FAULKS
ON
FICTION

FAULKS ON FICTION

A STORY OF THE NOVEL IN 28 CHARACTERS

SEBASTIAN FAULKS

BBC BOOKS

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‘L’homme n’est rien, l’oeuvre tout.’

‘The author’s life is nothing; it’s the work that matters.’

Gustave Flaubert in a letter to George Sand, December 1875.

INTRODUCTION

The way people think and write about books is always changing. I was raised on the 'New Criticism' (though it was pretty old by the time I got to it), which insisted that a work of literature is a self-contained entity and discouraged the student from trying to make connections between the text and the real world – particularly with any personal details of the author's life. You just wrote about the poem or the book, and how it achieved what it did. Although, like all schools of criticism, it was eventually pushed too far, it offered an essentially sound way of approaching a novel. It was replaced in the 1970s and 80s by critical theories that drew on other disciplines, notably Marxism and psychoanalysis. The most fruitful of these were those based on linguistics; they at least had a basis in neuroscience, and it was a scientific rigour that many literary critics felt ashamed of lacking. Few if any of these critical theories, however, made an impact on the reading public. This was partly because in the world of 'theory', returns diminish rapidly; the ratio of insight to verbiage is discouraging after a page or two.

The broader movement of criticism over the last twenty years has been biographical. Far from being banned from comment, the author's life and its bearing on the work became the major field of discussion. The advantage of this new emphasis was that it re-humanised the way that people looked at books: it made novels appear once again to be about people and experience, not structural linguistics. The bad news was that it opened the door to speculation and gossip. By assuming that all works of art are an expression of their authors' personality, the biographical critics reduced the act of creation to a sideshow. It has now reached such a pass that the only topic some literary journalists seem able to approach with confidence is the question of whom or what people and events in novels are 'based on'. Biographical criticism may have begun as a healthy reaction to extremes of New Criticism with its 'closed systems' and puritanical exclusion of facts; but it may now have reached its own terminal stage.

When I went round the country doing readings after my fourth novel *Birdsong* came out in 1993, most people could not conceal their disappointment. They had expected me to be 105 years old, French and – in some odd way – female. One man asked me how I knew what it was like to fight at the Battle of the Somme. I told him I'd read a lot of documents, visited the site, then made it up. 'You made it up?!' he almost spat at me. He didn't believe me, and neither did anyone else there. They thought I'd found a pile of old papers and passed them off as mine. When the politician Vince Cable recommended *Birdsong* in a magazine, he assured readers that I had based it on letters of my grandfather that I'd found in an attic. But there were no letters and no attic.

A subsequent novel, *Human Traces*, was concerned with the early days of psychiatry. When I spoke to a lunchtime gathering as part of the promotion for the book it seemed to me that the people present found it

impossible to grasp the concept of fiction. They assumed that everything in a novel is based on personal experience, which is then lightly, or perhaps not at all, rewritten. In trying to persuade them otherwise, I despairingly recounted the story of the *Birdsong* sceptic and concluded with a heavy jest: 'So now I've given up and just admit that yes, I'm really a 105-year-old French woman, that I was parachuted into France for SOE in 1942 to write *Charlotte Gray* and wrote *Human Traces* only because my great-aunt was in a lunatic asylum in 1895.'

There was some sympathetic laughter; but when I was leaving, a woman stopped me, all concern, and asked: 'Which asylum was your aunt in?'

How did we come to this? It's not, after all, the natural state of affairs. A child first marvels at the invention of a story; he doesn't ask who Rumpelstiltskin was modelled on; he just loves it that a wishing chair can fly or animals can talk. In adult fiction, the element of wonder has somehow been lost; some readers seem to find it frightening to think a writer can conjure people, scenes and feelings from a void. Yet to me that is a novelist's single saleable skill, his USP.

Many novelists, I concede, haven't helped themselves. In the 1960s and 70s there was a movement in fiction against invention and towards semi-autobiographical writing (I go into this in more detail in the section on *The Golden Notebook*). And the separation between fact and fiction is not as clear-cut as purists, including me, would like it to be. Unless a novelist is psychotic, inhabiting a delusional universe, the fictional characters he creates and the thoughts he attributes to them are doubly connected to reality, first by his locating them in a recognisable world and, second, by the fact that they have passed, several times, through his own mind, which

itself has been formed by millions of experiences in reality. I can honestly say that all the characters in all my novels are un-autobiographical in conception; none of them 'is' me; but at certain moments I am sure that details have been drawn from things that I have seen or felt and then – after double-checking their aptness – allowed to be attached to an imagined character as his own. The sensation of a hot bath, for instance, or of driving rain on the skin – many such small things have doubtless been experienced by my characters in a way so similar to that in which I experienced them as to be indistinguishable. But they are only details; and I take the line that, whatever the eighteenth-century philosophers may have argued, there are common human experiences of the phenomenal world. When Mike Engleby feels happy to be released from the hell of carsickness even into a place that resembles Broadmoor, it was not my experience of nausea that was being invoked, but yours.

While it is inevitable that parts of reality will thus seep through into fiction in more or less unchanged form, that does not alter the fact that most parts of most of the best novels ever written are either just invented, torn from a void, or represent aspects of reality so radically reshaped and recombined that they in essence become something new: not mixtures, but compounds with their own living properties. To me, this is the line beyond which there can be no more concessions to biographical reductionism.

Gore Vidal summed up the wearying nature of 'based on' critics in an essay on Ford Madox Ford: 'I must confess to a lifelong boredom with the main purpose of literary biography: the Life as opposed to the Work, which is, after all, all. I have also never had the slightest interest in knowing on whom a writer has based the character of Jeff, say; and should Jeff's affair

with Jane be just like a real-life one with Gladys, I feel gravity tugging at the volume in my hand … It is not the sort of game that an English teacher ought to encourage his students to play. It is enough that they learn how to read and understand fiction *tout court*; to perceive what it is on the page that makes, as the Master said with unusual hard preciseness, *Interest*.'

And here is perhaps a major reason for the predicament we are now in. Just as in the 1980s British novelists, many of them graduates of the University of East Anglia creative writing course, were admirably turning their backs on the semi-autobiographical fictions of the 1960s and 70s and reasserting the novelist's ability to invent, so at the same time a large industry in literary biography had grown up, attracting some of the most gifted writers of that generation. Clearly it is legitimate for a scholarly biographer to mention *in passing* in the course of a full critical consideration of, say, *Vanity Fair*, that Thackeray had so much admired a young dragoon's side whiskers that he gave some similar ones to his imagined character, George Osborne; not interesting, admittedly, but legitimate. And while there is far more to the best of such biographies than merely identifying sources for this or that character, it may be that some of the lustre these distinguished biographers brought to the genre legitimised the efforts of less gifted Jeff-and-Gladys merchants. It's not then so hard to understand why a journalist reading an admiring review of a biography that revealed that X was 'based on' Y would feel he had been given the go-ahead to indulge exactly that sort of speculation in his own reviews or reporting. And if you think I am being unfair to the great biographers of the generation above mine, consider the words of one of the best, Sir Michael Holroyd: 'Biography is at the shallow end of history … The essential truth is simple. Flaubert was born. Flaubert wrote his novel. Flaubert died. It is his work which is unique, that matters, not the ordinary experience he shared with so many others.'

From the best biographers, however, via lesser ones, sideways into newspapers and out into the real world, 'based on' has become the default mode in which many readers now approach a novel. There are monthly book groups that meet to discuss a novel but end up talking about only two things: the extent to which the contents are drawn from the author's life and the extent to which these in turn tally with the readers' own experience of such matters. The 'success' or otherwise of the novel is calculated by how close a fit the author has managed between his or her presumably autobiographical narrative and the reader's own experience of similar events. It is difficult to explain how dispiriting such conversations would appear if overheard by a novelist who has tried, by invention, to reshape reality into something new, and more satisfying.

This book does not purport to be a work of literary criticism, still less of scholarship; it began life, after all, as a companion to a television series. I have looked at all these characters as though they were real people and tried to understand what makes them work without reference to their authors' lives. This is undoubtedly, and deliberately, an unfashionable approach, but I hope it might prove to be a touch on the brake of the runaway truck of biographical reductionism and an encouragement to others to think on these lines. If some of those so persuaded were sixth-formers, so much the better.

The choice of characters was restricted to books that the viewing public might reasonably have been expected to have heard of, if not actually read. It seemed a good idea to group them into the four character types that British novelists have returned to most often and, in addition to looking at the individual examples, to ask why these four have been so useful. These

are not necessarily my all-time favourite writers or characters (though many are); they are ones that worked for television purposes.

However, as this book went along, it did seem to gather an identity of its own. It's meant to be a book of enthusiasm; it tries to celebrate the ability of novelists to create – from nothing, or from the imagination. Following Gore Vidal's advice, I have tried to read and understand twenty-eight works of fiction *tout court*; to perceive what it is on the page that makes, as Henry James said with unusual hard preciseness, *Interest*. Without the stimulus of this book, I would probably never again have opened *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or *Great Expectations*, believing that I had 'done' them in my student days. Of the twenty-eight books here, twenty-three were re-reads; and of these my enjoyment was greater the second time in most cases. As to why I had never actually read the Raj Quartet or *The Woman in White* before, I can't imagine, but I can only say how happy I am to have done so.

Occasionally the pleasure of my reading was touched by sadness, and that was when it was necessary to think about 'posterity', or the chances of these novels still being read a hundred years from now. A university lecturer I talked to while writing this book laughed when I asked if *Vanity Fair* was popular with her students. She told me that *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch* will never again be read by undergraduates because they are 'too long'. One or two brave souls will tackle bantamweight *Silas Marner*, but most will go no further, she said, than a single photocopied chapter. Evidence from this world is inconsistent, however. Two graduate researchers who worked on the programme wrote excellent background notes on the characters' historical reception that showed every indication that they had read most of the books in question; and *Middlemarch* is a set book at A level for one exam board at least in 2011.

However, the idea that the intrinsic value of a book will 'keep it alive' seems absurd, when the thrust of tertiary education for the last fifty years

has been to do away with the idea that there is any such thing as one book being 'better' than another. Part of the collateral damage of the 'theory' years of criticism in the 1970s and 80s was that in their search for a new scientific rigour many English literature teachers accepted that they could not 'prove' that *Middlemarch* was 'better' than the *Beano*, because 'better' was too imprecise and unscientific a word. This is logically true; but pundits proceeded to push logic beyond reason: I remember, with intense embarrassment, hearing people with the rare privilege of a good education arguing on Radio Four that you could never suppose that the *Divina Commedia* was *in any way* superior to the lyrics of Girls Aloud …

So there will probably be no posterity of achievement, no survival for the fittest, because the culture can no longer accept that such things as 'fitness' exist; the sociopolitical damage of admitting that some things are better than others has become unendurable.[1] But that is too sad a thought to end on. The characters who appear in the following pages are still alive to me and to thousands, probably millions, of other readers. It's too much to imagine my enthusiasm for them and for the books they appear in will have any effect on their viability, but I hope that what follows can at least be read as a prolonged and heartfelt thank-you letter from a reader for all that he has learned from living people created in the minds of others.

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[1] But publishers abhor a vacuum. While the academic world declared nothing was better than anything else, the consumer sector decided the exact opposite. Every coffee bar, hedge fund or mobile-phone group that sponsors a literary prize issues a list of books they have chosen or rejected; an indiscreet judge usually reveals which of the finalists 'really' came second or third. Literature festivals and newspapers pour out tables and rankings; in 2010, several published the order of precedence that novels published forty years earlier might have finished in, *had there been a prize* that year for them to enter… In *The Big Read* programme in 2003, BBC television invited viewers to list their favourite novels from any period, and ranked them in order from one to a hundred.

PART ONE

HEROES

It's a while now since anyone referred to the main character of a novel as the 'hero'. Yet for a word that was at best a misnomer and at worst a category error, it enjoyed a long life. I suspect that for nearly 200 years the misuse influenced the way that even the best novelists thought about their books and what they put into them.

Anthony Trollope seemed to think so, when he wrote in 1866: 'Perhaps no terms have been so injurious to the profession of the novelist as those two words hero and heroine. In spite of the latitude which is allowed to the writer in putting his own interpretation upon these words, something heroic is still expected: whereas if he attempts to paint from Nature, how little that is heroic should he describe!'

So even after the novel in its currently recognisable form had been around for 150 years Trollope still felt he was 'expected' to have a main character who displayed extraordinary qualities. Wouldn't it have been as sensible to expect him always to have red hair or be left-handed?

The explanation of how it happened is quite simple, though. The word 'hero' developed, as many words do; it changed its meaning over time through a semantic shift. The definition evolved roughly like this: (1) The offspring of

a god and a human – someone like Achilles, who was the son of Peleus, a man, and Thetis, a nymph; (2) Someone of great distinction in battle (but could be wholly human); (3) Someone of great bravery in any field; (4) The main character in an epic poem, then, more loosely, in a play or story.

These things happen,[2] but the shift is seldom laid out as clearly as it is for 'hero' in the full *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first time it is used in our sense (4) is in 1697, in Dryden's *Life of Virgil*: 'His Heroe falls into an … ill-tim'd Deliberation'. Dryden was actually referring to Aeneas, literally a half-god hero; but one can see how the slightly playful use of the word here could be misread. This is how semantic shifts often occur: someone uses a word out of context or with a little spin; a reader fails to see the irony or tension; others follow.

By 1711, Richard Steele is using the word 'hero' in its new sense: 'The Youth who is the Hero of my story'. And so it goes on. But why could 'hero' not just *change* its meaning and come to mean 'main character of this exciting new genre', and forget about demigods? Why in 1866 were readers still half-expecting that the central figure in a Trollope novel should be the offspring of a nymph?

The answer again is not complicated. The evolution of meaning is no more clear-cut than the evolution of species; vestiges of previous incarnations can remain before a new species become discrete, unable to breed with its progenitors. So it was with the word 'hero' for most of the history of the novel, where for 200 years or more the old idea of admirable superbeing lay behind the new meaning of 'main character'.

*

[2] Compare the word 'buxom', which went roughly: supine, obedient, compliant, pleasing, wifely, womanly, large-breasted.

You can see why the reading public in the early eighteenth century would like a word that promised something exciting in this new – novel – kind of book. And one can see, too, why the practitioners of an untried, irreligious form might at first have enjoyed the idea of inbuilt grandeur: it bestowed respectability by at least suggesting that their books would have a moral shape. Unlike poetry, novels didn't at first have much of a critical vocabulary in which to be discussed, and it was quicker to say 'hero' than 'principal character'. Like most shifts, it began as a mistake but caught on because it met a need.

To begin with, all went well. *Robinson Crusoe* is the first[3] novel and its main character is, as luck would have it, a hero. He has unusual, almost supernatural gifts. He succeeds in imposing 'civilised' values and order on a primitive world. He is a hero in both the primary (ultra-human) and the secondary (main character) senses. But perhaps he sets the novel off up a blind alley. Defoe may himself have thought so, if the character of Moll Flanders is anything to go by.

In the person of Tom Jones, Fielding has another try. His proposition is that a good heart is the best of possessions. It is a simple and sometimes simplistic view of the world. Crusoe prevails by means of his inner resources; Tom survives by means, one feels, of his author's interventions. He has a natural decency; he is passionate in love, lust and righteous anger. He 'works' as a hero because he is fortunate enough to be the protagonist of a well-crafted adventure and the brainchild of an avuncular providence.

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[3] First for these purposes, viz. recent British. There is really no such thing, and there will always be people who can think of an earlier one than you can – Petronius, Gunadhya, Zhang Zhuo – or will change the definition to include poets.

By the time we reach Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, the novel has revised its ideas of heroism. Becky is a cold-hearted, mercenary adventuress and a cruelly negligent mother. So what are her heroic qualities? Well, for a start, she is daring: she throws out Dr Johnson's dictionary and all the patriarchal lore it represents; she backs herself against the world, where even Achilles relied on divine help. She is honest; or at least, while she is duplicitous with others she is quite candid with herself. Third, she is the most interesting character. In the person of Becky Sharp, Thackeray makes explicit for the first time the rift between real-life and literary morals by showing that the highest virtue a fictional character can possess is *interest*. John Updike called it 'vitality', but it's the same thing. These qualities combine to make a fourth, and clinching one: we back her; this negligent mother, this selfish seductress is our representative at Vanity Fair. We select her over all the others – even good old Dobbin; and thus Becky clinches what will become the hero's most enduring quality: being the reader's point of identification.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray successfully deconstructed the idea of novel 'heroism'. That he was concerned to do this is shown by the book's sub-title: 'A Novel Without a Hero'. Dickens, incidentally, was as concerned as Trollope with the word, though in *David Copperfield*'s opening page he puts his anxiety to comic effect: 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.'

Sherlock Holmes was perhaps the purest example of a hero-as-main-character that a British writer had contrived. Holmes has aspects of the demigod; he looks back to Achilles and forwards to Superman. We don't know if he was held by his heel in a river of immortality or formed on the

planet Krypton, but he behaves as though something of the kind had happened in his youth. His feats seem devilish or supernatural to his enemies. But he is also a cocaine addict and a depressive; he is incapable of forming emotional attachments; he is afflicted by anomie and is addicted to violent crime – or at least to solving it. Over his super-rationalism seems to hang a *fin de siècle* premonition of some awful conflict in which the forces of reason will be annihilated.

And after 1918, it became increasingly difficult for the hero to find a place in serious novels. The Great War taught people that they were part of a murderous species that was not, after all, very clever. Individual acts counted for little on the Western Front in the face of a mechanised slaughter; Dobbin and George Osborne were arguably heroes of Waterloo, but to call any single man a hero of the Somme would seem to be missing the point. What was hard to reignite after 1918 was the idea that individuals them- selves counted for anything. Some post-war 'stream-of-consciousness' novels look with hindsight like a desperate attempt to locate value inter- nally, because to claim significance in one's outer life was to overlook or, worse, dishonour, the fact that whole factory floors, football elevens and years of college freshmen were buried entire, side by side, in the mud.

In the twentieth century, the hero lost his freedom. He became a prisoner – of circumstance or of the state. One of the better novels to emerge from the Great War was Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, though he could almost have called it *Death of* the *Hero*. After a period of absence from the serious novel, however, the hero re-emerged in 1949 – or rather, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston Smith is a reluctant and improbable hero. He betrays his love and his conscience, and is crushed by the political forces that have grown like poison spores in the shell holes of Flanders and the ovens of Auschwitz. The novel is more concerned with politics

than with characterisation, yet Winston does work as a character. That is because there is a tension between what he is – reduced, wheezy – and the role of heroic rebel that the state assigns him. We back Winston, as we back Becky Sharp, but we back him because, frankly, he's the only game in town.

Mainland Europe dealt with the mid-century in a different way. From Kafka via Camus to Sartre, through a climate of intellectual revolt and nihilism there emerged the doubtful figure of the 'anti-hero' – a short-lived and not very interesting concept. What does it mean? The main character of a book, yes, and one perversely without 'heroic' qualities; but the heroes of serious fiction, as we have seen, almost never did have 'heroic' qualities. To have had long-term traction, the idea of the anti-hero would have had to come at a time when main characters were all highly virtuous, but it had been many years since that had – if ever – been the case. Alternatively, you could define the 'anti-hero' as a character whose vocation is failure and trace him through Don Quixote, Bloom in *Ulysses*, Meursault in *L'Etranger* and Lucky Jim to Yossarian in *Catch-22*. But Lucky Jim gets the girl, Quixote is more comic hero than anti-hero, Meursault is heroic by his own lights and so on. It is interesting that the term died out – unlike the word 'hero' which may have owed its birth to a misunderstanding but did serve a purpose.

Jim Dixon in *Lucky Jim* doesn't smoke Gauloises and drink pastis in boulevard cafés; he doesn't reflect, like Meursault, that he could kill or not kill and that in the end it would come to exactly the same thing. No; he makes rude faces behind his boss's back; he gets drunk and burns the sheets. He has a pretty good job – rather pukka, really, being a university lecturer. But he is imprisoned by it, by the need to be polite to his absurd

professor, by the need for money, security, tenure … England of the 1950s has him in its grip as strongly as Oceania had Winston Smith. Jim's gestures of revolt are infantile, but he has something new – he is the first hero without dignity. Even Winston with his varicose ulcer is involved in a *noble* fight, while Jim's battles are petty. But although his world is exotically drab, we can identify with him. We back him not because he is the only game in town (Crusoe, Smith) or because the author tells us to (Tom Jones), but because (as with Becky) we like what we see.

By the time we get to *Money* and John Self, the idea of the hero as someone of positive distinction is quite dead. What is heroic about John Self is his excess.This rolling, belching Caliban is frank about something else: carnal greed. There is a little Self in every little self. We have all enjoyed Blastfurters and booze. And sex with Selina? We could all use a little of that. Yes, but could we use a *lot* of that? That is the question. That is the great thing about John Self – his world has one axis only: quantity. He is a very twentieth-century hero in that, as we shall see, he is also imprisoned. It is like watching a fat porpoise in a net, beached and thrashing. The most heroic thing about John Self is the extent of his self-abuse. The hero has become a tramp.

In Marvel comics and their spin-off films, the hero lives on frantically – leaping off computer-generated skyscrapers and gunning down armies of goons. To a lesser extent he is alive in fictional genres, where Sherlock Holmes found a path for him. The most widely known character of the last twenty years world-wide is an old-fashioned hero of magical, Achillean qualities and quiet virtue: Harry Potter. And the main character of *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon, also has heroic qualities. But Harry Potter is a children's book and *The Da Vinci Code* is … Something else. For the mainstream novel, the hero is no more.

‘SINGLED OUT’

ROBINSON CRUSOE

The first great hero in the British novel is a German called Kreutznaer. His father is from Bremen, but his mother is a Yorkshire woman from a family called Robinson, and it’s not long before the people of York anglicise the family surname to Crusoe. The Teutonic and the West Riding strains are dominant in the headstrong and resourceful Robinson Crusoe. His ‘ancient’ father wants him to be a lawyer, but the eighteen-year-old Crusoe longs only for the sea. He is an adventurer by nature, but also a merchant; his idea of seafaring is not to serve in the King’s Navy but to make money by trading – tobacco, gold, slaves, anything. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (first published in 1719) is extraordinary in that its main character passes most of his life alone, thus forfeiting the world of ‘personal relationships’ that was to form the staple subject matter of the novel as it developed. Yet its main character offered a sort of gold standard of what the new form could do in terms of giving the reader privileged

access to a developing state of mind; it was as though the novel was in this way fully formed at birth.

Crusoe's father is like a parent in a Philip Roth novel, full of émigré caution, urging his young son to find a steady job, to stick to the 'middle path' and not over-reach himself; he has already lost two sons. From the start, Crusoe shows a mixture of determination and cunning. He decides to ignore his father's advice, but enlists his mother to break the news to the old man; he cannily waits to engage her until she is in a good mood – 'a time when I thought her a little pleasanter than ordinary'. These humorous touches are vital in a story that will soon cease to contain any human intercourse. No sooner is Crusoe out of the Humber estuary on his first voyage than the wind blows a storm and he is so seasick that he vows to do his father's bidding. The next day, he is made drunk on punch by his fellow crewmen, and with a calm sea and a skinful of liquor all his good intentions are forgotten. A worse storm sinks the ship off Yarmouth, and although the crew are saved, the master's son tells Crusoe he should take it as a sign that the sea is not for him. Crusoe, though aware of the hand of Providence in all things, is a cussed fellow. He is a man who tempts Providence – 'tempts' in the sense of 'tests'. 'Providence' to his northern Protestant mind is the movement of chance in the world, guided by the hand of God; it is not as rigid as Fate, nor as flexible as something that stems from direct divine intervention; it lies somewhere between the two, but is something you 'tempt' at your peril. His attitudes to Providence and to God change as the plot unfolds; the older Crusoe who narrates the story has learned from the experiences of the young hero and is able to see his life as a Christian narrative in which the many 'strange' and 'surprising' events are actually instances of God choosing natural means to work out his providential plans for both humankind and for Crusoe himself.

The narrative is plain yet exotic. Like many of the greatest novels, it is set (beginning in 1651) many years before it was written[4] (1719) and it seems to offer a direct route into the past. This, you feel, is a quasi-journalistic account of what life was like in those days, not dollied up with fine phrases, but told in merchant seaman's prose. The effect is undoubtedly thrilling, like time travel, but is made more so by the fact there is something modern about Crusoe's attitudes. His brash entrepreneurial spirit seems familiar, and only the religious qualms with which it is – intermittently – restrained seem especially of their era.

After a rewarding voyage to the African coast, Crusoe sets sail again, only to be taken captive by Moorish pirates and made a personal slave to the master of the privateer. He escapes with a Muslim boy and is rescued at sea by a Portuguese ship to whose captain he sells the boy as a slave on the condition that he will be converted to Christianity. He goes with the Portuguese ship to Brazil where he sets up a successful tobacco plantation, but then sets off again for Africa in the hope of taking and trading more slaves. It is shocking to read of such things mentioned in the same terms as any other commerce ('few Negroes were bought, and those excessive dear'), but bracing to read of them unmediated by anachronistic judgement. The ship does not get far before a storm wrecks it somewhere in the Caribbean. Crusoe, the only survivor, is washed up on an uninhabited island, where begins his life of solitude.

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[4] The idea that a novel not set at the time of publication is part of a genre called 'historical fiction' is a relatively recent one. The novel has always been historical in its mainstream, even when – as in *Robinson Crusoe* or *Wuthering Heights* (published 1847, set mostly in the 1770s) – most readers imagine it to be contemporary because the reason for its being 'historical' is not immediately clear.

What the novel deals with, as everyone knows, is survival. The drama springs partly from the physical demands – the adventure story, which Defoe handles with skill and humour – but more importantly from the spiritual torment of solitude. There are questions of religious faith, of the values of Christian civilisation in a world that includes cannibals, and then there is the overriding test that Crusoe must answer: is humankind sufficiently developed and self-reliant that, with no other of his species on hand, he will continue to behave as a man. I think the book is, at its most interesting level, a consideration of the extent to which the speciating elements of *Homo sapiens* hold up under pressure and enable Crusoe to maintain his separateness from the rest of creation. One of the crucial points in the evolution of human consciousness came when an individual was first able to function apart from the group – to go out hunting or fishing alone and to carry in his head the idea of others continuing to exist without his presence.[5] Crusoe does more than this; his heroic belief not only in humanity but in the narrower virtues of Protestant Europe is triumphantly vindicated.

The ship is conveniently stranded on a sand bar, allowing Crusoe to swim out, rig up a raft from broken timbers and bring ashore as much as he can, most importantly some 'fowling pieces' (guns) and a carpenter's chest of tools. He is tempted by the large quantity of European and Brazilian coins on board, but comes to his senses when he recognises the money is of no use to him and would be better off at the bottom of the sea, like a 'creature whose life is not worth saving'. What is engaging about Crusoe, however, is the tension, often comic, between the pious, Low Church

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[5] For a fascinating discussion of this hypothetical moment, see Part I, chapter 6, 'The Origin of Civilization', in Julian Jaynes: *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. (N. Y. Houghton Mifflin, 1976)

German and the striving small businessman with a knowledge of the value of brass. And so, he tells us, 'Upon second thoughts, I took [the coins] away.' Retaining the money also shows an optimistic belief that his life will one day give him back a chance to spend it.

Among his first kills is a suckling she-goat. He hopes to bring up the orphaned kid as a pet, but 'it would not eat so I was forc'd to kill it and eat it myself'. This is a characteristic Crusoe sequence: knowledge of right and wrong, qualm, practical despatch. The other repeating pattern of thought is to bewail his wretched lot – being cut off from his fellow man for all time in desolate loneliness – and to ask why 'Providence should thus compleatly ruin its creatures'; then, just before giving way to despair, to wonder at his good fortune in being the only man saved from the wreck. 'Why were not they sav'd and you lost?' he asks himself in Calvinist terms; 'Why were you singled out?'

His spiritual project is to convince himself that he is not desolate but chosen, not abandoned but fortunate. Although he claims that 'I had very few notions of religion in my head', he seems to have absorbed a great deal; a whole vein of Protestantism is summed up in his reminder to himself that in the 'most miserable of all conditions in this world … we may always find something to comfort ourselves'. And no one who had not absorbed the rhythms, at least, of the King James Bible could have written this meditation: 'In a word as my life was a life of sorrow one way, so it was a life of mercy another; and I wanted nothing to make it a life of comfort, but to be able to make my sence of God's goodness to me, and care over me in this condition, be my daily consolation; and after I did make a just improvement of these things, I went away and was no more sad.'

And was no more sad … What intensifies his interest in the divine, however, is something that seems to him a miracle. He chucks out some

dried corn husks from a bag he has salvaged from the ship and some time later sees that a small crop of barley has grown up where he threw them. A tiny crop of rice appears from the same unlikely source. It is one thing to recognise the different plants, another to know how to make bread. Crusoe is by no means a natural smallholder, still less a cook; like most of us, his ideas of how grain is harvested, winnowed, milled or whatever are rather sketchy. There is something touchingly ham-fisted and believable in his struggles to make this simplest of human foods. And as for his attempts at crockery …

The pace and character of the narrative are varied by some pages from a journal. These also serve to give an impression of the passing of time – the days, the seasons, the years … The philosophical debate in Crusoe's mind takes on a sharper outline. The concession that the previously un-regarded God has been merciful means He must be omnipotent and has therefore brought Crusoe to this pass. Again, despair beckons; and again he saves himself from it by reflecting on his 'mis-spent life', and asking why he was not drowned in previous shipwrecks, or killed by beasts in Africa or murdered by the pirates. None of these escapes, lucky though they were, really constitutes a 'mis-spent' youth. The things he might regret – slave-trading and avarice – do not occur to him as faults. However, he progresses from thinking rarely about God to giving 'hearty thanks' for allowing him this island solitude in which he may be happier than he would have been in society; and when in his salvaged Bible he comes across the words 'I will never, never leave thee, nor forsake thee', he believes they are written to him personally. Whatever one's own religious beliefs, it is hard not to feel a pricking of the eyes at this moment.

Most narratives of despair and imprisonment contain a moment of transcendence, at which the castaway or prisoner is able to see himself

as part of a larger creation and is able somehow not only to accept his fate but to bless his fellow creatures, even his persecutors. One thinks of the Ancient Mariner, who has violated the natural order by shooting the albatross, so bringing death on his shipmates, but is able finally to save himself when he blesses the sea snakes he sees writhe below the surface of the endless ocean. *In God's Underground*, the account of a Rumanian pastor, Richard Wurmbrand, persecuted and imprisoned by the Communist government in the 1960s, contains a scene in which Wurmbrand, in the darkness of his torture and solitary confinement, stood up and danced because he remembered that the Psalms had commanded joy. More recently, Brian Keenan's moving account of his imprisonment in Lebanon, *An Evil Cradling*, has a moment of grace when he imaginatively reaches out and extends his sympathy to those who have so wronged him. For a precursor, Defoe had *Pilgrim's Progress*, written by Bunyan in Bedford jail.

The reader need neither be a believer nor be convinced that Robinson Crusoe is a sincere believer to be moved by the ardour of his hope. The crux of the novel, and the reason that it seems to have a resonance for all of us despite the outlandish nature of its central situation, is that Crusoe's total solitude and his intense hope for connection in this life or the next are in essence the conditions of every human being at nightfall.

While the spiritual aspect of *Robinson Crusoe* gives it depth of field, the foreground story of practical survival gives it charm. The hero's efforts to make himself clothes are clownish and have led to many famous depictions of a bearded man in animal-hide breeches with a goatskin umbrella. 'For if I was a bad *carpenter*,' Crusoe admits, 'I was a worse *tayler*' – where his italics provide the modest service of today's inverted commas. Yet he

never really ‘goes native’. He is always a northern European in his tropical world: practical, grounded and, with whatever spasms of despair, self-confident. He makes a grindstone for his hatchets by rigging up a pedal and a piece of rope to turn it; when out at sea in his improvised canoe he finds a ‘current like the sluice of a mill’. He never loses sight of European domestic invention as his yardstick and comparator. This rigour makes his efforts look ham-fisted, but makes the reader quietly proud of all the things we take for granted. The use of river energy to mill corn, for instance: how much more elegant and ‘green’ an invention could there be? And all of these things were newer 350 years ago, so more forcefully a source of pride to Crusoe.

There is more than pride and practicality, however, in the way he cleaves to the standards of the world he has left. There is a battle going on in him to remain human, to maintain a distinction between himself and the animals, both domesticated and wild, that are the other inhabitants of the island. I think it is significant that Crusoe does not become vegetarian. To begin with, when meat is his only source of food, he has no choice; but once, in addition to the available fruit, he has established cereal crops for bread and a dairy operation that produces butter and cheese, meat becomes optional. The instinct of most people in his isolated situation, I think, would be to try to draw comfort, succour, fellow feeling from the other living creatures in the environment. This would mean trying to commune with them on their level, as Crusoe does to a limited extent with a feral cat, a parrot and a dog; but for most people it would mean one thing before all others: not killing one’s only source of companionship. Crusoe, however, sees no need to – as it were – get on all fours with nature. He is a man, the plaything perhaps of Providence, but a man for all that and a European man to boot. He has a higher consciousness than the beasts; he can carry in his

'I was a worse *tayler*' – Robinson Crusoe depicted in animal hide (1719 edition)

memory not only the knowledge of what he did the day before, but of his entire life; furthermore he can carry a verbal memory of things done by others of his species – grinding, milling, planting, sowing, sewing – and by his cognitive power and the dexterity derived from opposable thumbs can make real belly-filling bread from little more than a half-understood idea. There is no need for him to crawl.

Crusoe has passed the test of his species. With whatever help he may have enlisted from his god, the genetic factors that made him human have continued to keep him separate from, and superior to, his fellow creatures. He is ready now to meet a man. He sees a footprint in the sand, and his response surprises him – or at least it surprises the older man who is recounting the story. He, like us, would have expected this to be 'a raising me from death to life, and the greatest blessing that Heaven itself … could bestow; I say that I should now tremble at the very apprehensions of seeing a man, and was ready to sink into the ground at but the shadow, or silent appearance of a man's having set his foot in the island.'

Be careful what you wish for; and when it comes, Crusoe feels only fear and disorientation. Part of this is the natural colonist's caution, without which Europe would never have conquered vast areas of the other continents; but part is the personal panic of a man institutionalised in his own solitude: he cannot face the thought of violence; but nor can he face the thought of friendship. After consulting his Bible for comfort, Crusoe goes about fortifying his dwelling, making it safe against intruders. The storytelling Crusoe is a little ashamed of the young castaway's reaction; Crusoe is no hero to himself – though this is perhaps what makes him a hero to the reader.

It emerges that people from a nearby island, or mainland for all he knows, are using Crusoe's island as a destination for cannibalistic ritual. A captive is brought, killed and eaten, raising doubts in Crusoe's mind about whether he should intervene – though his firepower would mean murder. It works out that he does not at first need to act, and he gives thanks that God has delivered him from 'blood-guiltiness'. For a time Crusoe lives in fear, baking his bread in an improvised smokeless oven to give no sign of his presence. Eventually, he believes himself alone again. More than twenty-three years have passed since his shipwreck but he can't stop thinking about how much money he could have made from his tobacco plantation and from slave-trading if he had stayed in Brazil. He continues to blame his 'original sin' of disobeying his father, though still, oddly, does not admit that it was only by disobeying him and going to sea that he put himself in the way of the riches he now misses. He also begins to form a plan: next time the 'savages' come with a prisoner, he will free the individual, make him his servant, then use his services as a pilot to steer his, by now, sturdy canoe to civilisation. The first problem is that he will need to kill the captors, and he feels uneasy about this, 'tho' it was for my deliverance'; the second is that his yearning for escape shows insufficient gratitude to the Providence that has given him a comfortable life within his reinforced stockade.

Soon, Providence works to his advantage. A captive due to be eaten escapes his captors, two of whom pursue him. It occurs to Crusoe that if he can dispose of the two pursuers, the rest of the savages need never know what has happened to them and he can turn the surviving fugitive into his servant. Not a 'friend': a servant. And so it happens. One of the pursuers makes to fire his bow and arrow at Crusoe, so that his pre-emptive gunfire is justifiable as self-defence. The fugitive himself obligingly kills the other

pursuer by borrowing Crusoe's sword and lopping his head off at a single blow. The bad deed is done by the non-Christian Caribbean, and Crusoe's conscience is clear.

Crusoe clothes his man ('Friday', as we know, is the name he chooses for him) and gives him a hare-skin cap, 'very convenient and fashionable enough'. He prevents him from eating the flesh of his former pursuers and soon finds him a very faithful servant, of almost filial devotion. He teaches him to speak English, and 'I began to really love the creature; and on his side, I believe he lov'd me more than it was possible for him ever to love any thing before.' Friday's increasing education gives rise to one or two ticklish theological questions – such as why does the all-powerful God not kill the Devil – but Crusoe's attitude to religion is nothing if not practical, and 'I pretended not to hear him.' The comedy of the Crusoe–Friday friendship is all the more effective for the fact that Crusoe never seems enraptured by the release from solitude that Friday has miraculously provided; he always sees him as servant and a means to an end.

When Crusoe leaves his island after twenty-eight years, two months and nineteen days, he takes his goatskin cap, his parrot, his umbrella – and the coins he had rescued from the wreck. The ordeal he has endured is something he will put behind him – a nuisance in the continuing merchant life he now intends to resume. This is the measure of the man and his triumph. He has conquered wild animals, seen off cannibals and manipulated foreign sailors into starting a small and peaceful colony on his island. He has looked into the void of time and the emptiness of the human heart, and if he has occasionally blinked, it has not been long before he has resumed his level gaze. He has shown himself to be the master of all that Providence has set before him and has called on his unseen Maker as much as he needed him, but no more. He has prostrated

himself before neither God nor beast. He has trusted to the acquired knowledge of his species, of his family and his nation.

Crusoe's rescue from the island comes after hectic complications involving Friday's father, more cannibals, an English ship, a Spanish captain and a mutiny. It is a strange reflection on the nature of narrative that rather than seize on all this as relief, the reader feels wistful for the quieter sections when Crusoe was learning how to make a watertight ceramic pot for his goat broth. It is eloquent of the interest that Defoe packs into the inner life of his hero that the adventurous action seems an anticlimax by comparison. It may also be that this first great English novel thus signposted the way for future writers by showing that in the new form the inner life would always trump the outer.

‘A THOUGHTLESS, GIDDY YOUTH’

TOM JONES

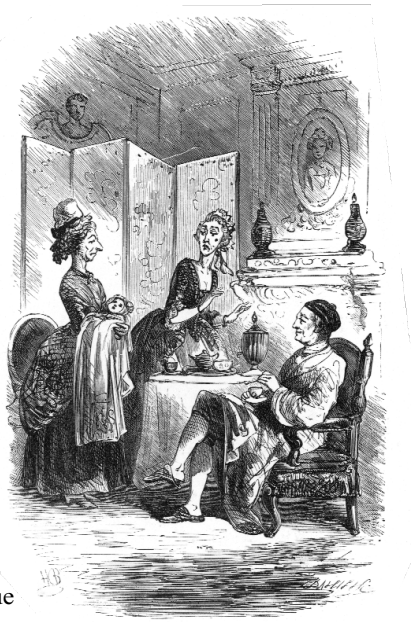
‘Good-hearted’ seems to be the word for Tom Jones, the hero of Henry Fielding’s 1747 novel. Fielding had the fortune, good or otherwise, to be writing at the same time as Samuel Richardson, and tidy-minded readers have tended to see them as two weathermen. On the one hand, Richardson is all Puritanical seriousness, and his books are massively extended homilies on the necessity of Christian virtue, particularly in the female of the species. *Pamela* and *Clarissa* both show young women under siege from lustful males and there is no doubt of Richardson’s didactic intent; indeed with *Clarissa* he revised the text extensively to make its moral clearer and to remove any possibility of the reader’s sympathising with Clarissa’s would-be seducer, Robert Lovelace. And against narrow, dried-up Richardson there is Fielding – rubicund, generous, clasping a pint of wine, blessed with a far more forgiving and realistic view of

human virtue. He is the sort of beak that Bertie Wooster would want to be up in front of after Boat Race night; Richardson would put him behind bars, but Fielding would send him on his way with a ten-bob donation to a charity. Henry Fielding's very name seems to breathe a sort of National Trust benevolence.

Luckily for us, there is more to it than that. It's true that Fielding wrote *Joseph Andrews*, which starts as a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*. The main character is Pamela's brother and is subject to similar attempts on his virtue. Fielding had put his finger on a weakness in *Pamela*: like many readers he was not convinced that Pamela's 'virtue' was based entirely on religious scruples; it seemed to have an element of calculation about it, since a young servant woman knows the price at which to sell her most valuable possession; and Pamela eventually succeeds in persuading her pursuer into marriage. Fielding was also the author of *Shamela*, an even more ribald satire of Richardson's book. However, Fielding admired *Clarissa* and had no doubt that its psychological insight had taken the novel into territory that few other writers would ever reach. And, as we shall see (in the discussion of *Clarissa*'s Robert Lovelace), Richardson's writing could be lively, allusive, witty, seductive – and flexible enough to go deeper into human motivation than Fielding's.

I pretended to have read *Tom Jones* at the age of seventeen and it was quite easy to write a convincing schoolboy essay, because the colours (so far as I had glimpsed them through a couple of critical essays) seemed bright and primary. I did finally read it at university, where my college had been founded by Puritans so Richardsonian that they had built the chapel on a north–south axis to avoid any taint of symbolism (the Son rising above the altar in the east). And at the age of nineteen I found *Tom Jones* to be everything I had confidently called it in my entrance exam. Tom was the sort of

hero a student could identify with. He starts with the disadvantage of being a foundling; he is misunderstood and not particularly devoted to his studies; he is vigorous, lustful and impulsively good-hearted – that word already. Of course the 'morality' that governed him was more flexible than the ecclesiastical dogma that brought Clarissa to an early death. It was fine by me that Tom should have an affair with Lady Bellaston in London and live off her bounty while trying to find his true love, Sophia Western. Lady B was 'Establishment' and rich, while Tom was an adventurer – and the lords of misrule are entitled to exploit the stewards of the house, just as the have-nots are always to be backed against the haves. It was terrific that his teachers, Thwackum and Square, one religious and one philosophical, should both be revealed to be scheming hypocrites. Ah, the stuffy older generation of pedagogues with their black gowns and chalk dust! Fielding knew as well as I did that they were in denial of life and lust. I loved the fact that promiscuous Tom was so modern in his free-love outlook and that he befriended people not for 'who' they were – worthy, respectable – but 'what' they were: basically good and basically good fun. Oh yes, Tom Jones – now that I had finally read his story – Tom Jones, *c'était moi*.



Our first sighting of Tom Jones, the foundling (1749 edition)

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I was looking forward to encountering Tom again, and through him perhaps a younger self; when I reopened the book I half-expected an aroma of Double Diamond and Number 6 to rise from its long-closed pages. The first person you meet, however, is not Tom, but Henry Fielding; and he is to be an ever-present guide through the adventures that lie ahead; Chapter 7 has the subtitle 'Containing such grave matter, that the reader cannot laugh once through the whole chapter, unless peradventure he should laugh at the author'; I had forgotten quite how large he loomed. Yet there is confidence in Fielding's narrative; without too much detail, he has what Henry James would call 'solidity of specification' in his descriptions of Squire Allworthy's Somerset house, where Tom will spend his childhood. Some of the character names have a Jonsonian flag attached to them – decent Allworthy; Thwackum, the flogger – but they are filled in with defter touches. The jocular voice of the author, meanwhile, which will be with us for 912 pages in the Vintage Classics edition, carries an interesting edge of the experimental as it reminds us, by its constant presence, that this is a new form, unsettled as yet. Richardson absents himself completely from his novels by simply printing (and he was a professional printer) letters between the protagonists; Fielding, in utter contrast, mingles with his creations, puts an avuncular arm about their shoulders; you sometimes wonder whether Tom could get out of bed without the author there to rouse him. Either method is workable in the user-friendly, demotic form that the novel turned out to be, and many others would be discovered. It is easy to forget how rapidly the early practitioners of the novel – most famously Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* – took it to pieces or 'deconstructed' it, like children with a fascinating new mechanical toy; so that not the smallest part of Jane Austen's achievement, when the British novel had been alive for about a hundred years, was to

establish a pattern of absentee narration through different character viewpoints that others could use as a template.

Fielding, meanwhile, gives the engaging sense that he is seeing what he can do with the new form, as well as making up the story as he goes along. The bluff, Johnsonian nature of his evident beliefs, the longish classical sentences and copious Latin quotation should not deflect us from the adventurous nature of his construction – nor from the quite revolutionary concept of goodness as something separate from religious doctrine that lies at the heart of his book. Fielding's idea of 'goodness' is still Christian, but it is looser than Richardson's more pious idea of 'virtue'. So when Tom is finally introduced in Book III Chapter 2, it is like this: 'We are obliged to bring our Heroe on the Stage in a much more disadvantageous Manner than we could wish; and to declare … that it was the universal Opinion of all Mr. Allworthy's Family, that he was certainly born to be hanged.' He spends much of his time stealing apples and poaching game to give to Black George, a gamekeeper on Allworthy's estate. 'He was indeed a thoughtless, giddy youth, with little sobriety in his manners, and less in his countenance'. Tom is viewed unfavourably in comparison with Blifil, the son of Bridget Allworthy, the squire's sister. Blifil, the companion of Tom's youth, is also the favourite of his mother, who reproves her brother for his kindness towards the foundling, Tom. However, as Tom grows older and 'gave tokens of the gallantry of temper which greatly recommends men to women', Bridget Allworthy is won round and begins to favour Tom over Blifil; and her change of heart is much more significant than the reader can know at this stage.

Allworthy's neighbour, Squire Western, has a daughter called Sophia, the heroine of *Tom Jones* and one of the most successful characters Fielding created – a credibly unsophisticated country girl of good family,

red-blooded, flirtatious but with a fine intelligence and a proper – though not mercenary – sense of her own worth. The excellent Sophia Western is Fielding's conclusive riposte to Richardson's Pamela Andrews. And what's more, 'she honoured Tom Jones and scorned Master Blifil almost as soon as she knew the meaning of those two words'. Tom, however, is not quite ready for Sophia, but is sowing some wild oats with Black George's willing daughter. Luckily a riding accident gives him a chance to be gallant towards Sophia; the citadel of his heart soon falls 'and the god of love marched in, triumphant'.

Fielding's interest in what he called 'imperfect heroes' gives *Tom Jones* its distinctive character and also caused a scandal when the book was published. The reading public still expected novels to be edifying in a reli- gious sense and found Fielding's flexible, humanistic scheme of right and wrong to be shocking. The outrage was a gratifying measure of the power the new form seemed to have. I don't think I have ever read a social history in which the historian did not say that one of the defining aspects of his period was the 'emergence of a new and powerful middle class'; but in the era of Richardson and Fielding this really does seem to have been the case. Rising literacy among a mercantile class swollen by empire trade and serviced by a vigorous bookselling industry meant that novels might reach an audience untouched by poetry, history or sermons. The novel was, from the start, a popular and middle-class art form. The masses who could not read relied on Bible lessons in church or some oral folk tradi- tions for literary entertainment: literature and 'improvement' were, for most people, indivisible; so the thought that a new form might not only lack an orthodox didactic position but might also have the power to reach tens of thousands of readers was alarming – though presumably thrilling to the writer.