

## Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell 2005)

Note: this copy has been made from a PDF version of the 2005 Wiley Blackstock edition. The footnotes in that edition have been transposed here from end-of-book to end-of-chapter and page-numbers have been omitted. Minor corrections have been made to the .pdf source where necessary – e.g., the inconsistent title-form, “The True Born Englishman” / *The True Born Englishman*). Note also that the sections of Defoe and Swift—the latter from p.11—are available separately as Chap. 2(a) and Chap. 2(b).

### Chapter 2: Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift

Like the novelist and ex-convict Jeffrey Archer, Daniel Defoe’s career spanned both debt and high politics, authorship and imprisonment. Chronologically speaking, art followed life in Defoe’s career, since he began writing most of his works as an activist. In another sense, however, his life imitated his art, since it was a career quite sensationalist enough for one of his own novels. He was at various times a hosiery, wine and tobacco merchant, brick factory owner, political turncoat, underground political informant, secret government agent and spin doctor or state propagandist. He took part in an armed rebellion against James II, travelled extensively in Europe, and played a key role in the historic negotiations by which the kingdoms of England and Scotland were politically united.

Defoe was bankrupted more than once, imprisoned for debt, and sentenced to stand in the pillory on a charge of sedition for publishing a satirical pamphlet. He later wrote a ‘Hymn to the Pillory’, as well as publishing a ‘Hymn to the Mob’ in which, scandalously, he praised the mob for its soundness of judgement. It is hard to imagine any other major English author doing the same. He also produced *A Political History of the Devil*, a study of ghosts, an account of the Great Plague of London, and a work in fulsome praise of matrimony entitled *Conjugal Lewdness; or Matrimonial Whoredom. A Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed*. He was not a ‘novelist’ (that category, as a serious critical term, comes later), though he did attack ‘Romances’, meaning stories which entertained rather than informed. Works like *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe* become ‘novels’ only in retrospect. Defoe simply wrote whatever he thought would sell, churning out works of all kinds for the rapidly growing mass market of his day. The printing press did not discriminate between different kinds of writing, and neither did Defoe.

Writing for Defoe, then, was a commodity, just as the world presented by his writings is commodified from top to bottom. He was not a ‘literary’ man: on the contrary, his writing is rushed, weightless and transparent, a ‘degree zero’ style of supposedly factual reportage which effaces its own status as writing. It is what he himself described as a ‘mean style’, one which seems to lack all consciousness of its own artifice. In Defoe’s laconic, homespun, rough-and-ready language we hear, almost for the first time in literature, the idiom of the people. It is a language stripped of texture and density, so that we can gaze right through the words to the things themselves. ‘The knowledge of things, not words, makes a scholar’, he commented in *The Compleat English Gentleman*. A profusion of incident and adventure has to compensate for this lack of texture. The sheer fertility of his invention is astonishing. Defoe is not interested in the feel of things, any more than a grocer spends his days lovingly fondling his cheeses. He is interested in the practical use and exchange-value of objects, not their sensuous qualities. There is sensuality in Defoe, not least in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, but not sensuousness. Defoe’s realism is a realism of things, whereas Richardson’s is one of persons and feelings.

After a lifetime as a mercurial jack-of-all-trades and professional survivor, Defoe died while in hiding from his creditors, determined perhaps to perish in the manner to which he was accustomed. He had been a Dissenter at a time when this reviled group were denied most civil rights. Like a good many major English novelists, as we shall see later, he was lower middle class or *petty bourgeois* in status, in tune with the common people yet more educated, aspiring and politically articulate. In his *Journal of the Plague Year* he scoffs at some popular superstitions but gives credence to others. Like many of those who sprang from this most politically nonconformist of social classes (one thinks of William Blake), he was a political maverick who affirmed the radical equality of men and women, maintaining that it was pure social convention which held women back. Sexual inequalities were cultural, not natural. The qualities which make characters like *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders* rogues and whores (either high-class

or low-class) also mean that they are no man's permanent property. In this world, in fact, no relationship is permanent.

These women are efficient entrepreneurs of their own sexuality, as much in control of this profitable commodity as Crusoe is in control of the products of his labour. The prostitute utilizes her own body as the peasant ploughs his own land. Moll's beauty and quick wits are raw materials to be exploited, rather like the materials which Crusoe salvages from the shipwreck. To reduce sex to a commodity in this way may degrade it, but it also demystifies it. It strips it of its chivalric trappings and feudal pieties. Instead, sexuality in patriarchal society is seen to be about power, gratification, possession and exploitation. To see it in this light may not be exactly sexual emancipation, but it is arguably an essential step towards it. When Moll Flanders breezily remarks that she was glad to be rid of her children, all right-minded readers are both scandalized and deeply sympathetic. Roxana is a 'she-merchant' who refuses to marry even a nobleman because it would be the ruin of her financial independence. To be a wife in her view is to be a slave. The puritan of Defoe's age prized both domestic bliss and economic individualism; the only problem was that they were fundamentally incompatible. This was obviously true for women, who were mostly excluded from the economic sphere in any case; but it was also the case for men, since in practice economic individualism meant trampling on the values of tenderness, affection, loyalty and companionship supposedly symbolized by the family.

To complete his progressive credentials, Defoe also championed the absolute sovereignty of the people, who could never, he thought, surrender their right to rebel against an unjust sovereignty. He defended the Quakers, and spoke up for the merits of an ethnically mixed society. Foreigners, he claimed, were a precious benefit to the nation. He scoffed at chauvinistic mythologies of England in his poem *The True-Born Englishman*, which insists loudly on the ethnically mongrelized nature of the English people, scorns the aristocratic notion of purity of blood, and ridicules the very idea of a true-born Englishman as an irony, fiction and contradiction. It is not entirely irrelevant to this polemic that William III, for whose government Defoe worked, was Dutch.

Though no social leveller, Defoe maintained that there was precious little difference between 'the counter and the coronet'. Trade, he claimed provocatively, was 'the most noble, instructive and improving of any way of life'. In a sense, his religious faith led him to a kind of social reformism, since if human nature was radically corrupt, one had to rely more on nurture than nature. 'What will all the natural capacities of a child amount to without teaching?' he inquires in *The Compleat English Gentleman*. It is upper-class Tories like Henry Fielding who stress the importance of natural characteristics, and Defoe was not slow to spot the politics behind this doctrine. It could be used to downplay the importance of education and social reform, and to justify innate, unalterable differences of rank.

Defoe did not entirely endorse the view that men and women were born like clean slates to be inscribed by social influences, but he certainly held that 'Nature produces nothing till she is married to Learning and got with child by Science'. Crusoe's island is a kind of blank slate or *tabula rasa*, waiting for Man to impress himself upon it. Defoe wanted to see the word 'gentleman' used more as a moral than a social term, though even he could not bring himself to concede that the word could be used of a tradesman. It could, however, be used of his cultivated son. He denounced the well-heeled aldermen of London in biblical style as men 'among whom are crimes black as the robes they wear; whose feasts are debauches and excesses ... their mouths full of cursing and blasphemy'. He was also a doughty apologist for the poor, and took a boldly deterministic line about their situation: they were, he thought, forced into crime through no fault of their own. As he scathingly inquires in his periodical, the *Review*: 'How many honest gentlemen have we in England now of good estates and noble circumstances that would be highwaymen and come to the gallows if they were poor?' A rich man, unlike a destitute one, has no occasion to be a knave: 'The man is not rich because he is honest, but he is honest because he is rich'.

This is a scandalously materialist doctrine, more typical of Bertolt Brecht than an ardent eighteenth-century Christian. Moral values are simply the reflexes of material conditions. The rich are just those

fortunate enough not to have to steal. Morality is for those who can afford it. Ideals are all very well for those who have plenty to eat. Defoe accordingly demanded laws which acknowledged the condition of the poor, rather than a system which first drove them to poverty and then hanged them for it. He believed, in his street-wise bluntly realistic fashion, that no moral or rational reflection could temper the formidable force of biological self-preservation, which he dubs Necessity:

Poverty makes thieves ... In poverty, the best of you will rob, nay, even eat, your neighbour ... Necessity is the parent of crime ... Ask the worst highwayman in the nation, ask the lowliest strumpet in the town, if they would not willingly leave off the trade if they could live handsomely without it. And I dare say, not one but will acknowledge it.

It is an early instance of what one might call the social-worker theory of morality. The conservative Henry Fielding, by contrast, argues in his essay on *The Increase of Robbers* that crime comes about by the poor imitating the luxury of the rich.

It is worth noting how Defoe's attitude denigrates the poor – they are mere victims of circumstance, without will or agency of their own – at the same time as it elicits our compassion for them. This is a risky move, since we tend not to feel sympathy for what we consider worthless. All the same, the claim strikes a devastating blow at the notion of the autonomous self, that ideological lodestar of Defoe's kind of civilization. Indeed, it lays bare an embarrassing contradiction at the very heart of that order. If middle-class society holds the autonomous self so dear in theory, how come that it violates it so often in practice? Does it really desire independence for its servants, wage-slaves and colonial peoples? Wouldn't you secretly prefer to have absolute freedom of action yourself, while denying it to your competitors in the marketplace? Middle-class society believes in the selfgovernment of the people; but it is also a place where men and women seem to be little more than playthings of impersonal economic forces. Defoe's protagonists – Moll Flanders, Robinson Crusoe, Roxana, Colonel Jack – are all caught up in this contradiction. If they are in one sense creators of their own destiny, they are also the hapless victims of Providence, the marketplace and their own appetites.

Defoe, to be sure, was no critic of capitalist society. On the contrary, he was one of its most articulate spokesmen. His writing is flushed with the buoyancy and boundless vitality of capitalism in its pristine stage. In an essay entitled 'The Divinity of Trade', he sees Nature itself as a kind of capitalist, who in its unfathomable bourgeois wisdom has made bodies able to float so that we can build ships in which to trade; has hung out stars by which merchants can navigate; and has carved out rivers which lead straight to the eminently plunderable resources of other countries. Animals have been made meekly submissive so that we may exploit them as instruments or raw materials; jagged coastlines are thoughtfully adapted to the construction of sheltered harbours; while raw materials have been distributed with wonderful convenience throughout the globe so that each nation has something to sell and something to buy. Short of manufacturing the oceans out of Coca-Cola or implanting in us a biological need for Nike footwear, Nature has scarcely missed a trick.

As an enlightened radical (though one who believed in witchcraft), Defoe saw capitalism as an internationalist, socially emancipated form of life, one to be celebrated rather than castigated. For him, it was an exhilaratingly progressive affair. The merchant was the new principle of universal harmony and solidarity: 'He sits in his counting house and converses with all nations'. Trade and market dealings were steadily undercutting privilege, deference, hierarchy and mindless custom. Merit and hard work were beginning to bulk larger than blood and birth. Defoe was critical not of this bustling, dynamic form of life, but of some of the ideological cant which still clustered around it. There was a glaring discrepancy between what it actually did, and what it said it did – between its facts and its values. There was a rift, for example, between the moral assumption that men and women were free, and the plain material fact that they were not.

There was also a troubling contradiction between the way this social order elevated the individual to supreme status, and the way that in practice it treated individuals as indifferently interchangeable. Business, sexual or marital partners in Defoe's novels come and go, sometimes with about as much individuality as rabbits. But the main conflict lay between the amoral practices of a culture in which what really matters is money and self-interest, and the high-sounding moral ideals to which it laid claim.

In Defoe's novels, this becomes a tension between the story, which is told because roguery and wickedness are inherently fascinating, and the moral, which claims that the story is told to warn you against imitating such vice.

It is the double-think of the tabloid press: 'You may find this tale of erotic romps in the council chamber shocking, but we feel it is our public duty to expose local authority sleaze'. The eighteenth-century writer John Dunton, who knew Defoe slightly, ran a monthly paper devoted to exposing prostitution called *The Night Walker: or, Evening Rambles in Search after Lewd Women*. It was not, as one might suspect, a wholly high-minded project. The naturalistic novel in the late nineteenth century did something similar, taking the lid off steamy sex and squalid social underworlds in a spirit of scientific inquiry. It is not, however, Defoe who is being hypocritical here, so much as society itself. The double-think, so to speak, is built into the situation he is depicting.

Like middle-class society itself, what a Defoe novel shows, and what it says, move at quite different levels. There is a blank at the heart of these works, where a relation between God and your bank balance, prayer and the purchase of slaves, ought to be. This is because a form of society is emerging in England which is moving beyond the religious and metaphysical in practice, but which still needs to appeal to such principles in theory. Unless it did, it would be hard put to justify its existence. In practice, the world is just one random material situation after another, without overall point or pattern. In theory, it all adds up to some beneficent Providence. In theory, things have Godgiven values; in practice, their value lies in what you can get for them on the market. In theory, moral values are absolute; in practice, nothing in this mobile, ceaselessly mutating society is absolute at all. The family, for a devout puritan like Defoe, is a sacred domain, as his work *The Family Instructor* suggests; it is just that ties of kinship are to be severed when they get in the way of your material advancement, as happens often enough in the novels. Family relations are sacrosanct bonds of blood; it is just that in practice they are to be broken, ignored or treated as purely instrumental.

The extraordinarily radical achievement of Defoe's novels is to tell the stark, unvarnished truth about this world, without posture or pretension. The result is a kind of sensationalism which rarely seems conscious of itself as such. The sensation, so to speak, lies in the subject-matter itself, rather than in the way it is presented. In fact, the tone in which it is presented is level, colourless and scrupulously neutral. In its English way, it does not go in for emotional histrionics. In *Crusoe*, it is as though the tone belongs to the cool-headed colonialist and the exotic subject-matter to his colonial subjects. These remorselessly unadorned narratives do not so much strip the veils of ideological decorum from early eighteenth-century England, as simply stare through them. They are not polemical, simply candid. They do not probe much into feelings, since feelings cannot be quantified, and in this society only what is quantifiable is real. In their unabashed amorality, they are subversively faithful to what social existence is actually like, not to what it is meant to be like. In this situation, simply exposing the facts of the matter is explosive in itself. Realism itself becomes a kind of politics.

Defoe's novels, to be sure, have much to say about the importance of moral values; but there are times when they say it so perfunctorily that the gap between these values, and the facts presented by the fiction, is almost laughably apparent. Moll Flanders finishes her story by telling us how prosperous she has grown after her life of crime, remembering hastily to add as a dutiful afterthought that she sincerely repents of it. The moral of the story – crime doesn't pay – is blatantly contradicted by the outcome. The gap is so glaring, indeed, that some critics have wondered whether Defoe is not at times being deliberately ironic. When the shipwrecked Crusoe denounces the uselessness of the ship's gold to him on his island, but decides to keep it all the same, is this meant to poke ironic fun at his expense? When Crusoe, seeing Friday fleeing for his life from his fellow cannibals, reflects that he could do with a servant, and at the same moment hears Providence calling upon him to save Friday from death, is this coincidence of self-interest and spiritual revelation meant to raise a readerly smile? Is Defoe sending up Roxana when she declares that she must keep her own money separate from her husband's so as not to mingle her own ill-gotten gains with his honestly acquired fortune?

The answer, perhaps, is that it doesn't really matter. What matters is not so much whether Defoe's intentions are ironic (how can we know anyway?), but what one might call the objective irony of the situation. In this social order, values and facts, the material and the moral, are acutely at odds with each other, whether Defoe is sardonically rubbing our noses in the fact or not. Moral values are mostly quite ineffectual: generally speaking, they are to be turned to in the face of a crisis or catastrophe, of a storm or a bout of sickness, or when you are affluent enough to put a life of crime behind you. As we have seen Defoe argue already, such values are mere reflexes of material situations.

Yet if this is what Defoe the literary realist and radical materialist believes, it can hardly be the credo of the devout religious Dissenter. Defoe the Christian naturally claims that moral and religious values are a reality in their own right. The problem with this claim is that they do not seem to mesh very tightly with the material world. They exist in a realm of their own, which may be real enough but which has little impact on one's actual conduct. Moll Flanders feels sorry for one of her victims even in the act of robbing him, but the sorrow in no way interferes with the proper business of relieving him of his goods. Like Colonel Jack, you can be a skilled pickpocket yet still feel pangs of conscience. In the eighteenth century, tender sentiment and hard-nosed self-interest were no strangers to each other. So either moral values lack force because they are too closely bound up with the material world, or they lack force because they are too remote from it. Defoe himself acknowledged the latter condition when he wrote that 'Prayers and tears no revolution make, Pull down no tyrant, will no bondage break'.

Morality in Defoe is generally retrospective. Once you have made your pile, you can afford to be penitent. In any case, it is only in hindsight, not least in the act of writing, that you can make sense of your life as a whole. You live forward, but understand backward. While you are actually living your life, you are too busy trying to keep your head above water to engage in reflection, let alone remorse. You must keep on the move or go under, run very fast to stay just where you are. It is hard to brood upon metaphysical mysteries while you are trying to keep one step ahead of your creditors or work out how to dispose of your latest husband. The narrative tumbles forward at such a hectic pace that one event constantly fades beneath the next, and that of another. Not one of the hordes of characters in *Moll Flanders* has more than fleeting contact with the heroine – a typically urban situation which would be unthinkable in the settled rural communities of Jane Austen or George Eliot. These figures come and go in Moll's life like passers-by on Piccadilly. The most pressing question as the reader follows this endless metonymic process is: what comes next? Meaning and living are not really compatible.

Just as some dim-witted people are said to be unable to chew gum and walk at the same time, so Defoe's characters can act or reflect, but find it hard to do both together. Morally informed action is rare; moral reflection is what generally comes afterwards. This is one reason why two quite different literary forms rub shoulders somewhat incongruously within the covers of *Robinson Crusoe*: the adventure story and the spiritual autobiography. Of all Defoe's characters, Crusoe is the most successful in combining rational action and moral reflection. But this is partly because of his exceptional circumstances: he is, after all, on an uninhabited island, where there is work to be done but also plenty of time to meditate.

Defoe's novels display a kind of pure narrativity, in which events are not so much savoured for their own sake as registered for their 'exchange-value'. We are interested in what they leash momentarily together – in what caused them and what they lead to. Because life is pressingly material but also fast-moving, events seem both vivid and insubstantial. These novels are fascinated by process itself, not just by its end-product. There is no logical end to a Defoe narrative, no natural closure. You simply go on accumulating narrative, rather as you never stop accumulating capital. One piece of story, like one capital investment, leads to another. Crusoe is no sooner home from his island than he is off on his travels again, piling up yet more adventures which he promises to write about in the future. The desire to narrate is insatiable. Like amassing capital, it seems to have a point yet is secretly done for its own sake, with no particular end in view. There is no definitive settlement in Defoe, as there is in Fielding. All endings are arbitrary, and all of them are potential beginnings. You settle down only to take off again.

Because of this pure narrativity, few events in Defoe's world are experienced deeply enough to leave a permanent memory or impression. Characters like Moll or Roxana live off the top of their heads, by the skin of their teeth and (sometimes literally) by the seat of their pants. Coping with a random, shifting world means that the self has to be constantly adaptive. And this, in turn, means that there is no immutable core of selfhood which might draw morals and store up memories. Instead, identity is improvised, tactical, calculating. It is a set of reactions to one's environment. Human drives – greed, self-interest, self-preservation – are fixed and unchangeable, but to gratify them you have to be pliable and protean. The wit, prudence and canniness you need to cope with the plague in *A Journal of the Plague Year* are simply exaggerated versions of the qualities you need to deal with everyday life.

Selfhood implies some kind of interiority; but though one can find this in a character like Crusoe, at least in his occasional breaks from labour, there is precious little of it in some of Defoe's other protagonists. The self is not constituted by its relations with others. On the contrary, its dealings with other selves are external to it, and are purely instrumental in nature. Others are essentially tools of one's own purposes, or at best one's partners in crime. There is little sense of relationship as a value in itself; all relationships are contractual, not least sexual ones. Colonel Jack marries four times, despite the fact that he can do without women, and breaks up with one of his wives because she is overspending. In Hobbesian vein, self-interest is far more fundamental than reason or altruism. Only hunting for food is stronger than hunting for profit. Defoe was a rationalist in some respects, but he also had a typically puritan sense of the depravity of human nature, and the consequent fragility of reason.

The sole abiding reality is the isolated individual self; and the autobiographical form, which views the whole world from this lonely standpoint, is a suitable medium for this solipsism. Crusoe complains strikingly little about his solitude on the island, and for most of the time scarcely seems to notice it. It is the presence of other people, not their absence, which he finds most fearful, as when cannibals set foot on the beach. Defoe would not have been unduly impressed by Henry Fielding's remark that those who are anti-social live in constant opposition to their own nature, and 'are no less monsters than the most wanton abortions or extravagant births' (*Essay on Conversation*). The Nonconformist Protestant, as opposed to a liberal Anglican like Fielding, suspects that other people are likely to get between him and God. In this view, you can be moral even when you are by yourself – perhaps especially when you are by yourself. This is a notion which classical ethics would find as puzzling as the claim that you can be tenderly affectionate or uproariously amusing on your own. Crusoe's isolation is God's punishment for his irreligiousness, but it also plants the seeds of his salvation, since he now has time to contemplate his eternal destiny.

The self may be brooding and solitary, but in practice it is a function of its circumstances. It cannot rise sufficiently above its material environment to be an autonomous entity. The *narrating* self, to be sure, does exactly that: it delivers its tale with a cool, unruffled air which suggests a detachment from the experiences it records. The *narrated* self, by contrast – the one whose adventures the story describes – can attain no such equipoise. This involves a tension between past and present, since the narrator belongs to present time and the events he or she records belong to the past. The self is thus divided in the very act of autobiography – an act in which it tries to gather itself into a coherent whole. We shall see more of this when we come to look at Laurence Sterne.

It is convenient in a way that moralizing involves a backward glance, since it means that morality is unlikely to interfere with your actual behaviour in the present. On this view, religion and morality are rather like alcohol: it is when they begin to interfere with your everyday life that it is time to give them up. Once on his island, Crusoe thinks that he can see how this frightful fate lends retrospective meaning to his life: it is Providence's way of punishing him for his faithless youth. Things lack a meaning at the time, but they acquire one later on by being incorporated after the event into a kind of grand narrative. What was empirical at the time becomes allegorical in hindsight.

Defoe is intensely serious about Crusoe's burgeoning spiritual life. The fact that spirituality is hard to square with practicality is no argument against it. Yet though God is by no means dead, he would seem for the good Protestant to have withdrawn his presence from the world. This is one reason why Defoe's

speculations on Providence ring fairly unconvincingly. Nothing can happen to you, he remarks in *The True-Born Englishman*, 'but what comes from Providence, and consists with the interest of the universe'. Taken literally, this suggests that rape, murder and human sacrifice play their role in maintaining cosmic harmony. He writes piously in the preface to *Crusoe* of how we should honour the wisdom of Providence and its works, 'let them happen as they will'; but far from letting things happen as they will, the frenetically active Crusoe is forever trying to shape them to his own purposes. He testifies to the wisdom of Providence by claiming that the heavens are chastising him for having lived 'a dreadful life'; but little we see in his career before the shipwreck would justify such a self-accusation. It is true, however, that his youthful neglect of his religious duties would weigh a lot more heavily in Defoe's eyes than in some modern ones.

If Crusoe is indeed to be punished, it should not be for skipping his prayers, but for such acts as selling his servant Xury into slavery and running a slave plantation. He is actually leading an illegal expedition to buy slaves when he is shipwrecked. But neither he nor his author would regard these actions as especially immoral, even though Crusoe waxes indignant about Spanish imperialism in the Americas. As with the narrator of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, other people's imperialisms are usually more reprehensible than one's own. Colonel Jack advocates beating slaves, and there is no indication that his author demurs. Freedom is for Englishmen, not Africans. As a zealous puritan, Defoe believed that 'savages' were condemned to bestiality on earth and eternal torment thereafter. His radicalism had its limits.

Crusoe actually reprimands himself for *not* remaining on his plantation, where he was settled and contented, and suspects that it was his sinful restlessness in abandoning the place which has brought him to ruin. Divine Providence would clearly have preferred him to live off slave labour, and is chastising him for not doing so. There is, he reflects further, always some good to be extracted from evil: he may be cast away, but at least he is still alive. It is not in fact true that evil always yields some good, and even if it were true, it does not necessarily justify it. Auschwitz yielded some good in the form of mutual help and self-sacrifice, but nobody proposes this as a justification for it. Crusoe even persuades himself that God has punished him less than his iniquity deserves, a peculiarly selflacerating view. He reminds himself lugubriously that even the most miserable of conditions could always be worse; praises Providence, perversely, for the considerate way in which it conceals from us the terrors which surround us; and consoles himself with the thought that only by being deprived of what we enjoy can we come truly to appreciate it. In the end, he abandons these cack-handed attempts to rationalize his situation altogether, accepting instead that Providence's ways are inscrutable and not to be questioned.

All this tortuous sophistry indicates just how hard it has now become to discern a purposeful pattern in reality. Nature is no longer an open book, but an obscure text to be deciphered with difficulty. The Protestant gropes anxiously in darkness for ambiguous signs of his or her salvation. Yet the whole point of a secularized universe would seem to be its contingency – the fact that nothing in it is actually 'meant'. An author like Henry Fielding uses the formal design of the novel itself to imply a pattern in events; but the result, as we have seen, is an ironic gap between the events and the pattern. All one now seems to be left with is secular experience – whatever one can taste, feel and weigh; yet it is in this unpromising domain that one must search for symptoms of salvation.

You must look for the divine in the very sphere which seems to deny it, since this is all you really have. In the literary realm, this poring over material fragments and psychological nuances, scanning them for their concealed significance, is known as realism. In the non-literary realm, it is known as Protestantism. Is the world a matter of accident or design? Or is God somehow present in the very contingencies of his universe? Could it be, paradoxically, that the more worldly one becomes – the more one accumulates wealth, climbs the social hierarchy and gains the respect of one's fellows – the more all this can itself be seen as a sign of God's favour?

This, in a word, is the famous Protestant work ethic; and like much about middle-class society it is anxious and self-assured at the same time. There is anxiety because you can never be quite certain of

your salvation, given the obscurity of the divine plan. Signs, in this world as in some modernist literary text, are always bound to be ambiguous. This is one reason why you can never stop working, since even if you have no assurance of salvation right now, your future labours might always issue in one. Tropical islands are generally associated with indolence, but not in Crusoe's case. He is forever improving and extending his labours ('I really wanted to build my barns bigger') – so much so, indeed, that the obvious question poses itself: 'What for?' Crusoe is not a capitalist – it is an odd kind of capitalist who has no wage-labourers, markets, commodities, competitors or division of labour; but though he has no competitors, he behaves as though he does. Who would have thought that a fable of one man alone on an island could be so action-packed?

What all this unwittingly goes to show is just how futile and irrational the whole process of labour is, however rational it may be in its local details. Crusoe works a lot of the time for the sake of working, as capitalists accumulate for the sake of accumulation. Success in work may be a sign of salvation, but it is also a welcome distraction from the whole vexed business of heaven and hell. Crusoe's labour is among other things a kind of displacement activity. It saves him from having to think about his salvation. This compulsively labouring hero is like a man *en route* to execution who pauses to fasten his shoelaces and meticulously checks the knots. Defoe's protagonists concentrate on the means of life rather than inquiring about its end. In fact, as in capitalist society in general, the means of life rapidly become the end. This is partly because there are now no 'natural' ends to life, just as there are none to narrative.

Yet it is hard, even so, to ignore the fact that you are helplessly dependent on a Providence which lies beyond the reach of reason. This experience has a worldly parallel: it corresponds to the sense of being alone and adrift in a hostile world of predators and competitors, having to pick your way through nameless threats and terrors. To this extent, Crusoe's island is less an alternative to middleclass society than an aggravated version of it. His loneliness is a magnified version of the solitude of all men and women in an individualist society. If you are helplessly dependent in one sense, however, you can still be self-determining in another. How resourceful and energetic you are in your shaping your own fortunes may reveal whether you are among the small band of the saved. You can resolve the apparent conflict between being the plaything of Providence on the one hand, and working for your own advancement on the other, by claiming in good puritan style that success in the latter is a sign of having found favour in the eyes of God.

Defoe's heroes and heroines are great self-fashioners, men and women who seek to master their own circumstances and forge their own destinies. The bad news is that the world is an inhospitable place; the good news is that this mobilizes a set of admirable human resources. If middle-class England is a place of perpetual insecurity, it is also a place of opportunity. Just because there now seems no design in the world, you are free to create your own. It is just that in doing so, you attribute your success to a greater pattern called Providence, even if it is the very absence of such a pattern which allows you to make your own way in the world.

Robinson Crusoe can be seen as progressing, by and large, from anxiety to assurance. He starts off on the island as a frightened victim of its unknown terrors, and then turns to God in his sickness. Prayer and misfortune are a not unfamiliar conjuncture of events. What impels Crusoe to seek divine grace suggests that his conversion may be no more than a reflex of his material plight. From this point on, he grows in spiritual awareness, as well as in his confident mastery of the island – so that if the latter can be seen as a form of symbolic imperialism, as the presence of Friday would suggest, the implicit lesson is that religion and imperialism go hand in hand. Crusoe becomes a kind of colonial conquistador on his island – an efficient, self-disciplined leader who by creating law and order ends up as a kind of one-man political state.

The suggestion, then, is that given enough self-mastery you can evolve from a fearful state of nature to a state of civilization. In fact, however, these states are less sequential than synchronous. In colonialism, 'savagery' and civilization exist cheek by jowl, and what is plundered from the former goes to sustain the latter. At the same time, colonialist regimes are themselves divided between



selfconfidence and chronic insecurity, as the ups and downs of political and economic life pose a perpetual threat to their mastery. Something of this can be seen in what one might call the play of tenses in Defoe. The narrative is all about a kind of present-tense precariousness, in which your fortunes are unsettled and your future alarmingly uncertain; but all this is recounted with the authoritative detachment of the past tense, by a narrator who must have survived simply to be able to tell the story. Anxiety and assurance are thus combined in the writing itself.

Crusoe sees his urge to travel as a perverse form of self-destruction. 'I was born to be my own destroyer', he gloomily remarks. It is impious not to stay serenely at home, but he is powerless to resist the impulse to break away. This is fortunate in one sense, since had he done so there would have been no novel. For the narrative to get off the ground, the hero has to break with the normality of his petty-bourgeois background – though there is a sense in which Crusoe never really does so, since he behaves like an impeccable petty bourgeois even on his island. We half expect him to open a corner shop. His compulsion to travel, however, is clearly a kind of deviancy. Restlessness, or perpetual desire, is now the natural condition of humanity, and narrative is its literary expression.

Like life in general, narrative appears to have a goal, but in fact it does not. It is secretly indulged in for its own sake – even though, for a puritan like Defoe, this is as morally indefensible as selfpleasuring sex as opposed to the reproductive variety. Like everything else in a utilitarian world, including copulation, narrative is supposed to have a point. It should illustrate a moral truth. In reality, however, it is a form of guilty transgression – not only because stories work by continually overriding boundaries, but because story-telling as such is a kind of luxury or superfluity, and thus morally inadmissible. The only problem is that it is also a kind of necessity – even, perhaps, a neurosis, as may well be the case with the compulsively scribbling Samuel Richardson.

This is why Defoe has to insist that the story exists for the sake of the moral, even though it is farcically obvious that it does not. Realism, in the sense of an attention to the material world for its own sake, is still not wholly permissible, even though it is increasingly in demand in a society which believes in what it can smell, touch and taste. Realism must not take precedence over morality: Samuel Johnson insisted that the fact that a character or event in fiction was true to nature was no excuse for including it. In theory, this clash between the moral and the story can be resolved by arguing, tabloid-wise, that the more graphic and gripping you make the story, the more thoroughly you drive home the moral. As Defoe writes in his preface to *Roxana*: 'If there are any parts of her story which, being obliged to relate a wicked action, seem to describe it too plainly, all imaginable care has been taken to keep clear of indecencies ...'. This has something like the effect of a solemn sex-andviolence warning on a video, one craftily guaranteed to augment its viewing audience.

Realism, then, is permissible if it serves a moral end; and this is strangely parallel to the way in which Defoe's characters are allowed to commit crimes if forced to do so by necessity, but not just for the hell of it. Colonel Jack's criminal activity as a boy is excused by his ignorance and need to survive. He is simply following the law of nature – self-interest – in grabbing from society what he needs to stay alive. Moll is originally driven to crime by necessity, which helps to make her more sympathetic and perhaps smooths the way to her later repentance; but there is no necessity for the series of illegal exploits she indulges in later, partly for the sheer delight of exercising her wits. Just as the inherent fascination of realism takes over from Defoe's supposed moral lesson, so Moll's crimes are perpetrated partly for their own sake – or rather, so to speak, for ours. She carries on thieving even when she is wealthy enough to retire. Roxana is likewise forced into an illicit sexual relationship by her fear of starving, but this is not enough to justify forcing her maid into bed with her as well. You are forgiven for being needy, but not kinky. Roxana becomes a whore from necessity, which for Defoe is quite enough to excuse her, but it is greed and vanity which compel her to remain in the trade.

The realist novel, as we have seen, emerges at a point where everyday experience begins to seem enthralling in its own right. This blending of the ordinary and the exotic is marked in Defoe's work. Part of the pleasure of reading it comes from the sheer excitement it can squeeze from the utterly mundane. There are reasons for this mixture of high drama and routine existence. Defoe lived in

turbulent, unstable political times, and as a political adventurer found himself in the thick of them. In revolutionary epochs like his own, theatrics is part of the stuff of everyday life. He also had several careers as a small businessman, which meant that the drama of debt, bankruptcy, imprisonment and foreign expeditions was part of his daily existence.

Above all, the colourful and the commonplace came together in this period in the form of colonial adventure, which brought the chuckleheaded Englishman face to face with what struck him as outlandish and bizarre. Part of the pleasure of reading *Robinson Crusoe*, not least perhaps for its contemporary audiences, is to observe a familiar kind of rationality successfully at work in highly unfamiliar circumstances. Crusoe, who is both average and exceptional, potters about his island rather as though he were somewhere in the Home Counties, which constitutes something of a compliment to Western reason. Drop it in a jungle or a desert far from home, rather like the paratroopers, and watch how efficiently it copes. We enjoy seeing Crusoe's sturdy English practicality made to look less prosaic and more heroic, just as we enjoy watching a tropical island being gradually made to look a little more like Dorking. It is ironic in this light that the stoutly empiricist Crusoe, who would not have recognized an archetype had one fallen into his lap, should have become one of the great modern myths.

We moderns, however, are also likely to find this process rather funny, as when Crusoe rigs himself up with a very English umbrella. There is something both admirable and ludicrous about such cultural egoism, rather as there is about the colonial official in *Heart of Darkness* who shaves meticulously every morning in the middle of an impenetrable jungle. It is at once arrogant and innocent. James Joyce, who rather oddly numbered Defoe among his favourite authors, wrote of Crusoe as incarnating 'the whole Anglo-Saxon spirit ... the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy; the practical, wellbalanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity'. [1] This, so to speak, is Crusoe as seen by Friday: Joyce is writing as a colonial subject of the British crown, and had no doubt run into the odd British soldier in Dublin who answered to this description. One or two of them turn up in *Ulysses*. The passage, which Joyce wrote while in Italian exile, also has something of the genially even-handed assessment of the imperial character of one who is now at a safe distance from it. Perhaps Joyce, as a fellow materialist, relished Defoe's intense physicality. He once described himself as having a mind like a grocer, and Defoe distils the true spirit of a nation of shopkeepers.

Seeing a very English rationality triumphing over alien circumstances allows Defoe's readers to remind themselves of the universality of their own ways of doing things. In fact, if their way of life really were as universal as they think it, Crusoe might have been saved the trouble of having to teach Friday about the Christian God, since Friday might well have been granted innate knowledge of him.

In any case, Crusoe himself is afflicted by the odd twinge of cultural relativism. Who is he, he asks himself in the breast-beating style of the devout liberal or postmodernist, to interfere with a practice like cannibalism? Even so, the fact that so much of the novel is concerned with practical know-how lends a curious kind of support to the universalist case. Practical rationality, in the sense of knowing when to take shelter or how not to fall off a cliff, is more plausibly universal than any other kind of reason. This is why Friday can assist Crusoe in his labours before he can speak English properly, since the logic of the material world is common to all cultures. Stones fall if they are dropped in Haiti as well as Huddersfield, and four hands are better than two in both places for shifting heavy weights. Someone can throw you a rope if you are drowning even if what water symbolizes in their cultural system is quite different from what it signifies in yours. Practical rationality is in one sense the epitome of Englishness: if the English ever get to heaven, they will instantly measure the place up for double-glazing. Yet it is also what is most convincingly universal.

Exploring the criminal underworld is another way in which Defoe blends the bizarre and the commonplace. The underworld is in one sense an exotic aberration from everyday society; but it is also a microcosm of it, since the criminal is the nearest thing there is to the businessman. Both types need much the same qualities to prosper: quick wits, ruthlessness, resourcefulness, adaptability, a thick skin and a smooth tongue, a keen sense of self-interest and so on. Moll is thoroughly middleclass in her

aspirations, and transports these talents into her career as a thief. She despises most criminals despite being in that category herself, is obsessed with gentility and keeping up appearances, and in general presents herself as a respectable middle-class puritan who just happens to be a hardened thief as well.

There is a venerable literary tradition of the businessman-as-criminal and vice versa, all the way from the rogues of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* to Balzac's Vautrin and Dickens's Mr Merdle. As Bertolt Brecht remarked: 'What's robbing a bank compared to founding one?' The thieves' kitchen is the business corporation without the veils of ideological respectability. Colonel Jack starts out as a petty thief and ends up as a successful capitalist in Virginia, without his talents having undergone any notable transformation. Henry Fielding's master-criminal Jonathan Wild is a satirical portrait of the politician Robert Walpole, bringing together the world of high politics and the world of high misdemeanours.

The idea of stumbling across virgin soil and building a civilization on it is one of the ultimate middle-class fantasies. No doubt this is one reason why the myth of Crusoe has proved so potent.

Demolishing what has come before you may be necessary to make progress, and virgin soil saves you the trouble. You are also saved the moral unpleasantness of having to exterminate the natives. Defoe spoke for a capitalist and commercial class which was growing increasingly impatient with tradition.

In challenging the sway of the gentry and nobility, it needed to discredit the power of antiquity in the process. Defoe is suitably sardonic about the aristocratic obsession with blood and breeding: why, he asks in *The Compleat English Gentleman*, do the gentry allow their children to be suckled by plebeian wet-nurses, thus imbibing what he ironically calls 'degenerate' blood? In *The True-Born Englishman* he declares the whole business of ancestry to be an irrelevance. It is an agreeable fantasy, then, to imagine that you could undo all this history and go back to the origin, starting the whole process again but this time with the middle classes in charge.

This is one of the wish-fulfilments lurking within Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe's island is empty except for a convenient manservant. Another such wish-fulfilment in the book is the desire to trace processes of production – of food, clothing, furniture and the like – all the way through from the raw materials to the finished product, in a society where these processes have become too complex and opaque for anyone to grasp as a whole. Since Crusoe builds his own world from the bottom up, the novel grants us this overall view. Its hero regresses to a time before the division of labour – the condition in which work tasks are shared amongst a whole army of specialists – and becomes a model of self-sufficiency. The middle-class dream of the purely self-determining human subject can thus be realized – but only when nobody else is around. There is an artisanal nostalgia in the book – a puritanical, lower-middle-class longing for a more decent, more transparent world of labour and consumption, a society of use rather than luxury. Because Defoe speaks up for small capitalism as against big, there is a critical edge to his enthusiasm for money, trade and markets. In his *Review* he laments the elevation of property over persons, whatever he may do in his fiction.

The desire to wipe the historical slate clean and start over again, however, turns out to be doomed to defeat. What defeats it in *Robinson Crusoe*, in one of the great uncanny moments of world literature, is a single footprint on the sand. There is, after all, no virgin territory. Someone has always been there before you. There is a threat to your absolute sovereignty known as the Aboriginal. In a similar way, Crusoe has to admit that he would not have flourished on his island without the tools and resources he managed to salvage from the shipwreck. There is no absolute origin, no pure creation from nothing. You forge your own destiny on the basis of a history handed down to you, which can never be entirely eradicated. It is in this sense that history knows no absolute breaks. Even so, Robinson Crusoe spends long years on his island without being disturbed; Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver* is not so fortunate.

*Gulliver's Travels* is a savage spoof of the kind of travel-writing represented by *Robinson Crusoe*. Many of its contemporary readers took the book as genuine, though one of them threw it angrily aside, loudly declaring that he didn't believe a word of it. One aspect of the work which makes it sound like the kind of thing Defoe might write is its style. Like Defoe, Swift writes a practical, transparent, thing-centred prose, without much texture or resonance. It has, as one critic has pointed out, no secret recesses

or tentacular roots. [2] There is a striking lack of metaphor. It is a style of the surface, without much depth or interiority.

Swift is suspicious of depth, as he is suspicious of metaphysics and abstruse speculations. This indifference to metaphysical truths says something about the eighteenth-century clergy, of whom Swift was one. It is rather like a bank robber being indifferent to money. Tory gentlemen like Swift were amateurs, not specialists: they believed in a few commonsensical truths which the light of reason had made accessible to everyone. Swift would not have understood the idea of a specialized literary prose style. *Gulliver's Travels* is not, in the later sense of the word, a 'literary' work, and would not have been thought of as a novel. Swift's language, like Defoe's, effaces itself before the objects it presents, allowing them to shine straight through it. The ideal language would be one so transparent that it abolished itself. This happens in the book with those Laputian sages who, rather than speaking to each other, carry around with them a sack of all the objects they might need in the course of a conversation, and hold them up mutely to each other. In fact, language is a sort of bottomless sack, a way of carrying the world around with us without any weight at all. The Houyhnhnms avoid verbal elaborateness and maintain a perfect correspondence between word and thing – so much so, indeed, that they are incapable of lying. Flawless as they are in their representations of the world, they would make superb realist novelists.

Eighteenth-century travel-writing is supposed to be in some ways a 'progressive' form, eager to investigate, exploit new technologies, acquire fresh knowledge and experience, and seize new opportunities for wealth. It centres on enterprise, optimism and self-sufficiency – all Whig-like, middle-class, commercialist values. It also allows you to draw some satisfying contrasts between your own civilized condition and the benighted state of the peoples you come across in your wanderings. *Gulliver's Travels*, by contrast, is an 'anti-progressive' work in which the amnesiac protagonist learns little or nothing, since he seems to start out on each of his travels as a blank slate. The book, significantly, is not one seamless narrative like Defoe's novels, but a series of disconnected episodes. And Gulliver's memory seems to disappear down the cracks between them. In a parody of the travel book's customary optimism, he ends up out of his mind.

There is no conception here of a developing self, indeed precious little notion of selfhood at all. The Tory Swift, unlike the Whiggish Defoe, is not especially interested in individuals. He is concerned instead with universal truths, which Gulliver and the other figures are simply there to illustrate. Gulliver is merely a convenient narrative device, not a 'character' with whom we are invited to identify. We are not invited to share his experience, as Defoe invites us to share Crusoe's. Instead, we are asked to observe and judge it. Like Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews and Parson Adams, Gulliver is sometimes used as a mouthpiece for his author, and sometimes as an object of satire himself.

Far from confirming his superiority to the creatures he encounters, Gulliver's travels reveal that they are pretty much the same as he is, if not somewhat better. The irony of the book is that however outlandish the beings you come across, human nature – if creatures like the Laputians and Lilliputians can be thought of for the moment as human – turns out to be much the same everywhere. Which is to say, not very admirable. The Lilliputians are cruel, scheming and sectarian, like pocket-sized replicas of Westminster politicians. This belief that human nature is both corrupt and unchangeable belongs with Swift's Anglican conservatism. He scorns the idea that there can be any dramatic progress or revolutionary change, or that we could unearth through our travels or researches any truths which are not plain enough already. God has given us all we need to know for our salvation, and sailing off to gawp at giants or disport oneself with midgets is just a fashionable distraction from that vital business.

Such travels simply flatter humanity, suggesting that its powers of knowledge and exploration are unlimited; whereas Swift is concerned to cut Man brutally down to size, reminding him with sadistic relish of how feeble and foolish an animal he is. He is typical of Anglo-Irish writing in his concern to debunk and deflate. Gulliver's various adventures are meant to reflect back on us humans, usually by placing us in an embarrassing light, not to bring revelations of enthralling new possibilities. For the conservative Swift, new possibilities are not in the least enthralling. He is right in a sense that other

creatures we might encounter could not be all that different from ourselves, since if they were it is hard to know how we could know we were encountering them at all. To define something or someone as different implies some kind of shared standard. We know that the Lilliputians are different from us because they are much smaller than we are, which implies that we share the concept of size. We can tell that tarantulas are different from us because we have a language in which we can describe and identify them. If they were utterly alien, this would not be so. You cannot speak of difference unless you can also speak of comparability. The really different beings are those who are squatting invisibly in our lap right at this moment.

Travel-writing, then, is a morally dubious genre from a Tory-Anglican viewpoint. It is dazzled by the prospect of innovation, which is always an alarming prospect to a conservative. Defoe wrote an early *Essay upon Projects* which expressed just such enthusiasm for technical and scientific reform. Like Crusoe, travel literature is full of transgressive desire, forever yearning to break away from home, and is thus an implicit rejection of the Tory values of land, home, crown and country. It is seen by such Tories as the pornography of progress. It is full of monstrous fantasies, which are both indecorous and likely to cloud our commonsensical judgement. It encourages idle fancies and extravagant emotions, which are not good for law and order. It also tends to breed cultural relativism, which is just as politically unhealthy. It can be dangerously utopian and sentimentalist, claiming to have stumbled across primitive peoples who live in happiness and harmony. Since this denies original sin, and might inspire us to hatch various dewy-eyed utopian schemes of our own, it is to be resisted. It also reflects less than creditably on our own less-than-utopian society, and thus can be an indirect form of political critique. The fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* sends up this utopian vision in the shape of the Houyhnhnms, who are certainly harmonious creatures but who also happen to be horses.

It would be a mistake, even so, to exaggerate the difference between 'progressives' like Defoe and 'conservatives' like Swift. Much eighteenth-century public debate concerns hammering out a political consensus after the sectarian ravages of the preceding century, and the novel plays a vital role in this mediating of political extremes. Swift referred to Defoe with patrician sniffiness as 'the fellow that was pilloried. I have forgot his name', but there were occasions when Swift spoke up for commerce just as ardently as Defoe did, not least for its role in reviving a poverty-stricken Irish economy. He could also be intensely scathing about noble blood, freely confessing how little of it ran in his own bourgeois veins. Swift may have been a Tory, but he was a Tory radical, that oxymoronic animal who has contributed so richly to English culture from William Cobbett to John Ruskin.

In eighteenth-century England, then, the social and ideological battlelines were notably blurred. It was not a Whig merchant, but the classical conservative humanist Henry Fielding, who wrote in his *Voyage to Lisbon* that 'There is nothing so useful and beneficial to man in general than trade'. Defoe may be a progressive and Dissenter, but he outrageously hyped up his own ancestry and snobbishly altered his name from plain Foe to the more aristocratic-sounding De Foe. Men like Swift and Pope saw English society as being in the process of dismissing innate merit and selling out to power and money, both of which were odiously epitomized for them in the figure of the Whig prime minister Robert Walpole. But Defoe could also be stinging critical of a money-obsessed civilization.

One can see the same crossing of political wires between Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson. Richardson was the son of a Derbyshire joiner, had only a year or so of secondary education and became a printer, while Fielding was an Etonian with aristocratic connections. Richardson was an aggressive champion of the middle classes, declaring in coat-trailing fashion that tradesmen 'are infinitely of more consequence, and deserve more to be encouraged, than any other degree or rank of people'. Yet Richardson was appalled by the number of low-life characters in Fielding's novels, and claimed maliciously that had he not known who Fielding was, he would have thought that he was an ostler. In turn, Fielding criticized Richardson's *Pamela* for encouraging young gentlemen to marry their mothers' chambermaids, and would never have contemplated such a come-down himself. Instead, he married his first wife's maid.

The social situation, then, was remarkably fluid, and something of this ambiguity is captured by *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver is well-named, since his gullibility can be his downfall. He can be pathetically eager to identify with the peoples he finds himself among. In Lilliput he is foolishly proud of his title of Nardac, throws himself vigorously into the role of military leader, and hotly rebuts the charge that he has committed fornication with a Lilliputian female. The physical difficulty of copulating with a woman only a few inches high does not seem to occur to him, and he fails to raise this issue in his own defence. By the end of the novel he thinks that he is a Houyhnhnm and is living with horses. Despite the impediment of being English, he is able to pick up foreign languages with remarkable speed, though this is more a plot requirement than a genuine talent. Yet if one side of Gulliver is obsequiously keen to conform to foreign customs, the other side of him is a boneheaded English chauvinist who is complacently blind to his own cultural prejudices. His self-preening account of life back home shocks the horrified king of Brobdingnag into condemning human beings as odious vermin, but Gulliver is too carried away by his own pompous rhetoric to care.

These two aspects of Gulliver are in fact related. The lack of critical reflection which leads him to identify too easily with his own kind also leads him to identify too quickly with midgets and horses.

He is either incapable of seeing his own prejudices from the outside, or too fawningly eager to throw them off and take on someone else's. He is either an imperialist or a cultural relativist, and the novel shows up the secret affinity between the two. There is not much difference between uncritically supporting the British crown and uncritically defending the sovereign power of Lilliput. If we should seek to empathize with other cultures, why not seek to do so with our own? If we are to excuse cannibals, why not corporate polluters as well? If all cultures are in perfectly good working order, then there is nothing to choose between any of them, and no reason to suppose that, say, the Brobdingnagians are in any way superior to the British.

In Swift's view, however, they undoubtedly are, as a rural, traditionalist, well-ordered civilization which is concerned more with the practical uses of things than with material luxury or abstract doctrines. In any case, the empathy of someone like Gulliver, who throws himself with such uncritical alacrity into shady set-ups like Lilliput, is hardly worth having. He is an upwardly mobile sycophant, a mercenary and hanger-on who is on hire to flatter any prince on whose realm he is washed ashore, which in turn suggests how little he is anchored in a nourishing tradition and civilization of his own.

Gulliver, then, is always either in over his head or too far out, and behind this lies a real dilemma. In Swift's view, human beings must be able to see themselves from the outside if they are to avoid the sins of vanity and pride. They must be able to objectify their own norms and values, see themselves as others see them, gaze upon their own form of life through the estranging eyes of others. Truth is a matter of proportion and comparison. And this is part of what is under way in *Gulliver's Travels*. The familiar must be made to look alien and monstrous, so that we can see it for what it is; and who better to perform this service for us than aliens and monsters who are nevertheless oddly familiar? The traffic, in fact, is two-way: the Brobdingnagians are appalled to see some of their own qualities mimicked by the diminutive Gulliver. If this is possible, they reflect, then their own nature must be contemptible indeed.

Once they can step outside themselves, men and women will be recalled to the chastening truth that nothing human is absolute. They will experience afresh their own frailty and finitude, the imperfection of their judgement, and the passions which cloud their reasoning. They will recognize how trivial most of their puffed-up projects are in the great scheme of things. Only by acting in this therapeutic awareness can they behave justly and charitably. Swift had good reason to know about prejudice: he was a slanderous, vituperative satirist, a polemicist who could be airily indifferent to the truth, and who defended religious and political intolerance. If Fielding's satire is genial, Swift's can be semi-pathological. He was a misogynist, an authoritarian, a reviler of the common people, a magnificent satirist and a courageous champion of Ireland as colonial underdog.

The problem with cultural prejudice is how you can get outside yourself without losing touch with humanity altogether and falling into madness, misanthropy and despair, as Gulliver ends up by doing.

If you press contrasts and comparisons too far, you finish up by tumbling into the abyss of cultural relativism. Trying to see yourself from the outside, through the bemused or aghast eyes of others, is one way of puncturing pride; but it can lead simply to a different variety of it, as Gulliver, convinced that he is a Houyhnhnm, flees from the stink of the human and regards his own wife as a loathsome Yahoo. The other side of treating the alien as familiar is treating the familiar as monstrous.

If you are truly to get outside your own cultural skin you must find a way of doing it, somehow, from the inside. As Bertolt Brecht remarked, only someone inside a situation can judge it, and he's the last person who can judge. You must appreciate that all human cultures are partial, without keeling over into nihilism. Men and women need their ideals, like the placid, rationalist virtues of the Houyhnhnms, if they are to be more than just material beings; but they must not let these ideals terrorize or bedazzle them to the point where they lose touch with their material being altogether, and come to regard themselves with disgust. You must not rest in the body, but you must not repress it either.

The relations between body and spirit are a metaphor for Swift of the relations between being inside a situation and transcending it. The curious point about human beings is that they are bodies but also more than bodies, inside and outside themselves simultaneously. They are animals, but animals capable of reasoning, and so able to stand to some extent outside themselves and their material contexts and reflect critically upon them. Body and spirit are related, but they are not the same thing.

When crazed utopianists, crackpot experimenters, obscurantist scholars and zealous Dissenters puff themselves up with windy rhetoric, Swift brutally deflates them to mere bags of skin and bone.

Yet though he clings to the material body as something concrete and certain, Swift is also notoriously disgusted by it. So those who really do see human beings as no more than bodies – mechanical materialists of various stripes – are equally the targets of his satire. We can observe this ambiguous relationship between body and spirit in the first two books of *Gulliver's Travels*, in which the hero encounters first the tiny Lilliputians and then the gigantic Brobdingnagians. With the Lilliputians, who turn out to be as mean and petty in moral character as they are in physical size, the physical and moral are reflections of each other. So we approach the Brobdingnagians expecting a similar sort of matching, only to discover that they are on the whole gentle creatures despite their awesome bulk. In this case, the material is no sure guide to the spiritual. Swift is continually setting such traps for the reader, setting up expectations which he then proceeds to frustrate. As one critic remarks, his relationship with the reader is 'intimate but unfriendly'. [3]

It is not a matter of finding some judicious middle way between body and spirit, but of leashing these contradictions together as best one can. There is no grand theoretical resolution to this dilemma; it can be tackled only in the living. The last thing one could accuse Swift of is balance. Human beings are not just a third term between Yahoo and Houyhnhnm. They are closer to the Yahoos, if only because they are not horses; but 'Yahoo' is also a Houyhnhnm-like way of *seeing* humans. No view of men and women which does not feel the force of this way of seeing can be valid, but this is not to say that it is the whole truth. Equally, the Houyhnhnms represent a largely admirable way of life: they are economic (though not social) egalitarians who run the sort of conservative social order Swift admires.

They have no money, which is a point in their favour, lack the desire for power and riches, and hold that virtue is its own reward.

The Houyhnhnms are not particularly passionless, as some have claimed, simply decorously restrained in their passions. If it were not that they had four legs and a tail, they would not be entirely out of place in a Jane Austen drawing-room, taking tea along with Mr. Knightley. But that is the point. The Houyhnhnms are less a human possibility than, as one critic has put it, an insulting impossibility. [4] These equine idealists are really a device for embarrassing us. Ideals simply serve to show us how short we are bound to fall of them. It is in the nature of humanity to be pitched between extremities. Our norm is to be caught between opposed aberrations.

*Gulliver's Travels* is cunningly constructed to make the reader feel this instability, and to emerge from the book as dizzy and disorientated as its protagonist. Gulliver ends up believing that humans are Yahoos and that he himself is a Houyhnhnm; the Houyhnhnms see Gulliver as a Yahoo; readers smile

at Gulliver's delusions, detaching themselves from the hero as he detaches himself from the Yahoos. Readers smile at the preternaturally placid Houyhnhnms as well, but in the uneasy awareness that they, too, are Yahoos from a Houyhnhnm viewpoint. To cap it all, the Yahoos are in some ways actually superior to human beings. They are physically stronger, for instance. And they are natural in the way non-human animals are, whereas we are unnatural to our own nature.

And where, in all this, is the Yahoo known as Swift? He would certainly seem to have dissociated himself from his crazed protagonist, but what does *he* make of the Houyhnhnms? It is not easy to say who is fooling who. With Swift, it is sometimes hard to say exactly who or what is being mocked. The book offers us no consistent perspective. It is in the very nature of a perspective that there should always be another one. At one point, Gulliver wonders whether there may be a race somewhere in the universe who would appear as tiny to the Lilliputians as the Lilliputians do to him. What is the 'correct' size to be, or the 'right' vantage-point to take up? The question of which perspective is the true one is hard to answer in an age which witnessed the invention of the microscope. How far back from or close up to the world do you need to be standing to see it aright? Is what we see down a microscope the truth, or a distortion of the truth?

The fact that sizes and vantage-points are constantly shifting in the book is an implicit critique of a naive belief in objectivity. The eighteenth-century novelists, having established their distance from the world of romance, are for the most part aware that a belief in raw fact is just as much a myth as romance itself. The novel, being the kind of literary form that it is, cannot help reflecting on the vexed relations between report and reality – on the way, for example, that your report or narrative does not merely reflect the real world, but plays an important part in defining it. Gulliver himself is a naive empiricist or believer in brute fact, a viewpoint that goes hand in hand with his 'progressive' interest in technical and mechanical matters. He is a 'new man': hard-headed, pragmatic, smug in his faith in progress, fascinated by chimerical schemes and projects, eager to festoon his text with maps and documents to guarantee its strict veracity.

All this, as we have seen, cries out for a degree of 'decentring'. You must not take your world complacently for granted in this way. Gulliver's uncritical cult of fact goes hand in hand with his political chauvinism. Instead, you must be able to step outside yourself if you are to be properly yourself. Being more or other than you are at any given moment is actually part of what you are. The subject has to be able to objectify itself in order to be truly a subject. But the risk is one of decentring yourself to the point of disorientation, becoming dangerously eccentric to yourself. And this is how Gulliver ends up. Swift does not hand us a solution to this dilemma. Instead, he disappears from sight and allows his readers to cope with these contradictions as best they can. It is in the nature of his satire not to propose a positive solution – partly because English gentlemen do not need to engage in anything as vulgarly petty-bourgeois as spelling out the truth in laborious detail, partly because this would simply offer yet another partial perspective.

In practice, truth becomes a question of irony, since this is what humanity is as well. It can only emerge negatively, obliquely, from a constant play and mutual cancellation of positions. Swift believed steadfastly in Truth and Reason; but they were not, alas, for us. For he also lived in an increasingly pragmatic age where all you really had to go on was the evidence of your senses. And this meant that Truth and Reason were not really within our power. 'Reason itself is true and just', he wrote in a sermon on the Trinity, 'but the reason of every particular man is weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his interests, passions and vices'. Like Defoe, then, he believed in a realm of absolute values which intersected less and less with the real world. The Houyhnhnms, perhaps, are an example of this. Even if they are right, they are irrelevant. Both Swift and Defoe are writing in a society which believes in truth, reason and justice in theory, but whose routine conduct has become so false, unjust and irrational that it can no longer credit them in practice.

There is an interesting ambiguity in Swift's presentation of the bestial, shit-smearing Yahoos. Are they meant to be an image of humanity in general, or of 'primitive' peoples in particular? There is evidence, for example, to suggest that the Anglo-Irish Swift saw the colonized people of Ireland as Yahoos. The



Yahoos reflect among other things an Anglo-Irish fear and hatred of those they oppress. 'Yahoo', then, may mean all people or just some people, just as it may signify a human condition but also a way of perceiving that condition. And this leads to some interesting political ambiguities. If 'primitive' peoples like the Irish or South Sea islanders really are Yahoos, then this would seem to justify a smack of firm colonial government. But if Yahoos are humanity at large, then the colonial governors are (metaphorically speaking) bestial and shit-smeared too, which undercuts their right to rule. Colonialism then becomes a matter of a bunch of hypocritical savages lording it over a bunch of non-hypocritical ones. On this theory, the masters are as worthless as the natives – an opinion which, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, undermines colonialism (what right have they then to rule?) but also confirms some of its prejudices (the natives really are worthless).

This ambiguity reflects something of Swift's own double-edged relations to colonialism. As a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, he was, so to speak, colonized and colonialist at the same time. He was in the ironic position of belonging to a sidelined governing class – a body of Anglo-Irishmen who ruled over the common people of Ireland, but who felt shabbily treated by the British on whose behalf they governed. Swift played a key role in the British colonial state: at one stage he was the Tories' chief propagandist, and helped to draft the monarch's speeches to parliament. But there were also certain questions on which he spoke up eloquently for the Irish people against their British overlords. He was caught between the coffee houses of Westminster and the starving weavers on his Dublin doorstep, rather as Gulliver is caught between Houyhnhnms and Yahoos. If he did not consider himself an Irishman/Yahoo, the British/Houyhnhnms sometimes did.

Swift the Yahoo can be heard loud and clear at the end of *Gulliver's Travels*, ventriloquized in Gulliver's magnificent tirade against imperialism:

The colonial adventurers go on shore to rob and plunder; they see an harmless people, are entertained with kindness, they give the country a new name, they take formal possession of it for the king, they set up a rotten plank or a stone for a memorial, they murder two or three dozen of the natives, bring away a couple more by force for a sample, return home, and get their pardon. Here commences a new dominion acquired with a title by divine right. Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives driven out or destroyed, their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free licence given to all acts of inhumanity and lust; the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants: and this execrable crew of butchers employed in so pious an expedition, is a modern colony sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous people.

If such a passage were to crop up in Defoe, indeed in many an English author, one might anticipate an immediate disclaimer: the British don't do that kind of thing. We are speaking of the Belgians, Spanish, French or Portuguese. Swift does indeed instantly append such a disclaimer, but it is wholly ironic: 'But this description, I confess, doth by no means affect the *British* nation, who may be an example to the whole world for their wisdom, care, and justice in planting colonies; their liberal endowments for the advancement of religion and learning...'. It is because Swift is Irish, conscious of the muddle, prejudice, nepotism, brutality and crass inefficiency of the British administration at Dublin Castle, that he is saved from the customary double-think.

Gulliver ends up unhinged by his hatred for his own species, a dreadful warning to his embittered creator of what he himself might turn into. Those who have lost touch with common humanity in their hubris, stepping outside their situations altogether, end up in lunacy. This, however, is not at all good news for the common people. For in Swift's view this lunacy includes those radical reformers who seek to view their situation as though from the outside in order to change it for the better. These, too, are crazed experimenters, intoxicated like the scientists of Laputa by their own hare-brained intellectual antics. The condition of the common people can be at best patched up somewhat; to imagine that it could be fundamentally transformed is a folly akin to using a quadrant and pair of compasses to measure someone up for clothes, as the Laputian tailor does with Gulliver.

The truly compassionate, in Swift's opinion, are pragmatists like himself who refuse to raise the hopes of the people with some insane idealism or rationalist utopia, since the result will only be to dash their hopes. The world is so wretched and corrupt that it is crying out for redemption, but to attempt to redeem it is simply to compound the problem. If you see people as Yahoos, you will lose all sympathy for them, acknowledge the futility of trying to help them, and retreat in disgust. If you do not see them as Yahoos,

you will fly to their aid with some fancy project based on a trust in the innate goodness of humankind, which will probably make their condition worse. Neither case is tolerable; Swift does not offer us any third way.

This, in fact, is part of the point of writing off the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms may represent an unreachable ideal, and one which may be in some respects flawed. They are hardly anyone's idea of a lively set of drinking companions, quite apart from the fact that they would have nowhere to put their beer money. But they also hold to the kind of rational, benevolent, egalitarian politics which for all its limits might well make some difference to a colonial situation. It is possible, however, that the supremely concrete, practically minded Swift finds these stoical rationalists dangerously abstract in their preference for the species over the individual. In his philistine English way, the creator of Gulliver detests theories and abstractions; it is much to the credit of the Brobdingnagians that they are incapable of absorbing abstract ideas.

For a stout Tory like Swift, it is not conducive to order and authority for people to think too hard about basic principles. Yet one could always claim that if men had shown rather more of a Houyhnhnm-like care for their species as a whole, there might well have been less warfare and injustice. Abstractions can indeed be a form of violence, as the Laputians show well enough: these self-absorbed scholars may be loftily remote from the real world, but they are quick enough to crush political rebellion. If scholars can be damagingly dissociated from the body, so can militarists. What Swift and his fellow Tories could not grant is that abstractions can also be positive. For women, for example, to be able to conceive of themselves as a group rather than simply as individuals is a necessary step to their emancipation. For Swift, to stand back that far from concrete particulars is to court a kind of madness.

Swift's satirical technique is quite often to play off a powerless ideal against an intolerable reality. The ideal is so distant from reality that it allows us to take the measure of just how desperate things are. But it is also a contrast with its own perfection which helps to make our world look so dire. We need our visions to remind us of how imperfect our actuality is; but if we did not entertain such exacting ideals, we might not find our actuality as insufferable as we do. The ideal is remote enough to show up the gravity of our situation, but for just the same reason it is incapable of repairing it. To avoid being gulled by ideals, we need to cut them satirically down to size. The grandiose dreams of Reason, as we have seen, need to be confronted with the blunt fact of the body, with its unlovely habits and appetites. But this may leave us with such a fearfully hacked-down image of the human that we will need instantly to appeal to Reason to amplify it. Perhaps this constant dialectical see-saw, trimming our sails one way and now another, is the closest we can now come to a life of virtue.

This, in effect, is the trap which *Gulliver's Travels* springs. As with *A Modest Proposal*, the pamphlet in which Swift calmly advocates roasting and eating babies as a solution to Ireland's economic woes, there is no way out of this lethal logic as long as one accepts the terms which it sets up. Perhaps it is only by rejecting the very terms which the work offers us that we can break out of its closed ideological circuit; and perhaps this is part of what Swift's writing is encouraging us to do.

We must acknowledge, against the dewy-eyed utopianists and sentimentalists, that there is a good deal of the Yahoo in the human, and that these are the rocks on which any radical agenda is in danger of coming to grief. But we must also recognize that this is also how the human looks from an impossible Olympian viewpoint, whose final effect will be to plunge us into terror and despair. In the end, what horses think of us is neither here nor there – except, perhaps, for the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, who sometimes seemed to love a horse more than they loved one other, and certainly more than they loved the common people.

## Notes

1. Quoted by John Richetti in his *Introduction to Daniel Defoe, "Robinson Crusoe"* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. xxviii.
2. Claude Rawson, in *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and Our Time* (London:

Routledge, 1973).

3. Ibid.

4. F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952).