

Reading the Body as Narrative Cue in J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*

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Abstract

This essay is concerned with the representation of bodies in J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974), a rewriting of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Specifically, it posits that the body in Ballard's novel is first and foremost a narrative cue in a constructivist sense: readers are trained to recognise that whenever the text makes appeals to the body, they are to understand this as a counter-narrative to what the characters may be thinking or stating in verbal utterances. As a consequence, while we may initially recognise the protagonist Robert Maitland as a Robinson figure who will conquer the concrete island he is stranded on, the text's strong focus on corporeality will dispel this notion quickly, revealing Maitland as on a trajectory towards becoming a heteronomous Friday figure or merging with the more obvious candidate for *Concrete Island*'s Friday, the tramp Proctor. Stylistically, the text privileges this reading through a variety of means, such as ascribing agency to extensions of the body like Maitland's car and persistently foregrounding parallels between Proctor and Friday.

Keywords: rewriting; J. G. Ballard; *Concrete Island*; stylistics; cognitive narratology; doppelgänger

J. G. Ballard himself makes no secret of the fact that *Concrete Island* (1974) is a re-writing of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. 'Robinson Crusoe was one of the first books we read as children, and the fantasy endures' (2014: vii), he writes in the introduction to the novel. He then gives certain hints on how to read *Concrete Island*. On the one hand, we can expect similar patterns as in Defoe's novel. The protagonist must 'overcome fear, hunger, isolation, and find the courage to defeat anything that the elements can throw' at him (2014: vii). He will feel 'the need to dominate the island' and to 'transform its anonymous terrain' in his image (2014: vii-viii). On

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the other hand, he also draws attention to a dominant pattern of difference from *Robinson Crusoe*:

But as well as the many physical difficulties facing us there are the psychological ones. How resolute are we, and how far can we trust ourselves and our own motives? Perhaps, secretly, we hoped to be marooned, to escape our families, lovers and responsibilities. (2014: viii)

This essay is concerned with the ways in which *Concrete Island* makes these differences from the original text salient for the reader by way of the stylistic options chosen. It is therefore first and foremost a narratological study, only occasionally straying to produce a reading or interpretation. Rather, the focus of this contribution is on how *Concrete Island* helps readers come up with an abstract reading by insistently prompting comparisons to Defoe's original text. Contrary to Ballard's assertion that the psychological component of *Concrete Island* is distinct from 'physical difficulties', it argues that the text extensively uses representations of the body to foreground these differences.

Uncanny doublings in Robinson Crusoe

A similar foregrounding of the body is central to *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe frequently uses Friday's body to highlight the similarities and differences between Robinson and his servant. Specifically, the physicality of Friday's imitation of Crusoe characterises him as an apt pupil, if cognitively inferior to his master. Todd relates this 'blurring of the civilized-savage binary in Friday' (2018: 149) to Defoe's advocacy for 'a morally sounder and more pragmatic policy of dealing with [Indigenous people]' (2018: 149). However, there are instances in the text where the blurring of the binary is difficult to reconcile with paternalistic colonial politics. At times, Robinson and Friday become uncanny *Doppelgängers* in an almost proto-Gothic sense, with Friday performing aspects of Crusoe's identity that his master does not recognise as such, but the reader may due to the stylistic texture of the novel. In my understanding of the double, I follow Vardoulakis, who notes that the 'reversal performed by the Doppelgänger counteracts absolutism by making "excessive" what seeks to become absolute' (2006: 104). In the scene to be analysed in the following paragraphs, Friday becomes the excessive as Robinson's double, and the text suggests that what could be conceived as absolute—in our case, the master-servant relationship—is, in fact, in constant flux.

The scene that illustrates this uncanny doubling best can be found in one of ‘the two gratuitous animal killings that end part 1, which have puzzled scholars for three hundred years’ (Prince 2020: 195). On the way back to England, while traversing the Pyrenees, Friday hunts and kills a bear, and he does so in a manner that Robinson calls ‘the greatest Diversion imaginable’ (Defoe 1994: 211). It is immediately clear that Friday will hunt and kill the bear for sport since, unlike the wolves that beset the party earlier during their travels, the bear just wants to be left alone. Friday throws a stone at the bear, then allows the understandably irate creature to chase him up a tree. When the bear follows him onto a branch, Friday’s cruel intentions become clear: he starts shaking the branch, and now the bear can neither go back down the tree for fear of falling nor forward to catch Friday since the foremost part of the branch would not sustain his weight. The confused animal begins ‘to totter’ and stands ‘so ticklish that we had laughing enough indeed’ (Defoe 1994: 213). Finally, Friday jumps down from the tree, waits for the bear to climb down, and then ‘stept up close to him, clapt the Muzzle of his Piece into his Ear, and shot him dead as a Stone’ (Defoe 1994: 214). Crucially, there is a constant element of surprise to Friday’s performance: Robinson repeatedly emphasises that he and the other men in the party ‘could not imagine what would be the End of it’ (Defoe 2014: 213).

The scene has been read as ‘an uncanny inversion of Robinson’s killing of the African leopard’ as well as his treatment of African and Caribbean peoples (Loar 2006: 19). Prince interprets the scene biographically, as Defoe taking allegorical revenge on an enemy whom he identified with the figure of the bear (2020: 198). But the parallels to Robinson’s actions shortly before he gets to leave the island are at least equally striking. He tricks the mutinous crew of the ship at anchor before the island into believing that the place has been colonised, that he is its governor and that he commands a small army against whom the sailors would not stand a chance (Defoe 2014: 180–193). Just like Friday, Robinson gleefully draws out the performance. And he, too, switches roles constantly and toys with the sailors. In other words, Friday’s bear hunt can be read as a demonstration that he has learned his master’s final lesson on the island well—so much so, in fact, that even Robinson can no longer predict his pupil’s actions.

As readers, we may pick up on the fact that ‘Friday has now come to understand that the power of violence depends as much on display as upon

raw force; that the performance of technological superiority is, after all, a performance' (Loar 2006: 20). Friday has become the uncanny echo of Robinson's violence. However, there is no indication that Robinson recognises himself in Friday's performance. Instead, he is relegated to the role of a spectator. The scene, therefore, also blurs the line between Friday and Robinson: for a moment at least, Friday becomes Robinson. Sivyer has characterised *Robinson Crusoe* as a text riddled with 'an anxiety about the distinction between the human and the non-human' and 'about the definition of the human' (2016: 82). In the bear-baiting scene, which invites us to consider the sameness of Robinson and Friday as well as the bear and the sailors back on the island, these anxieties come to the fore. While Sivyer thinks of such a reading as the 'latent content of *Robinson Crusoe*' in a Freudian sense (2016: 82), this essay argues that these complexities and contradictions are a part of the novel's very structure and form. They are a function of insistent stylistic and structural choices, not just the manifestation of the text's unconscious.

The anxieties that Sivyer identifies do not just become salient by way of parallelisms but also by pointed differences. These mostly derive from the intense, stylistically flaunted physicality of Friday's performance. While Robinson tricks the mutineers through his wit and knack for roleplay, Friday succeeds through the canny use of his body instead of social manipulation and technology (until he draws his gun, that is). He is portrayed as cognitively superior to the bear but not to his European master. And while both Crusoe and Friday put on a performance, it is striking that Crusoe's manipulation of the mutineers has only a very small audience: Crusoe and the reader. Its function is the assertion of dominance over the island. Friday, on the other hand, performs explicitly for the amusement of his colonial master and, therefore, tacitly accepts his inferior position in the hierarchy. Still, the uncanny effects of the doubling that blurs the line between master and servant linger.

Ballard, in *Concrete Island*, picks up on Defoe's use of Friday's body as a cue for readerly interpretation. But while Friday's physicality is mostly an indicator of the difference between master and servant in *Robinson Crusoe*, the body in Ballard's rewriting of Defoe signifies a fundamental sameness of Robinson and Friday that can only occasionally be glimpsed in *Robinson Crusoe*: a blurring of the boundaries between the two characters, to the point where they switch roles or become a hybrid entity.

Ballard's novel establishes this pattern of foregrounding the characters' physicality from the beginning. In fact, the introduction of the protagonist, Robert Maitland, can be seen as an instruction manual on how to read representations of the body in the novel: it channels readerly expectations and guides the process of hypothesis testing. These are terms from cognitive or constructivist narratology, which, as film scholar David Bordwell explains, emphasises the activity of the recipient while taking in a narrative (1985: 30). Herman, too, affirms that cognitive narratology focuses on 'mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices' (2009: 31). Constructivist or cognitive narratology assumes that the reader is not just a passive vessel that is gradually filled with information. Instead, readers take in the cues provided by the text and must actively fill the gaps left by the narration since the information provided by the narration is always 'incomplete and ambiguous' (Bordwell 1985: 30). Based on their inferences, the recipients 'construct a perceptual judgment' and thus, gradually, a narrative (Bordwell 1985: 30). Reception of a narrative can therefore be conceptualised as a process wherein readers constantly frame and test hypotheses (Bordwell 1985: 49) about how the narrative will continue and how to make abstract meaning of it.

The body in Concrete Island as counter-narrative to Robinson Crusoe

In *Concrete Island*, references to the body consistently establish a counter-narrative to what could superficially be considered a simple reread of the *Robinson Crusoe* formula. Our protagonist is Robert Maitland, a 35-year-old architect. On his way home from the office, his Jaguar blows a tyre and crashes on a traffic island below three converging motorways. In the aftermath of the crash, he sustains serious injuries that hinder his physical mobility considerably. At first, Maitland seems intent on escaping the island, but his attempts to flag down a car or alert the authorities to his plight prove unsuccessful. This is where *Concrete Island* deviates from Defoe's original text substantially: escape is not impossible for Maitland. Instead, it quickly becomes clear that he does not want to leave this concrete island. In other words, he is one of many characters in Ballard's work whose marooning is voluntary, a case of what Ballard himself called 'inverted Crusoeism' in his novel *The Drowned World* (2008: 48).

The reader can form this hypothesis mostly because the narration foregrounds Maitland's body. Roughly, the first two chapters tell us that Maitland has already given in to his unconscious desire to flee civilisation

before the crash. Throughout the novel, he will mostly not be driven by rationality. Instead, his body acts out his unconscious desires, often resulting in catastrophic self-harm, leaving the reader and Maitland himself to make sense of these unconscious decisions retrospectively. The supposed accident that leaves him stranded on the eponymous concrete island establishes this pattern. Here is how he works out the causality of the event shortly afterwards:

As Maitland frankly recognized, he invariably drove well above the speed limit. Once inside a car some rogue gene, a strain of rashness, overran the rest of his usually cautious and clear-minded character. Today, speeding along the motorway when he was already tired after a three-day conference, preoccupied by the slight duplicity involved in seeing his wife so soon after a week spent with Helen Fairfax, he had almost wilfully devised the crash, perhaps as some bizarre kind of rationalisation. (Ballard 2014: 3)

The passage gives us several potential explanations of Maitland's self-marooning without privileging one of them: exhaustion causing the loss of control over the vehicle; a suppressed penchant for irrational behaviour; a sense of ennui with his professional life, and guilt because of his affair (or all the above). Neither does it tell us in how far Maitland's wilful exile would constitute a 'bizarre kind of rationalisation'. We must hypothesise, therefore, that this pattern of obfuscation as to the meaning of Maitland's behaviour will continue, as indeed it does.

The opening chapters are much less ambiguous about Maitland's corporeal desires. Consider this passage with the premise that Maitland wants the car crash to happen:

Six hundred yards from the junction with the newly built spur of the M4 motorway, when the Jaguar had already passed the 70 m.p.h. speed limit, a blow-out collapsed the front nearside tyre. The exploding air reflected from the concrete parapet seemed to detonate inside Robert Maitland's skull. During the few seconds before his crash he clutched at the whiplashing spokes of the steering wheel, dazed by the impact of the chromium window pillar against his head. The car veered from side to side across the empty traffic lanes, jerking his hands like a puppet's. (Ballard 2014: 1)

The remainder of the depiction of the crash is reserved for descriptions of what happens to the car, not Maitland. In fact, we are encouraged to think of the car as a living being or an extension of Maitland's. The text initiates this pattern by giving agency to the vehicle instead of Maitland: it is the Jaguar that 'had already passed the 70 m.p.h. speed limit', not the

protagonist. And instead of the driver steering the car, the Jaguar controls Maitland, ‘jerking his hands like a puppet’s’. From the very first page of the novel, we can therefore deduce that Maitland’s desires are mostly of a physical nature. He wants to relinquish control of his body, become puppet-like, and even merge with other characters or material objects such as the car. He also welcomes changes to his cognition, especially if they result from the ruination of his body, as established in this excerpt by the image of an explosion inside his skull. As Stephenson (1991) puts it, ‘[i]n a metaphoric sense an explosion does occur within Maitland’s head at this moment: his familiar reality and his familiar identity are being exploded, collapsed like the tire of his car’ (75). Sivyer, too, observes that this is ‘the first of many instances in which the text not only blurs the line between the human and the technological, but also the internal and the external’ (2016: 77).

In short, even though we may superficially perceive Maitland along the lines of a Robinson, the novel’s focus on the protagonist’s body characterises him as at least partly a Friday, conceived of here as a heteronomous entity removed from Western civilisation and bent on pleasurable self-destruction.

More precisely, this expository sequence suggests that Maitland will intermittently and perhaps ultimately be a Friday. Rational, Robinson-like Maitland wants to leave the concrete island quickly. He explores the island’s circumference to find out whether there is an exit other than the embankment, only to find out that there is not (Ballard 2014: 5). Consequently, he decides to ‘climb the embankment, wave down a passing car and be on his way’ (Ballard 2014: 7). But even as he behaves like a Robinson, the narration gives us hints as to his underlying desire, that is, that he does not want to leave the island at all. When an airline coach passes Maitland on the motorway, we witness him ‘deciding not to wave at them’, for example. His body refuses to behave according to the rules and logic of his former life. His explanation for this behaviour—that his wave would be considered ambiguous and that the coach would therefore be unlikely to stop—is hardly convincing (Ballard 2014: 5).

Shortly afterwards, the narration complicates the readerly attempt to identify Robinson(s) and Friday(s) in the novel even more. We soon encounter two further potential candidates for Friday figures on the island: Jane, a psychologically troubled sex worker, and Proctor, a mentally handicapped former circus artist turned tramp. Proctor is the most obvious

contender for *Concrete Island*'s Friday. Maitland quickly gains the upper hand over him, and the former acrobat becomes his servant, carrying his master all over the island. However, the stylistic and thematic texture of the novel suggests a more complex scenario than Defoe's (mostly) clearly defined master-servant relationship. Much like in that closing scene from Defoe's novel, the role of Friday and of Robinson is dynamically reassigned in *Concrete Island*; it is a psychological and physical condition rather than an individual identity. And later in the novel, as already stated, it also becomes clear that *Concrete Island* is a case of inverted Crusoeism in another sense. Proctor is not going to become like Maitland. Instead, Maitland is going to become more like Proctor. Friday does not become Robinson; Robinson is instead likely to 'go native' and end up a Friday (see Weaver-Hightower 2007: 128–169 for a discussion of the fear of 'going native' in the Robinsonade). Then again, it ultimately does not matter who plays the role of the master and who the role of the servant in *Concrete Island*. In Ballard, both roles are framed in the same way: as a regression into a self-destructive, child-like state, but crucially, a state that benefits Maitland and Proctor and Jane, a condition that is desirable and often pleasurable.

In terms of poetics, this reading is made possible by the interplay of two stylistic and structural patterns: on the one hand, Ballard channels our expectations for the novel's outcome by constantly evoking Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Based on this pattern, we expect to see Maitland rise to dominate the island much like Crusoe did. On the other hand, there is a consistent pattern that undercuts this narrative, or rather qualifies it: dominating the island is not the triumph of a rational mind but rather a solipsistic, pathological regression. In fact, it may not be domination at all but rather a co-dependency with the other inhabitants. And for the most part, this counter-narrative is of the body and the physical world. This is very typical of Ballard's fiction. O'Hara (2012), too, emphasises that

by looking at the interrelations of inanimate objects, postures, gestures and contexts, we obtain a better idea of what shapes not only Ballard's characterisation but also his narrative structure, prose, and ideas. The active elements of Ballard's brand of anti-characterisation—of gestures, roles and contexts—are systematically organised, and any meaning to be found in his characterisation resides in the formal system, not the individual agents. (106)

Maitland's first encounter with Proctor is a good example of this strategy. Proctor is introduced as a Robinson rather than a Friday. According to

Jane, he was ‘sealed in’ when the motorway was built, and it is ‘pretty remarkable how he’s survived’ (Ballard 2014: 67). In other words, he has performed feats of endurance like Robinson’s, and the reader is expected to pick up on these parallels. Proctor’s dwelling, an old air-raid shelter, also bears certain similarities to Robinson’s fortress: it is cave-like and sports ‘a wooden chair and table’ as ‘the sole pieces of furniture’ (Ballard 2014: 51), evoking the sparse furnishing of Robinson’s den. This introduction of the character may cue the reader to think of *Concrete Island* as a conflict between multiple Crusoes who will compete for dominion over the island: Maitland and Proctor as well as potentially Jane. This hypothesis is encouraged since Proctor reacts violently to Maitland when he discovers the architect in his dwelling and throws him out (Ballard 2014: 51–52).

However, there are also salient narrative cues that invite us not to think of Proctor as an entirely separate character from Maitland, and they are all connected to the physical world and the body. The text draws attention to these cues by way of parallelisms. The two characters have a similar origin story, for example: just like Maitland’s car crash, Proctor’s accident altered the tramp’s body and ultimately led to his marooning. ‘He fell off the high wire and damaged his brain’, Jane tells us (Ballard 2014: 67). Then there is the matter of Proctor’s religion. On the wooden table in his den, Proctor has ‘a number of metal objects arranged in a circle like ornaments on an altar’. These are bits and pieces of cars, one of which is a manufacturer’s medallion—a Jaguar, just like Maitland’s. Crucially, the text tells us that Maitland ‘recognised’ the medallion (Ballard 2014: 51). We are invited to think of this as recognition in a more abstract sense: both Maitland and Proctor worship the same god. Crucially, it is a god that forces the believer—or rather the driver—to relinquish control and merge with its body. On top of that, Proctor gusts out ‘a hot breath of rancid wine’ during the struggle with Maitland (Ballard 2014: 52). After the car crash, Maitland mostly subsisted on the case of wine he had stored in the boot of his car, with pernicious effects on his mental faculties (Ballard 2014: 17). Finally, we find Proctor rolling Maitland ‘backwards and forwards across the damp ground, grunting to himself as if trying to discover some secret hidden on Maitland’s injured body’ (Ballard 2014: 52). This mirrors Maitland’s own struggle to make meaning of his injuries, which eventually culminates in the delusional identification of his body with the island itself

(Ballard 2014: 47–48). Proctor's struggle to read the ruined body therefore also mirrors Maitland's gradual loss of mental capabilities.

Mirroring and repetition in Concrete Island

This narrative strategy is carefully sustained and varied throughout the novel: Maitland's actions reference and run parallel to the original Robinson Crusoe's, but there is always an undercurrent that cues a growing sense of identity or merging with Proctor. Stephenson also picks up on this pattern and observes that Proctor is Maitland's 'psychic counterpart' with whom he will achieve 'identity' (Ballard 2014: 76). Instead of emphasising the psychological component, however, I argue that physicality always precedes cognition in *Concrete Island*, at least in the conscious sense. The hypothesis of Proctor and Maitland as *Doppelgängers* is strengthened by an insistent pattern of mirroring and repetition. Sometime after their first encounter, for example, we find Maitland watching Proctor from the cover of high grass, much like Robinson watching the natives (for a prominent example, see Defoe 1994: 145–148, also Robinson's first encounter with Friday). Proctor is trying to re-enact his past life as an acrobat, but his exercises come across as a parody of his former skills. He barely succeeds in pulling off a forward somersault but nevertheless prepares for a more difficult exercise right away:

Proctor concentrated all his energies. He marked out the ground, kicking away the loose stones like a large animal searching for the kindest terrain. When he finally leaped again into the air, attempting a backward somersault, Maitland knew that he would fail. He lowered his head as the tramp sprawled across the ground, scattering his boots. Stunned, Proctor lay on his back. He picked himself up, looking dejectedly at his clumsy body. He made a half-hearted attempt to prepare himself for a second attempt, but gave up and brushed the dust from his grazed arms. He had cut his right wrist. He sucked at the wound, and tried a hand-stand, following it with a crude knee fall. His coordination was clearly at fault, and the forward somersault had come off by chance alone. Even skipping was too much for him. Within seconds the rope was tangled around his neck. (Ballard 2014: 64–65)

At first glance, this is quite close to the *Crusoe* narrative. Maitland observes Proctor like Robinson observes the Native people, gathering information and hatching a plan to ensure his continued dominance over the island. Proctor, seen through the focaliser Maitland, is animal-like and an idiot, a powerful body in need of a brain. This is underlined by the

statement that ‘his coordination was clearly at fault’; the implication is that Maitland is required as the coordinator, the brains of the operation. But this statement is also indicative of a future relationship between the two that goes beyond Robinson and Friday’s master-servant constellation. It suggests a physical merging of Maitland and Proctor, the two of them becoming one body. There are other hints at such a merger in this excerpt, such as the fact that ‘Maitland knew that [Proctor] would fail’—a mysterious certainty that can either be explained rationally, based on Maitland’s empirical observations, or as yet another hint at the two characters’ identity. Finally, there is the way the scene ends. Proctor notices Maitland watching him and vanishes ‘like a startled animal into the deep grass’ (Ballard 2014: 65). But then there is ‘a faint movement in the nettle bank behind Maitland’, and our protagonist is ‘certain that Proctor was watching him’ (Ballard 2014: 65). The situation is reversed; Robinson becomes Friday, and Friday becomes Robinson.

This is not to say that our expectation that Maitland is Robinson is entirely disappointed. In his quest for domination over the island and its inhabitants, it is still possible for readers to occasionally recognise him as Crusoe. But this Robinson is not a rational agent. Instead, his actions are always motivated by cruelty and a self-destructive streak. Here, too, the text uses descriptions of the body to indicate that Maitland’s assertion of Robinson-like dominance should be taken with a grain of salt. Maitland controls both Proctor and Jane by dividing them, for example. To draw them out, he lights his blanket on fire; then, he implies that Jane kept the spoils from his wrecked car from Proctor and tries to bribe Proctor into subservience by offering him money. ‘Already he was playing these two outcasts against each other, feeding their mutual distrust’ (Ballard 2014: 78). But note how this supposed triumph over Proctor and Jane is qualified by an implied flash-forward in the preceding line: ‘The afternoon light was fading, and Maitland regretted that he had burned the blanket’ (Ballard 2014: 78). He is going to be quite cold during the night. These actions are not at all comparable to Crusoe’s, who is consistently invested in his own survival and success. The narration, by once again showing us that the body speaks the truth instead of verbal utterances or a short-lived success, thus leads us to suspect that Maitland’s ascent will be temporary at best. Instead, a different outcome seems more likely, namely, that Maitland will end up like Proctor. Already, Maitland’s dress shirt is ‘grimy’, ‘the blackened trousers slit from the right knee to the waistband’, and his

clothes a 'collection of tatters' that 'less and less resembled an eccentric costume' (Ballard 2014: 63) but an identity: that of the tramp. In short, these cues suggest either a Maitland-Proctor hybrid or Maitland's ultimate cognitive and psychological regression into a tramp like Proctor. The readerly hypothesis of Maitland as a triumphant coloniser is swiftly eliminated. The body and the material world betray Maitland's true future.

Much like in the bear-hunting scene from *Robinson Crusoe*, then, the status of Robinson and Friday oscillates throughout *Concrete Island*. However, what both states have in common is regression and the rejection of the supposedly modern and rational outside world. Occasionally, each character willingly becomes a servant figure to help others maintain their regressive or suppressive status. This becomes most apparent in Maitland's encounters with Jane. At one point, they both tacitly enter into a role-playing scenario with each other, with Jane 'testing both him and herself, exploring through Maitland some failure of her own past'. Maitland decides to 'play the girl's game', telling Jane: 'You owe it to yourself to leave here—by staying on the island you're just punishing yourself'. This is apparently exactly what she needs to hear to help her harden her stance again. She proclaims that staying on the island is 'easier than coming to terms with something' and that she 'was never very good at patching up quarrels—I wanted to go on simmering for days. That way you can really hate...' (Ballard 2014: 80).

Upon closer inspection, Maitland's supposed dominion over the island is predicated on this concerted refusal of all three characters to return to the outside world. This is why I cannot entirely agree with Sellars (2012) that Maitland 'psychically claims the island' in an act of 'micronationalism' (234). This would require that Proctor and Jane fully accept him as their ruler, which they do not. Whenever Maitland tries to command Proctor to help him escape, for example, the tramp systematically ignores any mention of the world beyond the island:

'Proctor—' Maitland chose his words carefully. 'I'm going to leave here today. I must go home—do you understand? You've got your home here, and I've got mine. I have a wife and a son—they need me. Now, I'm grateful to you for looking after me...'

He stopped, realizing that the last sentence was the only one which had registered on the tramp's mind.

'Listen to me, Proctor—I want you to help me climb the embankment. Now!'

He held out his arm to Proctor, but the tramp glanced uneasily towards the ruined cinema. 'Help Mr Maitland... how? Maitland's sick.' (Ballard 2014: 84)

The reference to Maitland's sickness is ambiguous enough to allow two readings: it could refer to his physical injuries—or to the fact that he is considering a return to the outside world. Only when Maitland chooses to stay does Proctor become his servant. Maitland still frames this as an acceptance of his dominance, but he also knows that Proctor's surrender is not unconditional: 'He had tamed the old tramp, but there was a tacit convention between them that Proctor would never help him to escape' (Ballard 2014: 101).

Significantly, this final rejection of Maitland's wish to stay on the island is once again tied to the body. As one illness is cured, that is, the vestiges of Maitland's desire to return to his former life, his physical injuries will go untreated by any doctor. As a consequence, Proctor and Maitland become more than just mentally co-dependent. Maitland needs Proctor to carry him around the island: 'Without this beast of burden Maitland found it difficult to move around the island at all' (Ballard 2014: 101). Proctor and Maitland's corporeal hybridity tells us the truth about their relationship: Maitland is not at all a Robinson figure by this point.

Takeaways

After this look at Ballard's reconfiguration of *Robinson Crusoe* and Friday specifically, what can we take away from the discussion? The first point is Ballard's method of rewriting Friday, and *Robinson Crusoe* in general. The narration consistently references and mirrors the structure of the original novel as well as scenes from the original. It channels our expectations in this way: *Concrete Island*, it seems to announce, will be a familiar story of isolation, survival, and domination. At the same time, Ballard's narration, with its intense focus on the body and the physical world, cues us to qualify this perception of the plot and characters, especially by making us question the physical and mental individuality or distinctness of Maitland and Proctor (and, to a degree, Jane). This leads us to the second takeaway: there are Robinsons and Fridays in *Concrete Island*, but these are not essential, immutable identities like in Defoe's novel. Instead, the characters are all Robinson and Friday as well as hybrids of the two at various points in the novel. In fact, the text seems to insist that it really does not matter whether Maitland is Robinson or Friday

or something in between. What matters is that Maitland, Proctor, and Jane all share the same negative attitude towards the outside world and towards facing their psychological problems. And they choose to help each other be a Robinson or a Friday, to self-destruct pleasurably.

It would be easy to criticise Ballard, of course: from a postcolonial point of view, it is a questionable move to rewrite Friday in this way, to insist that everybody can be Friday, even or maybe especially these three white English characters. But we could also think of how Ballard frames the choice to stay on the island as the most incisive part of his reconfiguration of the original novel. It is certainly the part that is most representative of the 1970s, of a very historically and culturally specific way of looking at *Robinson Crusoe*. Remember that in *Robinson Crusoe* Friday insists that he wants to stay with Robinson instead of returning home (Defoe 1994: 163). In Defoe, this insistence can be read as an affirmation of Western civilisation, Protestantism, colonialism, and the capitalist enterprising spirit. But Ballard's Fridays choose to stay with their Robinson because they reject all of the above. The trouble is that their Robinson does not have a new grand narrative to replace the old one. As Gasiorek (2005) puts it, Ballard's primitivism does not hold the promise of a better way of life:

The encounter between the individual and the environment may strip the self of socially programmed assumptions but this does not mean that psychic bedrock will necessarily be reached; what may be revealed is not a tragic knowledge—such as Kurtz's 'the horror! The horror!'—that is potentially redemptive but rather the ruses by which socially induced psycho-pathologies cover their tracks. (114–115)

Francis (2011), analysing the novel through the lens of psychoanalyst R. D. Laing, characterises the goal of these 'psycho-pathologies' as a 'deliberate withdrawal into a citadel-like microcosmos' (121). The characters' behaviour certainly bears this out. However, his statement that this withdrawal necessitates 'a solipsistic tendency mentally to depersonalise others' (Francis 2011: 122) cannot be fully reconciled with the novel. On the contrary, my reading suggests that Maitland, Proctor, and Jane are all keenly aware of each other's psychological needs. That is because they privilege reading each other's bodies over verbal utterances. They hurt each other because they know this is required to make the other, and themselves, stay on the island.

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