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

Note: this copy has been made from a PDF version of the 2005 Wiley Blackwell edition. The footnotes in that edition have been transposed here from end-of-book to end of chapter and the the page-numbers have been omitted. Minor corrections have been made to the original where necessary – as the inconsistent title-form, "The True Born Englishman" / *The True Born Englishman*).

Chapter 2: Daniel Defoe [extract]

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 lewdest 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 eighteenthcentury 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 amoralism, 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 absout 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 inadmissable. 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.

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Notes

Quoted by John Richetti in his *Introduction to Daniel Defoe, "Robinson Crusoe"* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. xxviii.