Narratives of the Literary Island: European Poetics of the Social System after 1945

Ioana Andreescu

Abstract

In European post-war literature, the topos of the island takes centre stage, as the insular space often narrates a micro-scale society and the reconstruction of its social system. Isolation, semantically derived from 'island', characterises a European society radically transformed by the traumatic violence of the twentieth century. In this context, Robinson Crusoe—the 'rational adult white man'—is recreated and reinvented in a multitude of new meanings, newly significant for understanding a transformed (and in-transformation) European society: he is cruel, he is afraid, he is a child, he is a woman, he is alone among others.

The hypothesis of this paper is that the interest in and updating of Robinson Crusoe's story transform this narrative into a literary myth, invested via intertextual and palimpsestic approaches with "a programme of truth" (Veyne 1983) that reveals a continuous interest in an alternative social system, which is in-the-making, historically, socially, psychologically, geopolitically, and so on. The literary post-war island narratives considered here, *The Magus* (1965) by John Fowles and *Friday, or, the Other Island* (1967) by Michel Tournier, highlight the process of the rewriting and rescaling of European history, as well as the essential need for human values in the creation of a society that has economics at its core.

Keywords: Robinson Crusoe, myth, power, ideology, capitalism, individualism, palimpsest, postmodernism, postcolonialism

Introduction

This paper seeks to relate the myth of *Robinson Crusoe* and that of the desert island to modern European history*,* in order to apprehend several poetic[1] functions of the post-1945 social system, particularly as portrayed in two post-war European novels, namely *The Magus* (1965) by John Fowles and *Friday, or, the Other Island* (1967) by Michel Tournier.

After the experience of the violence of the twentieth century, though Daniel Defoe's island story continues to be an important European narrative of society-making (literary, but not exclusively so, as I shall demonstrate), the novel is nevertheless classified in libraries as 'children's literature'. In fact, after the Second World War the rewritings of Robinson and the desert island present a completely different perspective than the one proposed in *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (hereafter *Robinson Crusoe*),[2] as the perceptions of the nation-state, time and space, identity and the place of the individual within society are radically transformed.

In publishing *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, Daniel Defoe highlighted "some of the most important tendencies of the life of his time" (Watt 1957, p. 67), those of the modern age, with its ascendant capitalism, colonialism and individualist ideology. The pervasiveness of the story of Robinson Crusoe in the collective memory is often considered as *mythological* (Certeau 1990) in nature, implying that on the one hand it fulfils the role of cultural mediation and on the other addresses a *community*. However, the disenchantment[3] of modern European society can be linked, among other things, to the detachment from mythological explanations, mostly replaced by strictly rational and secularized ones.

The emergence of a so-called *myth of the economic man*[4]in a literary genre corresponds to what Gilles Deleuze describes as the recovery of mythology in literature. In this context, Deleuze defines literature as "the attempt to interpret in an ingenious way the myths we no longer understand, at the moment we no longer understand them, since we no longer know how to dream them or reproduce them" (2004, p. 12). I further argue that post-war island literature represents an autonomous and dynamic actor, invested as it is with symbolic power in the creation of a discourse of its own.

Within this analytical context, I have identified two major cleavages regarding the notion of power: first, power relations as depicted in the literary text, or in other words the way characters on the island relate to each other; and second, the power of this literary myth in creating or reinforcing post-war discourses, implying a distance or relativism to modern discourses on society.

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[1] Further suggested readings regarding poetics of the historical practice: Paul Ricœur 1997, *La métaphore vive* [*The Rule of Metaphor*], Paris: Éditions du Seuil; Hayden White 1973, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press; François Hartog 2013, *Croire en l'histoire*, Paris: Flammarion.

[2] The full original title is: *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely delivered by Pyrates*.

[3] Such as understood and presented by Max Weber 1981, *L'éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Editions du Plon.

[4] Ulla Grapard, Gillian Hewitson 2011, *Robinson Crusoe's Economic Man: A Construction and Deconstruction.* New York: Routledge.

If we bear in mind that “History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake”, as framed with acuity by the protagonist Stephen Dedalus, *Ulysses*’ literary alter ego of James Joyce (1961, p. 34), the post-World-War-II avatars of Robinson seem to constitute a literary act involving collective awareness and a therapeutic exercise in memory regarding that historical ‘nightmare’.

Narrative techniques such as irony, playfulness, black humour, pastiche, metafiction and intertextuality are typical in the rewritings of the myth of the desert island. Furthermore, the notion of palimpsest proposed by the literary critic Gerard Genette is particularly enriching. The concept of palimpsest stresses the manifold relationships between a given text and a prior text (Genette 1982). In this sense, the postmodern novel *The Magus* presents an apparently enchanted island where the main character, this time no longer called Robinson but rather Nicolas Urfe, finally discovers his real self after a series of philosophical tests and psychological games. Similarly, the French author Michel Tournier rewrites the story of Robinson Crusoe from a postcolonial perspective, entitling it *Friday, or, the Other Island* in order to establish from the very beginning that the main character of his novel is Friday, the man of colour, and no longer the red-headed, English Robinson.

To facilitate my analysis, I first draw on the notion of Power as theorised by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. The paper will then provide a brief description of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and its relevance within modern history, followed by *The Magus* by John Fowles and by *Friday, or, the other island* by Michel Tournier. Finally, I draw conclusions concerning the discursive power of Robinson Crusoe and the desert island within a larger mythological European narrative.

The notion of Power as a “Regime of Truth”

According to Lukes, Power is an “essentially contested and complex term” (1974, p. 7), and is a concept which, moreover, can be understood in various ways, as it is equally legitimate to talk about political power, economic power, social power or, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, symbolic power. Considering this, as well as the palimpsestic literature of avatars of Robinson, Foucault’s theory of power seems highly relevant to my analysis. I shall thus briefly outline some of the main characteristics of power.

To begin with, Foucault does not conceive of power operating independently, but rather as a system of *relations,* originating from a heterogeneous *social body*. A particularly important part of his theory is the intersection between power and knowledge. As a result, Foucault contests a global or abstract understanding of truth; power cannot be true or false in itself. Instead, he perceives power as a *regime of truth* that pervades society. As a direct consequence, Foucault moves away from the classical focus on political power as associated with the state and expands it to the social. What was long considered to be *political* is now to be considered *social*. Following from this, I propose below a *mythological* dimension of power.

A second particularly interesting point stressed by Foucault is that power is not necessarily repressive; in fact, power can be productive, even creative. Furthermore, he argues that discourses have the ability to *produce* subjects with different social identities, and that power can be described as embodied in discourses. To quote Foucault:

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact power produces; it produces reality;

> it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (1975, p. 227)

Though Foucault never developed a theory on literature as such, he nonetheless places literature among the complex, multiple, cyclic and significant discourses that exist in society (1971, p. 24). In this context, the literary myth of Robinson Crusoe is representative of such a lasting and expressive type of discourse.

I shall return to this concept of power at several points later in the essay, but first, I will summarize and contextualize the three works under discussion.

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe

Published in 1719 by Daniel Defoe (c. 1660–1731), *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* is today "the subject of more editions and translations than any other book except the Bible" (Bevan 1986, p. 27), and is often considered to be the first modern novel (Watt 1973). Invested with what Joyce terms "a truly national spirit" (1973, p. 7), the novel has been described as "a mixed form of narrative, in turn pseudo-autobiography, marvellous traveller's tale, religious diary and do-it-yourself manual, a collage of the various forms of textual discourse".[5] Its coexistent discourses are various: the novel has been variously perceived as depicting a need for adventure, the rise of individualism, a theory of economics, the arrival of modernity, a religious quest, a brief history of colonialism, the need for isolation from society, and more. To mention just two contrasting perspectives, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau the adventure of Robinson on the island represents the single-most-important educational reading for any young boy during his formative years, while for Karl Marx it embodies the undesirable capitalist mentality.

The novel was apparently inspired by the real-life shipwreck of the sailor Alexander Selkirk. *Robinson Crusoe* presents the story of an ordinary character with a fondness for wandering and adventure who leaves his parents' home to embark on a ship that is later wrecked in a storm. As the only survivor and a castaway on a desert island close to South America, Robinson collects materials and tools from the hulk in order to reconstruct on his island a system based on the English puritan model. The island being occasionally visited by cannibals, Robinson saves one of their captives so as to make him his servant. Naming him after the day of their encounter, Robinson teaches Friday the values and customs of his original society, Christianity, and, naturally enough, the English language. After 28 years of living on the island, Robinson is rescued by a passing ship. He returns to England where he learns that his family believed him dead. He gets married, but, already used to an itinerant life, Robinson decides to return once more to his island.

The life of the author sheds an additional interesting light on the context of the publication of the novel. Daniel Defoe had a highly complex personality, as reflected by his various occupations as journalist, "linen factor, tile manufacturer, itinerant spy, perfumer, merchant adventurer, ship owner, embezzler, bankrupt, and professional liar" (Seidel 1991, p. 4). He set about writing the novel at the age of 57, after a second bankruptcy and when his entire life seemed to be a failure (Louis James in Spaas and Stimpson 1996, p. 46). Sytherland notes that during the eighteenth century, the activity of writing "pure fictions" and not "serious" writings, such as the historical, political or religious, could be perceived as a "a sign of social, if not

[5] Louis James in Lieve Spaas & Brian Stimpson (editors), 1996, *Robinson Crusoe: Myths and Metamorphoses.* London: Macmillan Press Ltd, p. 1.

indeed of intellectual, decay” (1950, pp. 227–228). However, contemporary analyses of this island novel consider a very ‘serious’ reading, in the sense that on the one hand it contributes to the developing individualist ideology, while on the other hand it legitimates the colonial conquest of the world by Occidental Europe.[6]

If the literary character of Robinson is interpreted as a subject or agent, then the desert island can represent his possession or domain. In this sense, the metaphorical laboratory of the island can be compared to a system-in-the-making under the influence of Robinson. From this perspective, I shall argue how and why the literary myth of Robinson Crusoe apprehends central elements of modern European history, but before this it is important to clarify what a literary myth represents.

Alban Bensa defines the literary myth as “an act of language by which one intervenes in history” (2006, p. 129). As Richard Slotkin has argued, “a society’s mythology is, in effect, its memory system” (2007, n. p.), a sort of combination of personal and collective *remembering*, closely connected to the ideology of that particular society. The myth also implies a type of narrative meant to explain or to give sense to everyday life events and experiences.[7] The aim of literary myths is evidently not to present a real story, but rather a narrative relevant for its community of origin: a story that is not real, but that is true. Considering the relation between *myth* and *truth*, the historian Paul Veyne proposes an enriching approach, neither arguing that the myth is true, nor rejecting it as a “false story”. Instead he suggests we consider the myth as endowed with “a programme of truth” (1983, p. 56): in other words a truth conveyed by a symbolic narrative. In this sense, Robinson can offer a ‘programme of truth’ related to the occidental ideology of modernity or individualism.

At this point, it is essential to identify the major elements that have transformed the story of Robinson Crusoe on a desert island into an occidental modern myth, as the island adventure is the only part of Defoe’s novel sequence that has made it into history. The remainder and the following sequels, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Serious Reflections During the Life & Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, With His Vision of the Angelic World* (1720), have been largely forgotten. As already noted by Ian Watt, this novel stresses “particularly clearly and comprehensively” the connection between essential aspects of individualism and the emergence of the modern novel (1957, p. 62). For the literary theorist Edward Saïd, the relationship between Robinson and his island is an essential element in the spread of a growing imperialist ideology. Thus Saïd argues that “the prototypical modern realistic novel is *Robinson Crusoe* and certainly not accidentally it is about a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island” (2000, p. xiii).

The French historian Michel de Certeau argues that the myth of Robinson Crusoe is one of the few invented within modern European society. Considering the island space as a metaphor for a European social system in-the-making, de Certeau argues that the story of Robinson Crusoe is highly representative of occidental modern historiography. According to him, the novel contains the three elements that define the modern practice of writing history, namely the *blank page*, the *text* and the *construction*: “the island that proposes an empty space, the production of a system of objects by a master subject and the transformation of a ‘natural’ World” (1990, p. 201, my translation from the French).

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[6] For further details on these matters, see Edward Saïd 2000, *Culture et impérialisme*, Librairie Arthéme Fayard, Le Monde Diplomatique.

[7] For further details on modern myths, see Roland Barthes 1957, *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Following the Second World War, "when hopes were deceived, when disillusionment took root", as François Dosse comments (1987, p. 189, my translation from the French), it is not surprising that European history and the myth of Robinson Crusoe were both subject to narrative fragmentation and relativism. In post-war European society, "history lost its meaning, it was fragmented into multiple segments" (ibid). In literature too, new Robinsons were to question the great narrative discourses of modernity.

The Magus by John Fowles: narratives of postmodernism

The Magus, the first novel written by John Fowles (1926–2005) and the third he published, was conceived under a general feeling that "the world was wrong".[8] Following its initial publication in 1965, the writer revised the novel "almost obsessively"[9] in order to republish it in a new version in 1977 (Tarbox 1988, p. 12). The long and laborious process of writing marks both a literary and a personal quest.

At the end of his university studies—without really knowing what to do with his life—John Fowles decided to live for one year on a Greek island. This island experience, often described in terms of loneliness and desertedness, was nonetheless highly influential for the conception of *The Magus*. As he puts it:

> I had no coherent idea at all of where I was going, in life as in the book. (Fowles 2004, p. 5)
>
> Like Crusoe, I never knew who I really was, what I lacked (what psycho-analytical theorists of artistic making call the 'creative gap'), until I had wandered in its [the island's] solitudes and emptinesses. Eventually it let me feel it was mine: which is the other great siren charm of the islands—that they will not belong to any legal owner, but offer to become a part of all who tread and love them. (Fowles 1978, p. 11)

The Magus, a "cross between an intellectual puzzle and a dazzling work of fiction" as described by Roberta Rubenstein (1975, p. 328-339), is a novel widely read on both sides of the Atlantic. It is also a story that *The New York Times* has said "reverberates in the mind" (1966, n. p.) because of its multiple meanings and postmodernist formulations of a transformed post-war society.

The main character, the young Oxford graduate and aspiring poet Nicholas Urfe, seems somehow "handsomely equipped to fail" (Fowles 2004, p. 17), partly because of his cynicism and misunderstanding of the world. At a London party he meets an Australian girl, Alison Kelly. They have an affair that Nicholas prefers to consider superficial. In order to escape boredom, he accepts an English-teaching position at the Lord Byron School on the Greek island of Phraxos. Depressed and alone, here he has to admit his failure as a poet—which almost leads him to commit suicide. His encounter with the eccentric, mysterious and wealthy Maurice Conchis represents the beginning of a series of psychological games that are to have an important impact on his way of thinking. On the island, Urfe becomes the main actor in a meta-theatre, where various episodes—sometimes recalling the Second World War, sometimes

[8] John Fowles quoted in James R Aubrey 1991, *John Fowles: A Reference Companion.* New York: Greenwood Press, p. 14.

[9] The term was used by his biographer Barry N. Olshen. 1978, *John Fowles*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., p. 31.

scenarios from Greek mythology—shed a new light on his understanding of existence. At the end of the book, Urfe realises that these hypothetical theatrical episodes relate to himself more than to the mysterious Conchis. Having accepted this, he is now ready to meet Alison once again, this time assuming and revealing his feelings of love for her.

The Magus is written in the form of a *Bildungsroman* that reveals an encounter with the inner self. Its structure is that of a labyrinth, where each hypothesis is tested to find if it is true or false. When reason cannot solve the matter, dreams and mystery intervene. Apparently the island experience leads Nicholas Urfe to reconcile nature and culture, rationality and love, the individual and Occidental post-war society.

The novel can also be read as expressing a desire to re-enchant society through the recovery of mythology, an understanding of psychology, and a recollection of the arts and humanities. The narrative techniques used in the novel, such as fragmentation, paradox, pastiche and irony, are characteristic of postmodern literature, and equally reveal a desired detachment from major discourses of modernity.

Among other things, *The Magus* highlights the aim of literary creation as conceived by John Fowles. In this regard, Fowles argued that his writings aim to present to the reader a new perspective on things, different from political or media discourses. If literary writing is related to the freedom of expression, reading fiction is linked to the freedom of thinking and to the exercise of boosting creativity.

> I am very clear that the true function of the novel, beyond the quite proper one of pure entertainment, is heuristic, not didactic; not instruction, but suggestion; not teaching the reader, but helping the reader teach himself.[10]

In short, then, part of the symbolic power of *The Magus* involves a combination of reflexivity, imagination, acceptance of a social construction of reality, and an experience of esthetics, which are equally understood as an exercise in liberty of thought.

Friday, or, The Other island **by Michel Tournier: A Postcolonial Narrative**

Friday, or, The Other Island (original French title *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*) was published in 1967 and won the prestigious prize of the *Académie française* the same year. For Michel Tournier (b. 1924), the decision to rewrite the myth of Robinson Crusoe stemmed from his conviction that the contemporary French collective mentality had to adapt to a multicultural, postcolonial French context. Defining man as a "mythological animal" (1977, p. 192), Tournier argues that narratives are essential in the shaping of human identity. Thus, he states that "man becomes a man, acquires a gender, a heart or a human imagination thanks to the rustle of stories, to the kaleidoscope of images that surround the child from the cradle and accompany him to the tomb".[11]

In this French palimpsest, the initial values established in *Robinson Crusoe* are reversed and new designs are introduced. While starting from the story written by Daniel Defoe and

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[10] Fowles quoted in Barry N. Olshen & Toni A. Olshen 1980. *John Fowles, a Reference Guide*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, p. viii.

[11] My translation from the original French: "L'homme ne devient homme, n'acquiert un sexe, un cœur et une imagination d'homme que grâce au bruissement d'histoires, au kaléidoscope d'images qui entourent le petit enfant dès le berceau et l'accompagnent jusqu'au tombeau." Ibid, p. 191.

keeping the same settings and characters, *Friday, or, The Other Island* presents a gradual metamorphosis: Robinson changes radically, physically and psychologically, under the influence of his existence on the island and the presence of Friday. The island evolves as well: ironically called in the beginning “the administrated island”, it becomes at the end of the novel a ‘solar island’, where Robinson decides to stay. Thus he is no longer a homo economicus but a homo philosophicus.

Like Fowles’s novel, Tournier’s text suggests the idea of a choice, of a change and of a social deconstruction (this time, of colonialist values and ideology, among others). This is not surprising, as the author states that

> a good book is only half of a book, and it is up to the reader to write the other half. Literature is therefore a lesson in freedom, a lesson in creation, and it is dangerous if it appeals to disorder and ideas. That is why, whatever they write, writers are always persecuted by tyrants. And the tyrant is right to persecute the writer, because the writer is a professor of freedom.”[12]

Arguing that the writer is “socially responsible”, Tournier conceives his rewriting of the myth of Robinson as an imaginative exercise of liberty and to some extent a projection of a collective European identity. Implicitly, it is a liberating reflexive act of power. The aim of this hypertext is to raise rather than to respond to questions of a changing, multicultural society.

Some Concluding Remarks

The myth of Robinson Crusoe—in its initial form as well as in its further rewritings—represents an act of symbolic, discursive power. In fact, the three texts above reveal several dimensions dealing with power: at a textual level, *power over* Friday can be identified in a colonist/colonizer logic, and there is the *power to* understand and to change, as in the novel of John Fowles; from the perspective of literary criticism, we can identify the skilful ‘power’ of the writer to *seduce*[13] the reader; at an institutional level, the notion of power can be understood as a *relation network*, where discourses from various disciplines, such as literature, history, anthropology, mythology and economics, interact and coexist within the (re)writings of Robinson Crusoe. Moreover, at a macro-sociological level, modernity itself is challenged by new literary discourses of the island genre, by a postmodern perspective in *The Magus* or a postcolonial one in *Friday, or, The Other Island*.

The rewritings of Robinson and the desert island, I suggest, point to a literary, mythological and social transformation. The narrative of the literary island, apart from being a poetic act, also implies a historical or a social dimension. This is why the island space is often understood as a human laboratory where a dominating/dominated human experiment takes place. If in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* the reader can identify an act of legitimating or reinforcing the political power of modern discourses, the post-war rewritings of Robinson distance themselves from an individualist ideology and tend to deconstruct its narratives. This is one reason why ‘post-’ literary techniques such as postmodernism or postcolonialism are adopted by writers.

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[12] My translation from the original French: “Un bon livre n’est que la moitié d’un livre, et c’est au lecteur d’écrire l’autre moitié. La littérature est donc une leçon de liberté, une leçon de création, et elle est dangereuse si elle appelle au désordre et aux idées. C’est la raison pour laquelle, quoiqu’ils écrivent, les écrivains sont toujours persécutés par les tyrans. Et le tyran a raison de persécuter l’écrivain, car l’écrivain est un professeur de liberté.” Michel Tournier quoted in Bruno de Cessole 1996, p. 44.

[13] Term borrowed from Roland Barthes.

To put it in another way, in European post-war society notions such as collective memory, fiction and history became essential in understanding the emergence and evolution of this literary myth. The analysis of the myth of Robinson Crusoe, as I have shown, highlights several interdisciplinary tensions. One of the consequences is the narrative *hybridization* of codes from several disciplines, including literature, anthropology, philosophy, history, and sociology. Michel Foucault associated power with the social body; Gilles Deleuze considered islands as the embodiment of a shared imaginary. Can we then suggest that the image of the island and the character of Robinson are relevant elements in shaping a collective imaginary of colonial, and even postcolonial, Europe?

To return to Paul Veyne's analysis, the position of myth vis-à-vis truth from Veyne's perspective might correlate with the relation between power and truth as described by Michel Foucault, in that the 'programme of truth' theorised by Veyne is comparable to Foucault's 'regime of truth'. Though mythology and power are radically different concepts, they nevertheless have common mechanisms of functioning. In this sense, if power relates to knowledge, myth relates to common acceptance or validation, which the story of Robinson Crusoe confirms, given its striking popularity.

The present paper has shown how both John Fowles's and Michel Tournier's rewritings of Robinson and the island were invested with analytical, reflexive functions. I have also revealed the correlation implied between these literary palimpsests and the discipline of history, as rewritings of this literary myth often constitute an act of 'remembering' a colonial past, or a revision of individualist narratives. I would like to conclude with a third function of the island post-war literature, which concerns the process of soothing collective painful memories, in this case the violence of the twentieth century. As Kenzaburō Ōe commented in his 1994 Nobel Prize speech, "I wish my task as a novelist to enable both those who express themselves with words and their readers to recover from their own sufferings and the sufferings of their time, and to cure their souls of the wounds" (1994, n. p.). Similarly, the post-war poetics of the literary island and of its solitary hero respond to this triple literary function, that of reflexivity and apprehension, of remembering and assuming the past, and of alleviating the present of the burden of history.

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Contact Ioana Andreescu: andreescu_ioana@yahoo.com