starts addressing himself Robinson and enters into a conversation with his former self: 'There were two of us. One from before the time of the disaster, the other from after the disaster. [...]. We started talking to each other and in this way I maintained a vestige of reality' (Tokarczuk 2007: 95).

Tokarczuk has probed such states of in-betweenness, whether emotional or geographical, in many of her novels and short stories. In an interview with Hannah Weber, the writer said: 'I am fascinated by the concept of borders [...] borderland is always in between two things [...] dawn is much more interesting than day or night' (2018). For her,

¹ The short story 'Wyspa' [The Island] has not been translated into English. All translations are mine.

peripheries are the territories which are potentially most creative, enticing and unpredictable, conducive to metamorphicity and the creation of new hybrid forms (Larenta 2020: 98).

Although, unlike many of her later works, this 2001 short story does not feature the creation of post-human hybrid forms, it does probe the creative potential of plunging a character into an unfamiliar, liminal environment and explores its transformative capacity. The island environment—securely sheltered from a world devastated by war, unpeopled, and yet with remnants of human habitation—has the qualities of a border-like, in-between territory. Its mysterious biological potential, gradually uncovered by the shipwrecked man, induces his gradual transformation, forces him to abandon his former self and search within to discover that his basic instinct for survival makes him overcome human limitations and biological barriers. The island habitation allows him to look at the world from a different angle. For example, he begins to perceive the sea as the realm of the dead, ‘a wet Hades’ (Tokarczuk 2007: 95), so that, by extension, the act of catching and eating fish feels like a form of cannibalism, comparable to feeding on death. When he comes across a luminous mushroom, ‘a sign of some living gleaming presence in dead matter’, he has ‘a premonition of some inhuman, cold, thallus-like presence, self-absorbed, alien to human body’ (Tokarczuk 2007: 103). It is one of the passages revealing Tokarczuk’s sensibilities akin to vitalist new materialism that via Deleuze looks back to Spinoza and Leibniz, for whom ‘all of nature was defined primarily by an immanent vital power or force [which was] immanent to matter’ (Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019: 119). The man’s first contact with traces of human presence on the island—a mysterious hieroglyphic inscription on a stone, below which he notices a relief depicting a slender human-like winged figure captured in a moment of jumping up, as if frozen between the surface of the earth and the sky—triggers the reaction of terror, similar to Robinson’s reaction to the footprint. The man wants to hide and erase all signs of his presence. But as he runs away with the intention of destroying his shelter, he feels his body react in the most unexpected way: ‘it refused obedience’ and became sexually aroused. As if ‘sensing or remembering the presence of other, it returned to its old, well-known rituals once again ready to unite with another’ (Tokarczuk 2007: 109). By this moment, the man knows that he has limited, or no control over his body, that it acts independently of his intentions, adapts to the new island environment sooner than his

thinking processes allow him to, and sooner than his consciousness is ready to readjust. The whole shipwreck experience becomes for him a process of discovering that his own body is a mysterious mechanism which tunes in to the biology of the island and physiologically meets its demands sooner than his conscious will does.

The man's ultimate unanticipated transformation takes place when he retrieves a baby from the wreck of a boat, from underneath the rotting body of its mother. Repeating and responding to the tradition of subjection between Robinson and Friday, the baby is depicted as naturally totally dependent for its survival on the man. He initially fumbles in his attempts to feed it, as a consequence the baby weakens and enters a near-death slumber. In an act he perceives to be humanitarian mercy, the man contemplates taking its life. But as he starts feeding it with fish, as he takes it in his hands and embraces it, his body unexpectedly responds with a spasm along the lower part of his abdomen, 'the last faintest wave of orgasm' as if 'its inner part organised itself afresh'. When the child opens its eyes and registers him for the first time, he feels his body become almost one with the baby's. He realises that at this very moment the baby has become more important than his own being, that it 'conquered the whole island, that it, too, existed for him'. As he is lying with the baby in his arms in the warmth of the setting sun, his body, again, involuntarily reacts to the proximity of the baby's body, this time, however, with lactation, as if his 'nipples suddenly turned out to be some long-forgotten sensual organ, a device of one sense only which delivers information directly to the inside of the body, without the mediation of the brain' (Tokarczuk 2007: 123).

The hybrid, angel-like form from the relief, the sense of which the man could not understand when he saw it—'Do we have to understand what we are looking at? Do we have to grasp the meaning of a sign?' (Tokarczuk 2007: 109)—acquires a new meaning with the arrival of the baby. Its sustenance and survival are possible thanks to a 'jump' the man's body involuntarily makes. It is not a transformation into a new hybrid form, as illustrated in the relief, or crossing species barriers, which are the themes explored in Tokarczuk's later works; what the man experiences is overcoming gender barriers. The man's body is demonstrated to possess a transformative inner force, so that, perhaps triggered by the vulnerability of the baby's body, it instinctively reacts to its needs, and thus in a broader sense demonstrates its capacity to performatively engender the survival of

the species. This twenty-first-century Robinson morphs into a breastfeeding surrogate parent, but so does Friday, who transforms into a silent baby completely reliant on the man for survival. In the end, however, this new embodiment of Friday sets up his own family and becomes the most independent of his literary predecessors discussed above. At the same time he is also the most fully integrated with the man who brings him up as his son.

Tokarczuk's short story enters into an interesting dialogue with the photograph *Projekt pomnika Ojca Polaka* [Project of the monument to the Polish Father] (1981, Fig. 1) by Adam Rzepecki, in which the concept of a man breastfeeding a baby is visually expressed: the half-naked artist is seated in a chair with his own baby at his breast. Although the man seems to be content and fully absorbed in the activity, looking attentively at the baby, the context in which the photo was published implies that for the artist it was an anarchistic protest against social expectations and being positioned as a model father by mere virtue of fatherhood. However, when 'Wyspa' was published two decades later, in 2001, in an era of early post-communist transformations in Poland which witnessed glaring gender disparities and a return to traditional division of social roles, new meanings were attributed to the scene in the photograph, independently of the intentions of the artist. Some saw it as voicing the need for more complete gender equality, as an expression of 'closeness, physical and emotional' which awakens 'longings for inaccessible experiences' (see Brzezińska-Waleszczyk 2014, trans. mine). Yet others saw it as a blasphemous mockery of breastfeeding mothers. These disparities of opinion can serve as an illustration of the considerable potential not only of this particular scene, but more broadly—when seen in the context of Tokarczuk's story—of the Robinson-Friday dynamics.

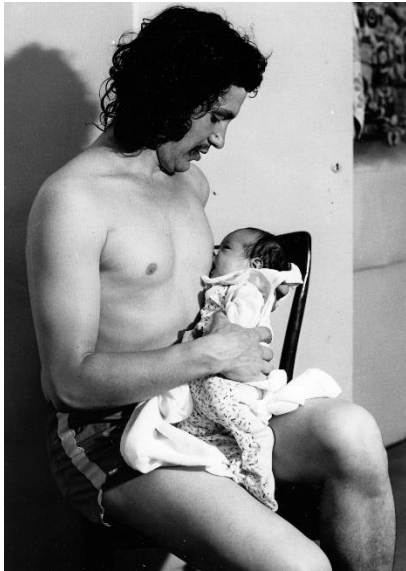


Figure 1. Adam Rzepecki. 1981. Projekt pomnika Ojca Polaka. Courtesy of the Gallery Dawid Radziszewski.

Conclusion

The body, its limits, its potential, its equivocal relation to the mind, the body that eats, aches, and prays, utters words thanks to which we will not die completely, is at the core of the three analysed texts. In these narratives it is always a 'white' narrator who sieves the story of the island experience through his or her Western consciousness, narrating and thus creating also its essential ingredient, man Friday. Although written in different historical moments and on different continents, and looking at Defoe's original from different vantage points, the two reworkings put Friday and corporeality at the centre of their interest. In some sense, however, Friday does not lose his secondary status. The fact that he is a narratorial construction is reinforced both in Coetzee's and in Tokarczuk's texts by the fact that he does not utter a word. Both he and his past and future are blank sheets to be written and created.

However, although always in the background, Friday is indispensable. It is through the process of narrating his physicality that in the three analysed texts attitudes to the self, to what constitutes identity, to economy, colonisation and our human place in nature are expressed. In

Defoe's text the body aids the soul, where he believes the essence of being lies. For Coetzee, the body, although inevitably seen as a postcolonial message board, becomes the impenetrable essence of being. Tokarczuk's story challenges the notion that body is separate from the mind and veers towards the appreciation of the fluid, transformative body. This body houses the self, which is also undefined, fluctuating, and capable of crossing gender barriers when needed—particularly when the survival of the human species is at risk.

References

- Boyce, Benjamin. 1976. The question of emotion in Defoe. In *Daniel Defoe: A collection of critical essays*, edited by Max Byrd, 40–50. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Brzezińska-Waleszczyk, Marta. 2014. Kolejna awantura z gender w tle. Tym razem o wystawę w Krakowie. Bo facet nie może karmić dziecka? Accessed July 5, 2022. <https://natemat.pl/140577,kolejna-awantura-z-gender-w-tle-tym-razem-o-wystawe-w-krakowie-bo-facet-nie-moze-karmic-dziecka>.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1997. *Foe*. New York: Penguin Books. Original work published 1986.
- Davidson, Jenny. 2015. The 'minute particular' in life-writing and the novel. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48(3): 263–281. doi:10.1353/ecs.2015.0012.
- Defoe, Daniel. 2020. *The life and strange surprizing adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Eds. Maximillian E. Novak, Irving N. Rothman, and Manuel Schonhorn. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. Original work published 1719.
- Flynn, Carol Houlihan. 1990. *The body in Swift and Defoe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gamble, Christopher N., Joshua S. Hanan, and Thomas Nail. 2019. What is new materialism? *Angelaki* 24(6): 111–134, doi:10.1080/0969725X.2019.1684704.
- Hillman, David, and Ulrika Maude. 2015. Introduction. In *The Cambridge companion to the body in literature*, edited by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, 1–9. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, David. 1757. Of the standard of taste. Essay XXIII. *Hume Texts Online*. Accessed July 20, 2023. <https://davidhume.org/texts/empl1/st>.

- Kavanagh, Thomas M. 1978. Unraveling Robinson: The divided self in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20(3): 416–432.
- Larenta, Anna. 2020. Metamorficzność postaci w twórczości Olgi Tokarczuk. *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 16: 83–113. doi:10.15290/bsl.2020.16.05.
- Lundberg Anita, Katarzyna Ancuta, and Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska. 2019. Tropical Gothic: arts, humanities and social sciences. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics* 18(1): 1–11. Accessed June 13, 2022. doi: 10.25120/etropic.18.1.2019.3685.
- May, Brian. 2001. J. M. Coetzee and the question of the body. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 47(2): 391–420.
- McInelly, Brett C. 2003. Expanding empires, expanding selves: Colonialism, the novel, and *Robinson Crusoe*. *Studies in the Novel* 35(1): 1–21.
- Mulvey-Roberts, Mary. 2016. *Dangerous bodies: Historicising the Gothic corporeal*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Novak, Maximillian E. 1963. *Defoe and the nature of man*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Swenson, Rivka. 2018. *Robinson Crusoe* and the form of the new novel. In *The Cambridge companion to 'Robinson Crusoe'*, edited by John Richetti, 16–31. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tokarczuk Olga. 2007. Wyspa. In *Gra na wielu bębenkach*, 83–125. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie. Original work published 2001.
- Weber, Hannah. 2018. The meteoric rise of Olga Tokarczuk, Poland's pre-eminent novelist. Accessed July 5, 2022. <https://www.new-east-archive.org/articles/show/10772/olga-tokarczuk-polands-pre-eminent-novelist>.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1967. On being ill. In *Collected essays*. Volume Four, 193–203. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1968. Robinson Crusoe. In *Collected essays*. Volume One, 69–75. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Zimmerman, Everett. 1975. *Defoe and the novel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.