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Robinsonnades I: The Allegory*

...the consciousness of a necessity, of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally needy individuals)...

—Georges Bataille, The Accursed Share

1. The Robinson Folly

We need to imagine Robinson Crusoe on his island (keeping in mind that we will have dealt with this character from our earliest years when, already trapped in the maze of language and culture, we were caught up in the solipsistic mood that leads children to wrap themselves inside their monologue to the point of playing at erecting a miniature universe, each according to his or her taste and sense of scale, where no one is allowed to enter or intervene, but to which the child is not loathe to call attention or to show off: this work of fiction which is at the beginning of the modern novel, this book which figures among the great pedagogical tools of our civilization, is multiply tied to our own origins; and each of us will have dreamed, at least once in our lives, of being Robinson.

(And moreover: the allegory does not come from nowhere; a certain culture offers it to us, imposes it on us for its own purposes, fictively reducing us to the condition of being completely cut off in order to force us—even while dazzling us with its own "riches"—to judge our needs, our productions, our values, our cultural heritage, by the sole light of necessity. Robinson's adventure takes its place in the economic history of the West at the precise moment when the relation between

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Plate from an edition of Robinson Crusoe illustrated by Grandville.
the rates of population growth and those of food supplies inverted itself, the latter finally surpassing the former: Robinson is the man for whom population, or reproduction, is not an issue, at least in its natural, biological form; he’s the producer who has to know about nothing but his own sustenance.

The invention was made (made on purpose) to seduce the intellectuals of an era—the first—that was committed to taking a critical look at the foundations of culture. It being a matter of imagining a situation through which the needs of man—which he specifies as “natural” and thus as “necessary” and hence as “true”—would be successively revealed (according to the circuit of equivalences that his system organizes), Rousseau himself, as gifted as he was at supplying thought with the appropriate models to form and instruct it on the matter of its own archaeology, Rousseau (who claimed to hate books) wanted his Emile, for as long as possible but always by means of extracts, to know no other book but the one we are discussing—the philosopher, having severed fiction from the volume in which it is written in accordance with the same decision that led him to close up all books so as to consider nothing but the unique text of nature—a text open to all to read, but the reading of which struck him as requiring a preparation and special exercise of the imagination, if not its disturbance (“I want to make him dizzy: I want him constantly to be busy with his mansion, his goats, his plantations. . . . I want him to think that he is Robinson himself, to see himself dressed in skins, wearing a large hat, carrying a large saber, and all the rest of the character’s grotesque equipment, with the exception of the parasol which he will not need. . . . What a resource this folly would be for a skillful man who knew how to engender it solely for the sake of taking advantage of it”).

2. The Absolute Whole

And what better image, in fact, than that of a man totally cut off, deprived of resources and of society, delivered up to the most naked necessity? What fiction could seem more suited to teach the difference between natural man—the absolute whole (to follow Rousseau, once again) who, having no connection but to himself, judges everything and always settles his accounts according to his own needs—and social man, the man of culture whose “ego” is commandeered by society and is no longer in touch with desire except as denatured, fashioned by institutions? Behold a subject—the narration of Robinson is in the first person—who from early in life had obstinately refused to accept a post, and above all the one that designated for him a mediocre condition yet seemed to satisfy those whose lot it was so well that they could not conceive of either transforming it or leaving it; a bourgeois, yet tempted by adventure, as if he were propelled by either pride or adversity, and who will in fact see himself reduced to that excess of solitude and of privation

where one can witness both the extremes of hardship and the cost of the most
demented pride: this individual, not even terribly sympathetic (but a great reasoner
and an unparalleled storyteller), will find himself placed by the decree of fiction
in the very position to which reflexive consciousness aspires when it constitutes
itself as the point of radical departure (absolute whole). It is certain that something
of the heroism of Don Quixote—himself a close relative of Robinson, as Daniel
Defoe flattered himself to think—entered into the decision that led the philosopher
to link his discourse to the concept of the subject as it is instituted by language in
the utterance of the cogito, and to found the chain of his deductions on an
obviousness without any backing but that of language (that common treasury—
shared—from which the sharing out occurs, the splitting of the subject into
shares). But for this particular subject who answers to the name of “man,” in order
to distance himself from the culture that designates him as such, doubt will not
suffice, nor will reason, even deductive reason: for this we need an image.

So long as the wave has him in its grip, Robinson will be utterly concentrated
(thinking of nothing that came before) on holding his breath and swimming with
all his might so as to save an existence that he clearly knows is threatened and
fragile but is nonetheless so necessary to him that once he is carried to the shore
he needs to flail about thousands of times and to cry out over and over before
recovering his speech, regathering his wits, and taking a first look at his misfortune.
In the quickly grasped solitude of his island, this man, reduced for a time to the
state of “nature,” will not be able to flatter himself—like the philosopher by the
warmth of his stove—of being assured of his existence. To the contrary, he will be
forced to guarantee it by all sorts of bastions, fortifications, and defenses that will
be able to protect him even during sleep, in order subsequently, by dint of caution,
economy, and material provisioning, to arrange a future: spelling out one by one
and in what seems a necessary order, the supposedly “natural” needs of the species
and reinventing on his own (I cite this randomly and without paying attention to
a progression) agriculture and animal husbandry, temporal measurement, the
mechanical arts, medicine, pottery and basket weaving, cookery, bread making,
navigation and tourism, in short, by his own gifts and by the sole means of his
industriousness, reconstituting the conditions and material supports of culture.

3. Reproduction

This novel which should have told of the deformation of a linguistic being
subtracted from social space and soon threatened, even fascinated by savagery, by
delirium and violence, by irrationality, and by bestiality, this book is in fact
(Rousseau was not wrong about this) the chief among novels of culture, the first
among education stories: the novel of the formation of culture, of its re-production
based on the model it imposes as necessary by means of a fictional ploy—the very
one of “nature” and of a being who because of being cut off knows what necessity
really means. If we give such a work to children to read, this is—as it should be—
to educate them, to inform them that there are not many ways in which to conceive of carrying on human activity and that, it being a question of remaking the world, the best is still to stick with the received model. But who would know, among the needs Robinson will have managed to satisfy and others (desires?) he seems to have been at pains to suppress even the utterance of ("I was removed from all the Wickedness of the World here. I had neither the Lust of the Flesh nor the Lust of the Eyes, nor the Pride of Life. I had nothing to covet; for I had all that I was now capable of enjoying": but has Robinson told us everything about the pleasures he was capable of?), who would know how to separate what defines “natural” man as such (who in being “natural” is no less “man”) from what makes him social, “denatured” man? This soul would have neither the taste nor the leisure to stray, so occupied as Robinson was in not losing the thread, in ceding nothing to those animal powers that, in man, borrow the means and even the voice of “nature” in order to lead him to deviances; and even when he has lost all hope of rescue, we never see this isolate neglecting the units of cultural time and ceasing to maintain his calendar, nor relinquishing anything of his language or of his identity, specifically that of his dignity and his manners (self-indulgently imperious, if not imperial, and so ingrained in him that an isolation of more than twenty-five years will not seem to have tempered them).

On his island, was Robinson free—I mean: was he free, in such a situation, to act or to comport himself otherwise, and first and foremost to strip himself of his social being, to break the boundaries of culture? Against the reading of the novel proposed by Rousseau—although of the version he had abridged for children—it might seem instead that the trial of an “inhuman” solitude was imposed on our shipwreck not so much to permit him to tally up the true needs of the species as to force him to swear allegiance to a society he was determined to flee but which he nonetheless needed in order to escape annihilation, to keep body and soul intact. Every man needs a ground, a shelter against being overwhelmed, including the sailor even though (according to Robinson) he is of all men the one who is farthest from the fear of God: if his boat founders it’s the entire world that threatens to drown with him, the world that made him and that contains him, that disciplines him but whose withdrawal leaves him without protection in the face of immensity, delivered up to all the excess of horror, of the unbearable, of madness (as Joseph Conrad more or less says in his Lord Jim, this other version of Robinson). But Robinson took elaborate pains neither to discover in himself nor to expose anything of himself that could exclude him from the society of his fellows; nor to commit any deviation consistent with expelling him from his own humanity: a decision that was greatly aided by both the complete solitude of his island and the quality of its land, well appointed as it was to persuade him to put the finishing touches on the work of Nature within which everything seemed to signal that it was operating in the direction and according to the means of culture already. What Robinson reveals to us is less the primordial grounds of a linguistic being figuratively led to the supposed state of nature than the conditions of an economic
balance based on the calculation of resources and on the elimination of all feelings or desires man cannot satisfy once reduced to singleness; or based—to speak like Rousseau, but this is, as we would say, an equivocal way of speaking—on the renunciation of all dependency, except that of nature.

4. The Man of Culture and of Inequality

Nevertheless, Rousseau was simply wrong to have wanted to ignore the “hurly-burly” that surrounds the silent and exemplary life of Robinson Crusoe. For the other adventures of this character (who declares himself to be incorrigible and of a nature that is hardly prone to being reformed) are not without connection to the question that occupied the author of *Emile*: where in man does the frontier between nature and culture lie (insofar as dividing needs into natural and artificial makes any sense and authorizes such a dichotomy)? For here we see how much Robinson will have ventured, his whole life, onto the edges of savagery without for all that ever having penetrated into it, as his long seafaring along the African coasts after leaving Sallee clearly illustrates, or again, once cloistered on his island, his interminable musings on the state to which he would have been reduced if, having saved nothing from the ship’s wreckage, he had been forced to live like a real savage (and, for example, to go around completely naked, something he couldn’t bear to imagine even though no one was there to witness it). In fact, and whatever he might have claimed, Defoe was careful not to expose his hero for
longer than several hours to a state he could never have tolerated. Perhaps, as long as he was without society, Robinson could in fact renounce nothing of his social being; but once he would succeed, after so many years, in associating another creature to his life, this will not be an occasion for him to build relationships of equality with this native and to try to settle down with him in the wild state, a state that is still close to the primitive condition of man, in which Rousseau would soon recognize the true infancy of the world. It's due, of course, to Robinson's having been able to have a far less abstract view of this condition and to his having felt nothing but horror and aversion for the cannibals that gorged themselves on the banks of his island, congratulating himself for having been born in a part of the world where human nature hadn't attained such a degree of degradation (following a trajectory that wouldn't be the same as that of history?). But it's also due to the fact that he wasn't only civilized man, and thus complicit with the rules and usages of an organized society, but—more profoundly—the man of inequality, the man
of culture and history insofar as these have as their beginning and permanent resource the continually repeated victory of the master over the slave. Even having experienced servitude himself (with the pirates of Sallee) and even finding himself subsequently having to work with his hands to the point of reinventing the basis of culture, according to his means and without anyone’s help, this man will remain no less a master, even in his solitary state. We could gloss over his having sold the young Arab he took along in his flight from Sallee to the captain of the boat that rescued him (all the more in that he did it with misgivings and often regretted not having kept the boy for his own service); but can we ignore, without damage to the allegory, that the same Robinson was shipwrecked while sailing toward Africa to stock up on slaves and that, quickly setting himself up as lord of his island, he never stopped dreaming of the means to make use of several of the savages that came there to feast? This master will have experienced the trials of work to their utmost: but if he soon stopped giving a special mark to the seventh day on his calendar, this is because he could not hope to attain the Sunday of history without the mediation of Friday, whose appearance—and, once again, whose servitude—will announce his deliverance and his return to human society.

The man of culture excluded from connection to his fellows and to their discourse, the civilized man faced with the savage, the man of distraction enclosed by the limits of an island and delivered to solitude, the master forced, for survival, to work: this invention was made to appeal to the mind (such as Hegel would construe this concept, so problematic today) and to lead it into assuming some distance, inquiring about its own ways, and finally judging its various activities and productions in terms of their relation to nature (= to necessity = to truth). Being more particularly a matter of art (whose death Hegel would soon announce) and of its works, we must observe that nothing in Robinson Crusoe nor in the Reflections that followed it authorizes one to endow the isolate with any needs or cares of an “aesthetic” order, in the sense Western culture imposes on this term. If Robinson complains that his trays and baskets are inelegant and that he can only turn out bowls and vases of an insignificant form, doesn’t this concern their function only? And as for the furnishings of his life, his greatest pleasure was to view the wonderful order of his things and above all to find himself in charge of a considerable stock in the light of which he feared nothing but its annihilation. Here again, master rather than slave, he has vested all his happiness in use and consumption, immediate or deferred, to wit in the stockage of goods and produce and in an abundance he had discovered could be raised (in the form of turtle soup, roasted pigeons, and sun-dried raisins) to the level of delicacy. (We know that Defoe himself disclaimed the status of art for his Robinson Crusoe, professing to have wanted merely to inform the public by means of a narrative without appearance of fiction, despite its allegorical nature, and all the while recognizing that with regard to the entertainment and instruction of the reader, the result would have been the same whether it were a novel or a simple and exact recounting of a set of facts.)
5. The Circle, the Threat

Was there no place, then, in this solitary existence for any consideration other than utilitarian, any field on which an "art" might develop that was not only functional or mechanical, any margin or gap within which the concerns of writing might have seen the light under any other form than that of a ship's log (even though late in life the same Robinson would be called upon to take up the work of a writer, or at least that of a moralist)? Would the fiction have so demanded it, even given the fact that the shipwreck victim was put in a position so as to encounter nothing but his "true" needs instead of the art that would have made him respond, according to his means, to a need he would have created himself, an artificial need he could actually satisfy only through artifice? Or did Robinson have to eschew "art" to the precise extent to which it, even if borne on the soil of culture, always claims to sink its roots elsewhere? (But of course culture is not understood in this way by the author who could conceive the figure of the absolute whole so as to enclose us in his system and persuade us of the necessity of an order that, without excluding movement, could not tolerate, in its revolutions, any deviation or excess.)

We must imagine Robinson on his island at the moment when he will be threatened—it's Valéry who speaks thus in his essay "Robinson," in *Histoires brisées*—by discovering the arts and letters. Threatened: the word is strong, but instructive, as is Valéry's position. And thus what will the man of subsistence, the man of singleness, the man of necessity, do once he has arrived at the state of abundance and leisure within which we expect to see (but that does not go without raising questions as well) the conditions of emergence of culture in its most refined forms? He will begin—Valéry is still speaking here—by remembering the books he has read, the music he has heard (must we then think that he has seen no pictures, and what is the meaning of this exclusion?), busying himself with reconstructing them in his memory, if not with fixing their recall by writing down a few notes, in order, finally, to carry them forward, to create the sequel. We must underscore (as Valéry himself does) these remarkable terms: for one cannot imagine that such an understanding of creative work could have disturbed the course of such a perfectly solitary life in any way, being something that—to the contrary—should have inscribed Robinson within the circle of culture and reinforced the links this subject tries to preserve with his past and with his future as a social being. Had the regularity of his thoughts, desires, and actions been threatened by literature or art, it would not have been under the guise of the museum without walls, nor of a "tradition," nor of a continuous history but rather through the power of alienation that informs art and literature, by the ferment of rupture—at least of contestation—that constitutes their inner strength, by the decision that turns anyone who acts according to the order of the letter into the last man if not

3. Ibid., p. 416.
least human one, given that he wants to know of no future other than that of a work that escapes the humanists' notion of cultural measure and first among them those who take the unit (the work, the author, the subject, as a unit) as its standard. But what then about the denatured man, the one who keeps trying to decipher in himself the signs of a nature that escapes rational reflection? Or to put it better and finally to break with such language: what about art—and writing itself—if it is true that it might borrow the means and indirectness of play, of artifice, of convention, in order to go against the grain of those rules and prohibitions basic to "culture" as such, so as to impose the notion of a necessity that would be foreign to the rule of such a culture and to that of "nature"?