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**Adventures
in the Machinery
of the Popular
Imagination**

THE MODERN MYTHS

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BALL**

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HOW CAN
A MYTH
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We can start almost anywhere, and there's no virtue in being high-brow about it. So why not with the 2004 movie *Van Helsing*, star-ring Hugh Jackman as the famous vampire-hunter? Aside from his name and calling, this youthful, dark-locked, brawny action hero has nothing in common with Dracula's venerable nemesis in Bram Stoker's novel. It's not only the bloodsucking count he's pursuing but a legion of mon-sters that includes Frankenstein's creature and the brutish Mr. Hyde. We know we are in safe hands here, for Jackman and his screen lover, Kate Beckinsale, are genre stalwarts, much as Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing, Boris Karloff, and Bela Lugosi were in their day. The texture of the movie is familiar too: comic-strip gothic, lit by moonlight and bristling with razor-fanged CGI beasts, the framing and aesthetic echoing the graphic novels of Frank Miller and Alan Moore. The imagery is iconic: here is Dracula's castle, much as it was in the 1931 Lugosi movie directed by Tod Browning. There is Frankenstein's electrified laboratory, full of sparks and shadows, where Karloff's creature rose up in the same year. And here comes the flat-headed monster himself, his patchwork skull apt to fly open, in slapstick fashion, to reveal a sparking brain. We forgive Van

Helsing for becoming a werewolf and killing his paramour; heroes these days are prone to such things.

Van Helsing is a stupendously silly homage, about as scary and unsettling as a soap opera, and I rather enjoyed it.

There doesn't, though, appear to be much we can learn about our modern myths from this sort of good-natured romp, with its relentless computer-game dynamic, cheap sentimentalism, and makeshift, Frankensteinian mosaic of motifs. Surely it does for these myths only what Ray Harryhausen did for the classical myths of Greece, turning them into a parade of cinematic effects with not a care for coherence or poetry. (I don't mean that in a bad way.)

Still, you know what I'm talking about, don't you? You know what *Van Helsing*, in its clumsy, carefree fashion, is up to. You know that the seam it is exploiting, the language it is using, is indeed that of myth.

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I hope I am not being condescending when I suspect that few among *Van Helsing*'s target audience—hormonal adolescents eager for violent action, sexy vampires, and spectacle—will have read Stoker's *Dracula*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. These are stories that everyone knows without having to go to that trouble. They have seeped into our consciousness, replete with emblematic visuals, before we reach adulthood. I met Robinson Crusoe in a black-and-white French television series from the 1960s, in which nothing much seemed to happen save for the discovery of that momentous footprint in the sand; like many of my generation, I can hum the theme tune today. Frankenstein arrived as a glow-in-the-dark model kit of the Karloff incarnation, arms outstretched to claim his next victim. (It was not actually "Frankenstein," of course, but his monster, although the box didn't tell me that.) The stingray alien craft of George Pal's 1953 movie *The War of the Worlds* were ominous enough to distract us from the wires from which they dangled. Dracula—well, he was Christopher Lee, everyone knew that.

This cultural osmosis is how we learn our modern myths. For myths

are what these stories are, and to suggest (as some purists do) that the Hammer films or Hollywood adaptations traduced the "real" story is to miss their point. In this book I propose that the Western world has, over the past three centuries or so, produced narratives that have as authentic a claim to mythic status as the psychological dramas of Oedipus, Medea, Narcissus, and Midas and the ancient universal myths of creation, flood, redemption, and heroism.

Myths have no authors, although they must have an origin. They escape those origins (and their originators) not simply because they are constantly retold with an accumulation of mutations, appendages, and misconceptions. Rather, their creators have given body to stories for which retellings are deemed *necessary*. What is it in these special tales that compels us so compulsively to return to them? Each age finds different answers, and this too is in the nature of myth.

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Why are we still making myths? Why do we need *new* myths? And what sort of stories attain this status?

In posing these questions and seeking answers, I shall need to make some bold proposals about the nature of storytelling, the condition of modernity, and the categories of literature. I don't claim that any of these suggestions is new in itself, but the notion of a *modern myth* can give them some focus and unity. We have been skating around that concept for many years now, and I can't help wondering if some of the reticence to acknowledge and accept it stems from puzzlement, and perhaps too a sense of unease, that *Van Helsing* is a part of the story. Not just that movie, but also the likes of *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *Zombie Apocalypse*, as well as children's literature and detective pulp fiction, not to mention queer theory, alien abduction fantasies, video games, body horror, and artificial intelligence.

In short, there are a great many academic silos, cultural prejudices, and intellectual exclusion zones trammeling an exploration of our mythopoeic impulse. Even in 2019, for example, a celebrated literary novelist dipping his toe into a robot narrative could suppose that *real* science fiction deals

in "travelling at 10 times the speed of light in anti-gravity boots," as opposed to "looking at the human dilemmas of being close up." It is precisely because our modern myths go everywhere that they earn that label, and for this same reason we fail to see (or resist seeing) them for what they are. As classical myths did for the cultures that conceived them, modern myths help us to frame and come to terms with the conditions of our existence.

Evidently, this is not all about literary books. Myths are promiscuous; they were postmodern before the concept existed, infiltrating and being shaped by popular culture. To discern their content, we need to look at comic books and B-movies as well as at Romantic poetry and German Expressionist cinema. We need to peruse the scientific literature, books of psychoanalysis, and made-for-television melodramas. Myths are not choosy about where they inhabit, and I am not going to be choosy about where to find them.

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The idea of a modern myth, admits literary critic Chris Baldick,

> simply should not exist, according to the most influential accounts of what a 'myth' is . . . the consensus in discussion of myths is that they are defined by their exclusive anteriority to literate and especially to modern culture. 'Myth' . . . is a lost world, to which modern writers may distantly and ironically allude, but in which they can no longer directly participate.

Like Baldick, I think this traditional view is entirely the wrong way to understand what a myth is. I will try to explain why.

The word *myth* is bandied about with dreadful abandon, as if it doesn't much matter what it means. Often now it is used to stigmatize a widely held misconception: the myth that the moon landings were staged in a Hollywood studio, or that Nelson Mandela died in the 1980s, or that eating carrots improves your eyesight. It can mark a clumsy attempt to disguise a franchise as an epic: *Star Wars* is mythic, right? (We'll see about that.) Or perhaps a story becomes a myth just by being much retold?

Experts, I fear, aren't much help here. You can collect academic defi-
nitions for as long as your patience lasts. "The word *myth*," as Northrop
Frye rightly says, "is used in such a bewildering variety of contexts that
anyone talking about it has to say first of all what his chosen context is."
Folklorist Liz Locke put it more bluntly in 1998: "such a state of seman-
tic disarray and/or ambiguity is truly extraordinary."

Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko nonetheless gives a definition that
kind of *sounds* like what you'd expect from an expert: a myth is

> a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world,
> the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as
> a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together
> with all parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains. A myth
> expresses and confirms society's religious values and norms, it provides
> a pattern of behavior to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual
> with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult.

This is a fair appraisal of how myth has often been regarded by anthro-
pologists. But it is fraught with dangers and traps. Like the word "an-
thropology" itself, it seems to offer an invitation to make myth some-
thing "other": something belonging to cultures not our own, and most
probably to ones that even in the circles of liberal academics retain an
air of the "primitive." Gods, creation, ritual, cult: these are surely no-
tions that we in the developed world have left behind and only pick up
again with an air of irony. Our "gods" are not real beings or agencies but
metaphorical cravings ("he worships money") or celebrities (rock gods
and sex goddesses). Our rituals, not invested with any spiritual content
(except in churches, mosques, and temples attended by the devout), are
empty or, at best, time-honored habits we indulge for the social sanction
they offer—marriages and funerals, say. Our cults are brainwashing sects
isolated from regular society. And so likewise, our "myths" are things
that many people believe to be true but that aren't really—or, as "urban
myths," oft-told tales that likely never happened.

Our popular narrative, then, is that we shed mythology in its tradi-
tional sense, probably during the process that began in the Enlighten-

ment, in the course of which the world became "disenchanted" by the advance of science, and that has led since to a secular society on which the old deities have lost their grip. We grew out of gods and myths because we acquired reason and science.

This picture is tenacious, and I suspect it accounts for much of the resistance to the notion (and there is *a lot* of resistance, believe me) that anything created in modern times might deserve to be called a "myth." To accept that we have never relinquished myths and mythmaking might seem to be an admission that we are not quite modern and rational. But all I am asking, with the concept of myth I use in this book, is that we accept that we have not resolved all the dilemmas of human existence, all the questions about our origins or our nature—and that, indeed, modernity has created a few more of them.

One objection to the idea of a modern myth is that, to qualify as myth, a story must contain elements and characters that someone somewhere believes literally existed or happened. Surely myths can't emerge from works of fiction! The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski asserted as much, saying of myth that "it is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies."

But this is simply the grand narrative with which Malinowski and his generation framed their study of the myths of "primitive" cultures. It allows us to insist (as they wished to) that we advanced societies have no myth left except religion (and even that is no longer believed in quite the same way as it was a couple of centuries ago).* As Baldick puts it, in

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* Malinowski's distinction becomes (inadvertently) more fruitful once we recognize the *desire to believe*—and to cultivate belief—that is evident in modern myth. Many modern myths, from *Robinson Crusoe* onward, have been presented as "true" accounts, for example, by means of epistolary and diaristic devices. The most avid fans of Sherlock Holmes talk of him as a real person and furnish him with biographies and obituaries. As for *The War of the Worlds*, the literal belief in the story when it was broadcast on US radio in 1938 is notorious. Malinowski would have done better to describe part of the work of myth as blurring what is real and what is fictional.

this view "myth is the quickest way out of the twentieth [and now the twenty-first] century."

Even in its own terms, however, Malinowski's definition is tendentious. Did the author(s) we know as Homer believe he was merely writing history, right down to, say, Athena's interventions in the Trojan war? To assert this would be to neglect the long and continuing scholarly debate about what Homer was really up to—was he, for instance, a skeptic, or a religious reformer? Worse, it would neglect the even longer and profound debate about *what storytelling is up to*. It might be unwise to attach any contemporary label to Homer, but one that fits him more comfortably than most is to say he was a poet, and that he used poetic imagination to articulate his myths. Stories like his relate something deemed culturally important and in an important sense "true"—but not as a documentary account of events. Plato admitted as much in the fifth century BCE; are we then to suppose that Greek myth was already "dead" to him?

To ask if ancient people "believed" their mythical stories is to ask a valid but extremely complex question. It is much the same as asking if Christian theologians, past and present, "believe" the Bible. Yes, they generally do—but that belief is complicated, multifaceted, and contentious, and to imagine it amounts to a literal conviction that all the events and peoples described in the holy book occurred as written is to misunderstand the function of religion itself. What's more, while we can adduce a range of interpretations about these beliefs today, it is not clear we can ever truly decide how these correspond (or whether they even need to correspond) to the convictions of the people who created the original text.

Many early anthropologists and scholars of myth (and some still today) thought that myths must be "sacred": they must have the aspect of religious belief, and perhaps have been used in ritual. This was the position taken by Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the nineteenth-century founders of cultural anthropology, and also by James Frazer in his seminal early work on comparative myth, *The Golden Bough* (1890). For Tylor, Frazer, and Malinowski, myth was a prescientific way of understanding the world, and thereby of trying to control it. The French

anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that in fact myth was a kind of primitive science: logical and concrete in its own terms. Philosopher Karl Popper believed that science arose out of efforts to assess the validity of myth through empirical, rational investigation of its effectiveness. The evaluations of all these commentators stemmed largely from a focus on *creation* myths, which are the easiest to map onto questions about how the physical world is constituted and governed.

This view of myth as primarily religious and at any rate prescientific is certainly a convenient way of keeping myth at arm's length from today's secular, technologically sophisticated society. But to insist that a religious role is a necessary, defining feature of myth would be an arbitrary stricture that tells us little about the social work myths did. It is a view that mistakes function for process—as if to say that the function of a church service is to enable hymns to be sung. It doesn't even fit with the way (as far as we can say anything at all about this) myth functioned in ancient times. As classicist William Hansen has said, there is "no real evidence that I can see that the Greeks regarded myths as 'sacred stories,' unless you take 'sacred' in a very watered-down sense."

It's undeniable that religion and myth are tightly entwined, however—not least because both address cosmic questions about *meaning*, which lie outside the domain of scientific cosmology. For religious scholar Mary Mills, myth offers a "cosmic framework . . . which indicates where cosmic power resides, what it is called, and so how it can be used." To which one might reply: sure, sometimes. The world emerging from the body of the giant Ymir, maybe. Theseus's struggles with the Minotaur or Medea, not so much.

The temptation is to suppose that modern myths are today's replacement for religion. That would be to fall for another a category error, however, for religion might be regarded as a particular social and institutional embodiment of myth—and not vice versa. Religion explores some of the same questions—about life and death, meaning, suffering and fate, origins—and so it is not surprising that we will find our modern, secular myths still returning to religious themes, questions, and experiences. Institutional religion tends, however, to crystallize from this exploration codes of conduct, values, and norms. At its worst, it seeks to

escape from the ambiguities of myth by imposing a false resolution to irresolvable questions. At its best, it leaves those doors open.

This brings us to the tidy function ascribed to myth by Honko's definition: to express and confirm society's religious values and norms and provide a pattern of behavior to be imitated. This is the sober, objective rationalist's view of myth as normative narrative. But whose behavior exactly is to be imitated among the Titans and Olympians? Cronus the father-castrator? Zeus the sex-pest and rapist? Dionysius the libertine? Heracles with his boneheaded pragmatism? Self-absorbed Narcissus?*

No, myth is not tidy. Myth is the *opposite* of tidy! Was Gong Gong, who caused the Great Flood of China's formation myth, a wicked demon king who broke one of the Pillars of Heaven and made a hole through which the waters poured (as some versions suggest)? Or was he an opportunist human king who simply tried to exploit the catastrophe? Or was he an inept engineer employed by the Emperor Yao to drain the waters? Or was he in fact the father of the engineer-hero Yü who finally resolved the mess? Take your pick. This, I think, is the best answer we can give to such questions based on the conflicting versions of myths that have survived (while no doubt many others have been lost): *it depends on the story you want to tell*. Gong Gong could represent many influences and agencies, contingent on what the myth-teller wanted the people to believe about flood control and state authority. A myth is typically not a story but an evolving web of many stories—interweaving, interacting, contradicting each other. Boil it down and the story falls away: there are no characters (which is to say, individuals with histories and psychologies), no location, no denouement—and no unique "meaning." You're left with a rugged, elemental, irreducible kernel charged with the magical power of *generating versions of the story*.

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* Mythologist William Doty suggests that myths involving trickster figures, of which Dionysius might be considered an example, "often convey social norms precisely by describing behaviors taught to be just the opposite of proper living." But if that's so, they are filled with the same ambivalence we will find in modern myths—for such tricksters are almost always not simply wicked but attractive and seductive.

A function of China's flood myth (for example) is thus not simply to give citizens a quasi-religious account of how their nation began, but also—and more importantly—to help them deal with the ever-present fear of massive flooding. It sanctifies the authority of someone who can cope with such a natural disaster, and even proposes a theoretical basis for flood control: carve out channels to let the waters flow, don't dam them up. But more than that: it creates *a vehicle for thinking about the problem*, without offering either a definitive version of events or an un-ambiguous solution. When a myth becomes a dogmatic social and eth-ical code, it has become prescriptive religion or something like it: we have arrived at Daoism or Confucianism, say. When a myth permits of a resolution—when it indeed succeeds in what Lévi-Strauss describes as its aim, of providing "a logical model capable of overcoming a contra-diction" (though how could it, if the contradiction is real?)—it has be-come a moral fable. But while it retains ambiguity and contradiction, it stays a myth. It acts not as a cultural code but as what cultural historians Amanda Rees and Iwan Rhys Morus call (apropos the kind of modern myths discussed in this book) a "cultural resource."

It's unfair to judge the early anthropologists too harshly for the limited and inadequate picture of myth they presented, which was of course a product of its time. They deserve credit for taking seriously the function it serves; as Malinowski said, myth "is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hard-working, ex-tremely important cultural force." Yet it wasn't until around the middle of the twentieth century that such scholars began to recognize the ob-vious corollary: that the work demanded of this cultural force does not simply vanish with modernity, and that there is nothing essentially an-cient about myth. Philosopher Ernst Cassirer was perfectly happy with the idea that myths are still being produced, especially in the political sphere—he regarded Nazism as an instance. "In all critical moments of man's social life," he wrote, "the rational forces that resist the rise of the old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In these mo-ments the time for myth has come again."

Still, for Cassirer, mythmaking remained an atavistic throwback, a strategy necessary only in "desperate situations." It took a theologian to

dismantle that idea: the German Rudolf Bultmann, who sought to "de-mythologize" the Christian New Testament. To seek historical verifica-tion of the scriptures or reconciliation of their account of cosmogenesis with science is not, he argued, a meaningful pursuit. Rather, their mes-sage is ethical and philosophical. It's the same with all myth, he said: it expresses timeless human experience:

> The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologi-cally, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially.*

If this is indeed at least a part of what myth is about, then mythmaking can cease only when "the world in which we live" has ceased to change, and when we have solved all of our problems and resolved all of our anx-ieties. That, I suspect we can agree, will not be any time soon.

The idea that myths confirm social norms and values—that they tell us how to behave—is nevertheless especially persistent. What is the myth of Oedipus if not a warning against incest? Yet, on closer inspection, that reasonable-sounding supposition dissolves. Taboos against incest are pretty much universal,† and for good biological reasons: inbreeding promotes genetic dysfunctions, a fact obvious enough from experience long before Darwinism suggested a means of rationalizing it. And for that reason, too, no society really needs a cautionary tale. To suggest that the myth of Oedipus has this utilitarian function is ludicrous—we all know from the outset what a harmful and terrible thing the hapless

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* Praise for Bultmann must be qualified, however, for he believed that myths have a single meaning, which it is the scholar's task to identify. His critic Karl Jaspers was more astute here, acknowledging that the interpretation of a myth may adapt to different circumstances.

† They have been sometimes set aside, however, when they conflict with notions of hierarchy-preservation, leading to inbreeding in royal and noble lineages from the ancient Egyptians to the Hapsburg monarchs.

Oedipus is doing, and it's obvious he'd never contemplate it if he knew the truth himself. No, the Oedipus myth exists because, even knowing already that incest is bad, still we worry that it might happen. We call the protosexual attraction of a child to his or her parent "oedipal" today not because it looks a bit like what happened in the Oedipus story, but because the Oedipus story encodes the fact that *this is what happens to us*. That's why the story exists: to create a narrative space for thinking about the unsettling fact that a young man awakening to adulthood may start to look at his mother in a different way (and the mother, in turn, might do the same). To be the object of your child's first sexual impulses is unsettling for a parent, but also very common. Such disquieting but widespread, if not universal, experiences create a demand for myth.

We should be wary, though, of concluding that a myth lays hold to a specific dilemma and toys with it. Myths are certainly "about" things, but they are rarely about a single thing. The Oedipus myth explores what we now call oedipal anxieties, but bound up with them are questions about how individuals and societies respond to taboo-breaking, and where responsibility for it lies. These issues change with the times. Did the ancient Greeks also consider the story to be primarily about father-son rivalry and fears around incest, or were they perhaps more impressed with the way it explored the arbitrariness of fate? An openness to multiple readings is a hallmark of modern myth, and surely of classical myth too.

Another line of resistance to the concept of modern myth takes the form of evasion: So, do you mean stories from modern times with a whiff of the supernatural? Say, the "Angel of Mons," glimpsed by troops in World War I? But we have a perfectly good word for such stories already in anthropology: folklore. Now, it's true that there is plenty of academic discussion about where to fix the boundaries between folklore and myth, but this is beside the point. One thing we can say is that modern myths have little, if any, use for the supernatural. On the contrary, they are keen to advertise their modernity. What's more, they are not synonymous with isolated archetypes, beliefs, or apparitions. They are *stories*. That is what *mythos* means.

This is vital to everything that follows, for it is the narrative nature of myths that allow them to do their cultural work. As professor of religion and scholar of myth Sarah Iles Johnston says in the course of outlining her own definition of Greek myth, there are "certain things stories do that simpler statements cannot." They help us to refine our skills, our thoughts, our conception of the world, Johnston says, by allowing us vicariously and without actual hazard to place ourselves in new situations, to consider the responses of the characters, "weighing their choices and considering whether we would do the same under similar circumstances." Ideas formulated as stories are congruent with our experience of the world—it is not simply for the purposes of entertainment but more for the purposes of aiding cognition that they take this form.

So then, what kind of stories serve this role? Fantastical ones often work best: in myth, says Lévi-Strauss, "everything becomes possible." Such stories, says Johnston, "can coax us to look beyond the witnesses of our five senses and imagine that another reality exists, in addition to the reality that we experience every day." The very departure from realism that has led mythical narrative to be derided and belittled in the modern literature of the fantastic, in Gothic, horror, and science-fiction novels, is a key enabling feature of the work of myth.

And yet not everything possible becomes actual in myths. The limitless profusion of possibilities condenses into rather specific, if schematic, narratives. The question is what directs that emergence.

Mythologist Robert Segal simply says that a myth is a story about "something significant"—more precisely, that it "accomplishes something significant for adherents." This of course raises the tricky question of what makes someone an "adherent." As I've said, I don't think adherence need entail a belief in the literal truth of the story. I think we are all adherents of the modern myths I explore in this book, simply by virtue of the fact that we know the core stories and recognize them as being deeply embedded in our culture—and because we want to hear them, again and again, and to juggle with their implications.

The idea that modern myths exist should not really be controversial, for most of the stories I consider in this book are routinely referred to in these terms, without inciting protest. All I am doing, in a sense, is to take this designation seriously and to ask what it means—about these stories in particular and about our need for new myths in general.

Literary scholar Ian Watt was one of the first to argue the case for modern myths. In *Myths of Modern Individualism* he identifies four of them: *Don Quixote*, *Faust*, *Don Juan*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. All are good candidates, although one can quibble. (One can always quibble about such selections, and I anticipate and even hope you will do so with mine.) *Faust*, for example, has a history that goes back at least to the biblical story of Simon Magus, and was a morality tale until Mary Shelley spun it into something far more ambiguous and contemporary. And it's hard to see much of a cultural heritage to *Don Juan* after Byron had his way with it, partly because the early forms of the tale are so heavily invested in ideas of divine morality. (But I'll accept the 1966 film *Alfie* among its progeny.)

Where I would respectfully take greatest issue with Watt, however, is in his assertion that "unlike the myths of Greece, the new Romantic myths were conscious inventions; and they were the product of single individuals." On the contrary, I will insist that, to the extent that these stories were conscious inventions, they are not mythical; what seems a necessarily if not sufficient ingredient for myth is a lack of authorial control. What is more, while the founding texts of modern myths are indeed generally the work of individuals (although they need not be), the myth is not identical to its founding text. Myths are the work of a culture (as Virginia Woolf said of *Crusoe*)—but of course they have to start somewhere.

One more bone of contention (Watt's contribution is very important, so let's have it over with): Watt claims modern myths give us more detail than the ancient ones. With the original texts still in our possession (or at least in our archives), that is not surprising—but those details are, in general, *precisely what we discard* as story turns to myth. I summarize each of my modern myths in a paragraph at the start of their respective chapters, and I suspect most readers could produce something

similar, regardless of whether they've read the books in question. Do you remember Crusoe's first shipwreck off the Norfolk coast, or the tragic fate of Safie in *Frankenstein*, or who mocked up the Hound of the Baskervilles with luminous paint? I thought not.

Rather than lay out a set of rigid qualifications, I want merely to suggest some general factors that our modern myths seem to share:

- They are stories that lend themselves to many reworkings, some barely recognizable as versions of the original form.
- They don't have morals. They explore human questions that are irresolvable, and they are *polysemic*: able to seed many different interpretations.
- They do, however, have significance—even if, as novelist Pat Barker says of the ancient myths,* "we don't agree on what that significance is."
- They are not consciously invented, merely crystallized—often unwittingly and messily, though sometimes with a degree of genius— by their first teller. As mythologist William Doty states, "Myths are not the creation of individual authors, but collective products elaborated over relatively long periods of time."
- They often burst forth from works of rather prosaic literary merit. If a story is too carefully crafted, the characters too finely drawn, it can't be altered without losing the essence, and so becomes a poor vehicle for myth.
- Their core narratives can be stated concisely—but not *too* concisely. Taken too far, the process of condensation leaves only a residue of banality: "we have a dark side," "we might invent something

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* Barker, one of several writers commissioned to write "modern" versions of ancient myths, revisits *The Iliad* in *The Silence of the Girls*, reshaping the story (as do others engaged in the project) to suit the demands of the present. Barker, for example, offers a female and often feminist perspective, while Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson let modern science infiltrate old narratives. We have been doing much the same for years, centuries even, with our modern myths, but without quite recognizing that is what we are up to.

dangerous," "we fear invasion." Only a few stories are myths, but there are no myths without stories.

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Well, OK then, you can have your modern myths, the skeptic might (at last) allow. But what does that mean, except that there are stories we keep returning to? Is *Pride and Prejudice* a modern myth? *A Christmas Carol*?

No and no—but that's just my opinion. I'd be happy for someone to make a case for one or both of these novels as myths. But you would need to do more than say simply that people still read them and base films, plays, and TV series on them. Do their messages and characters ever really change, even when we boldly set them in some time and place other than nineteenth-century England? Is a telling of *A Christmas Carol* ever anything other than the story of a miserly misanthrope turned kindly by seeing how lonely and wretched his behavior has made him? Is *Pride and Prejudice* ever about anything except how we can be too hasty, in affairs of the heart, to judge others and interpret their nature and intentions? I would contend that the goals, trajectories, and characters of these two popular stories are too fixed, too lacking in ambiguity, to make them mythical. But I'm open to persuasion (and perhaps even to *Persuasion*).

There are mythical and archetypal elements in Shakespeare too, but his works cannot engender their own myths, partly because if you lose Shakespeare's words then you lose their substance. Dickens's stories too would be slight fare without their finely wrought characters and dialogue. Fictions of this kind, with characters in whom we can believe and with whom we can sympathize, and with plots that intrigue, inspire, move, and astonish, can always hope to find an audience. But myths are something else, and serve a different function. They erect a rough-hewn framework on which to hang our anxieties, fears, and dreams. The timber must be rather crudely cut and loosely assembled so that the frame does not too tightly constrain what is suspended on it. As Lévi-Strauss said, a myth's true substance "does not lie in its style, its original music or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells." Myths arise by accident, not design—but they become myths because they provide something our

cultures need. The themes and meanings of modern myths are not nec-
essarily located in the books that initiated them but are decided collec-
tively and dynamically, constantly shifting with the times. We can agree
on the plots, but not on the meanings.

This characteristic addresses yet another objection to designating
anything as a modern myth: that it was *written by someone*. Myths are
no more written by an individual than the First World War was caused
by an assassination. The originating text—if there is one—supplies the
material for a culture to work on. "The popular imagination," writes cul-
tural critic James Twitchell, "is continually finishing these stories, plug-
ging loopholes, locating gaps, reiterating important characteristics, and,
most important, introducing new players, especially victims." The media
that nurture and convey myths need not, he adds, be literary:

> The myth may appear in a literary text and it may appear on the movies
> or on television, but it may also be told in comics, on bubble gum
> cards, on dolls, on Halloween masks, in toys of all description, even in
> the names of breakfast cereals . . .

. . . to which we might now add: on the internet, in video games, in
social media. What Roland Barthes calls "mythical speech" can show
up in "photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity." Myths
themselves aren't written down; they live in the warp and woof of the
human world.

And while we may make aesthetic judgments about these revisions
and retellings and refractions, this need not reflect their importance for
the evolving myth in question. "All versions of each text are valuable," says
literary scholar Michael Preston, although some are better than others.
The texts that seep most deeply into the cultural discourse—Preston
cites *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Alice in Wonderland*—
become malleable to the form required of them. "If one cannot simply
re-read a text so that it accords with one's values, then it is adapted,"
Preston says.

Notions of purity or authenticity then become otiose, just as they do
for classical myths. "The mythical value of the myth is preserved even

through the worst translation," Lévi-Strauss asserts—which is what makes it the opposite of poetry (and undermines the idea that Shakespeare wrote myths). But we can go further than that: poor translation often forces us to see the gist even more clearly. As Twitchell says, "The more derivative and exploitative the version, the more revealing it may be."

The skeptic perhaps now grants, begrudgingly, that she can see what we're getting at. So, then, what are these modern myths? *The Lord of the Rings*? *Star Wars*? After all, wasn't Joseph Campbell, doyen of the Hero myth, consulted by George Lucas?

Sorry, but neither of these tales qualifies. (Nor does *Harry Potter*, I'm afraid.) For *a modern myth is not an old myth retold in modern times*. We can argue about how well *Star Wars* integrates Campbell's conception of the Hero's Journey, but it adds nothing substantial to it. (A more interesting question might be how satisfactorily the elements of classical myth can be blended with the demands of a modern movie franchise.) Certainly, these Manichean tales demonstrate that our appetite for the old myths is undiminished—but we knew that already, not least from that most characteristic modern reimagining of the Hero myth: the Western. But let's not mistake them for something new.

Lucas wanted quite explicitly to give *Star Wars* a mythic structure. And that is the whole point: he took this structure ready-made from Campbell and set it in space. New myths—genuine modern myths—have no such template. They aren't wrought with a mythopoeic aim in mind. I don't think anyone has ever sat down with the express intent of writing a modern myth and actually succeeded in doing so. I suspect no one ever will.

What is it, then, that distinguishes modern myths from the exploits of Thor or Theseus? It is this: these stories *could not have been told* in earlier times, because their themes did not yet exist. Modern myths explore dilemmas, obsessions, and anxieties specific to the condition of modernity.

It's this novelty that explains why modern myths are being created at all: because the modern world confronts us with questions and problems

that have no precedent in antiquity. Modern industrialized cultures face challenges that our ancestors did not: in the search for meaning within an increasingly secular society; in the disintegration of close-knit community and family structures; in the opportunities and perils presented by science and technology. And so our new myths deal with issues of identity and status, individualism, isolation and alienation, power and impotence, technological transformation, invasion and annihilation. They speak of scientific discovery and spiritual ennui, sexual dysfunction and erotic displacement, dystopia and apocalypse. Modern myths do not feature kings and queens, dragons and heroes. They draw less distinction between hero and villain, human and monster. We ourselves play the roles of gods, and of course we are as vain, fallible, and compromised as the deities of Olympus and Asgard ever were. The evil forces, likewise, do not manifest as demons and malign deities but lurk inside us all.

Myth is where we go to work out our psychic quandaries: to explore questions that do not have definitive answers, to seek purpose and meaning in a world beyond our power to control or comprehend. By looking at the narratives that have become modern myths, we can examine the contemporary psyche and reveal some of the dilemmas and anxieties of our age: what we dream, what we fear. These stories provide a mental map of our dark thoughts. They are more honest than we dare to be.

Of the seven modern myths I propose here, only one arose from a story written by a woman. I don't pretend to feel comfortable about this, but it confronted me with a choice. I could have pursued gender balance by rooting around for female-authored tales for which I might then patch together a justification for inclusion. But that seemed to me not only unsatisfactory but dishonest. Myths mine our cultural unconscious for anxieties, prejudices, and obsessions, so if most of our modern ones have excluded (sometimes, as we'll see, comprehensively) a female perspective, then that is part of the material we need to work with. To pretend that the situation is otherwise would be to forgo the opportunity to ask what the male dominance of our modern mythopoeia tells us about our culture. I want instead to try to let voices that have been silenced in these stories speak out. They are already doing that. Many

commentators, especially women, have laid bare the unsettling and damaging ways in which these modern myths exclude or traduce a female perspective.

Similar considerations apply to the fact that these are all Western myths written by white authors. I don't doubt for an instant that there are modern stories in non-Western cultures that can lay claim to mythical status, and I would love to hear what they are. And the more we can allow the voices of storysmiths of color to be heard, the less our mythic explorations of the dilemmas of modernity will be seen only through this narrow aperture. This is already happening, as we will see—but the gestation period of modern myths is typically longer than the timescale over which racial bias and discrimination has received serious challenge. Again, this is partly the whole point: for some of these myths Eurocentricity, racial anxiety, and xenophobia are at the core. No one should pretend that myths set out to satisfy a modern liberal ethic of inclusion and diversity. They often do the opposite.

My seven myths have, moreover, a specifically Anglophone, and indeed a British, bias. My own cultural blinkers might be partly to blame for that, but I believe it also reflects the historical circumstances: the British imperial hegemony throughout much of the period I am examining (as well as the increasing dominance of American culture during the twentieth century). I can think of a few potential modern myths in non-English languages (you're about to hear about one of them), and would be delighted to learn of others, but I genuinely struggle to identify any that have had quite the global pervasiveness of those I consider here. Once more, rather than pretend this were otherwise, it seems more honest and valuable to ask how the British character of much of the modern mythopoeia has determined its themes—themes, for example, of class and propriety, of empire and its vulnerabilities, of brutality, repression, and dominance. Sexual anxiety is universal, but Great Britain has cultivated a very particular variety of it.

One thing I don't apologize for is having made a list at all—for the simple reason that I make no claims for it. My choice of modern myths is neither exhaustive not definitive, and I very much hope that others will argue the case for candidates I've neglected. That is in fact my main

objective: to promote further discussion. It should be fun, and hopefully interesting, but I think it is also important, and overdue.

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My modern myths start more or less where the modern novel is often said to start: with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. But there is an earlier contender for that accolade, and arguably too for the status of first modern myth, albeit one of an unusually benign nature. So let it serve here as a brief and gentle introduction to the matter of what modern myths can be and where they can go.

Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) is celebrated for its literary influence: pioneering, for example, in its use of dialogue, metanarrative, and irony. These attributes are not, however, what makes it a myth. The story is a quest narrative—but whereas quests in classical myths do not fail, that of Don Quixote is doomed from the outset. That's what gives the story the power to speak to modernity (even though, when it was written, the modern age itself was just emerging). We can't be sure things will work out, but with tragicomic resolve we will try to keep going anyhow. There's no right way to proceed, and *Don Quixote* offers our sympathies a very modern choice. We know that the Don's sidekick, Sancho Panza, has the more trustworthy perspective, but it is also the dullest, the most literal: how much finer the world appears through the delusions of Quixote! When the old man sees the error of his ways before he dies, we're not sure it's an improvement.

This was Cervantes's genius: to see that Don Quixote mustn't just be held up to ridicule. We're on his side, all the more so as the real world increasingly confounds and frustrates his dream. We must *want* to be seduced by that dream, just as the narrator is seduced by the impractical, romantic enthusiasms of Zorba the Greek in Nikos Kazantzakis's 1946 novel, which borrows more or less explicitly from Cervantes.

Like many modern myths, *Don Quixote* didn't come out of nowhere. Other satires on the chivalric literature preceded it—but Cervantes found the elusive formula that gives a tale currency beyond its immediate context. The old gentleman, Alonso Quixano, is a *hidalgo*, the

lowest order of Spanish nobility, who is addicted to books of chivalry. He decides to become a knight errant himself, roaming the world on horseback in search or opportunities to perform noble deeds. He puts on his rusty ancestral armor, names his old nag of a horse Rocinante, and anoints himself Don Quixote de La Mancha—a knight of the poor rustic village, south of Madrid, in which he lives. His squire, Sancho Panza, is a local farmer. As a knight errant, he needs a lady whose heart he must win, and so decides that his great love is for a farm girl from a nearby village, who becomes "Dulcinea del Toboso."

The Don's exploits in the Spanish countryside are filled with the pathos of his fantasy. Some people humor him in his delusion, others mock him, and Sancho does his best to keep his master from disaster. Several of their adventures, especially the encounter with windmills that Don Quixote mistakes for giants, are universally known, episodes more or less liberated from their source text—a common signature of a mythic text. Thus we understand, however scant our knowledge of the novel, what is meant by "tilting at windmills" and by "quixotic" ventures. Edward Riley, perhaps the foremost twentieth-century authority on Cervantes, writes that

> the figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have attained a life of their own quite independent of the book they first appeared in. They are visually known to countless people who have never read the novel. In other words, they have attained mythic status, such as is only now and then achieved by the creations of literary art (and not always the most prestigious of them). Were it not for this mythic, simplified, and easily visualized quixotism, it is unlikely that Cervantes' invention would have come to inspire the extraordinary number of adaptations and refashionings it has in almost every genre and medium—from opera to animated cartoon, from sculpture to computer game.

These many modern reworkings of the Quixote myth have a clear enough pedigree without feeling any need to ape Cervantes's story. The Don's delusions can easily be transformed into a form more relevant and contemporary than a love of chivalric romance, even if it is a love of drink (Zorba, and the priest in Graham Greene's 1982 *Monsignor Quixote*) or a

simple (and perhaps misplaced) conviction that life will turn out fine in the end. In *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens recounts the adventures of the roving old gent Samuel Pickwick and his astute servant and companion Sam Weller—and drafts a blueprint that transforms *Don Quixote* into the madcap "road trip" narrative, out of which emerges everything from Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to Neil Gaiman's mythological reboot *American Gods*, and innumerable buddy movies, among them, *Thelma and Louise* (1991) (not nearly as radical-feminist a rewriting as Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* [1986]) and *Sideways* (2004). The lovably foolish, deluded old man who keeps getting into scrapes is the model for Toad of Toad Hall; the faithful servant who humors his master's unworldliness is Jeeves to the Don's Bertie Wooster. The set-up has infinite scope for variation, but at its core is a psychological truth. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, said George Orwell, represent the familiar duality of human nature: "noble folly and base wisdom, [which] exist side by side in nearly every human being." If you look into your own mind, Orwell continues,

> which are you, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza? Almost certainly you are both. There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin.

And all this, says Ian Watt, is conveyed with the memorable visual emblems that are so often a requirement of the modern myth: "If we should ever see a stick and a ball advancing together side by side down a road, we would immediately recognize them as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza."

Don Quixote is a book unencumbered by expectations. In its nascent form the European novel can do anything, moving from the fantastical to the realistic, from allegory to farce and satire. The heroes can become famous for starring in the very novel that records their fame; there is an intertextuality to *Don Quixote* that, Riley points out, makes it "very congenial to the age of Borges and Eco, Barthes and Derrida."

This situation changes at the start of the nineteenth century. One could be a Jane Austen, writing minutely observed realist novels about

manners, society, and personality. Or one could be a Mary Shelley, subsuming character and to some degree plot (certainly consistency of plot) into the fantastical outpourings of the subconscious—and thereby writing in the mythic mode. I'll return to this division at the end of the book. To take the mythic path was to risk being dismissed as a genre writer. On the face of it, you were then simply writing to entertain. But mythmakers were really up to something more dangerous.

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That's one reason we should attend closely to our modern myths: what they are and what they signify. It's a peculiar thing that we have made such widespread use of them while remaining so ambivalent about their status. The closer to us these stories are historically, the less carefully we examine them. *Crusoe* and *Frankenstein* have benefited from many serious critical readings (even if many of these are relatively recent and had at first to justify themselves in the face of critical disdain). H. G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle still suffer from being labeled genre writers, while serious scholarship about comic-book narratives such as Batman is in its infancy (even though the form itself is a century old). This is not so much because modern myths take a long time to be recognized and assimilated (although that tends to be true too), but because we have been slow to throw off the shackles of literary prejudice. The result is that we fail to see the important psychic work these stories are doing. I'm put in mind of what William Doty says about Plato's determination to guard the morality of the republic's citizens against the corrupting influence of the artist's deceptions:

> Plato worried about the influence of old wives' tales in the education of the elite citizens of his idealized "republic." Out of the rulers' control, such materials—and the poets' elaborations of them—were to be excluded because they were unphilosophized and unrationalized.

I think Plato would exclude as well the unruly, uncouth, unconventional, undisciplined, uncanny. The modern myths I have chosen are all

of those things, but perhaps more than anything else the force that drives them is *unconscious*. Plato could not keep these qualities out of his culture's stories, and neither—even if we wanted to—can we keep them from ours. We create our new myths because they do necessary work. It's worth getting to know them, and to understand what they are up to. Let's make a start.

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Chapter 2

JOHN BULL ON A BEACH

ROBINSON CRUSOE (1719)

A man is left stranded in a remote, inhospitable place, and by dint
of his ingenuity and perseverance forges a solitary life—
before perhaps discovering a faithful, subservient companion.
He is eventually rescued and returns to civilization.

Some years ago the *New Yorker* placed a ban on desert-island cartoons. The ragged, bearded fellow making some satirical observation from his little patch of sand with its lone palm tree had become a tired formula. It wasn't that he had run out of things to say, but that he'd become a cliché.

Yet he is still with us, reinvigorated with self-aware irony. The age of Wifi and social media offers new possibilities: the castaway forgets his password (was it "coconut" or "fish"?) or gets spammed by messages in bottles.

Why is this minimalist scenario so well suited for commenting on

the idiosyncrasies of modern life? The castaway, faced with isolation and hopelessness, still clings to familiar petty, futile obsessions, routines, platitudes, and delusions. We can't go on, we go on, our Beckettian resolve both noble and pathetic.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was not the first story of shipwreck and marooning on a desert island, but it turned previous real-life accounts into a cultural emblem. Like the desert-island jokes it spawned, *Crusoe* reduced the world of its day to a single, stark schema. It couldn't

have done so at a better time—or perhaps it is better to say, Crusoe arrived just when he was needed. The novel became a sensation, an Enlightenment trope, and a best seller.

Out of the hazards of maritime adventure it forged an enduring metaphor and myth that spoke to the emerging notions of individuality, autonomy, and self-determination. It became a representation of empire and colonialism, but also a fable about isolation, both personal and existential. It has endured as a children's story and an economic parable, and it established the island as a place of new possibilities. Lying beyond the bounds of established norms and rules, the island could be a utopia—or a place of nightmare.

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Being marooned alone on some distant, isolated shore had been a hazard from the earliest days of seafaring. But before the eighteenth century it would not have been deemed a meaningful proposition that there was a story to be told about such a predicament. What story ever had but a single protagonist? Without human relationships, what was there to say?

The concept of the self-made man—without which there could have been no *Crusoe*—crystallized only in the early modern period. By the eighteenth century one's role and fate were not preordained by birth, stars, or gods; you could improve your lot by your own efforts. It's central to Crusoe's tale that he comes from a family made prosperous and respectable by trade. He was a representative of the book's target audience, enacting a fable of capitalist self-sufficiency.

A superficial reading makes *Robinson Crusoe* an opportunistic dramatization of several real-life accounts of sea adventures and castaways in Defoe's time. One widely read example was William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697), which recounted the English explorer's exploits aboard the ships of buccaneers and privateers, as a kind of semi-sanctioned pirate, off the coast of the New World. Dampier sailed around Cape Horn into the Pacific and traveled from Central America to Manila, China, and Australia on board the ship of the privateer Charles Swan. In the archipelago of the Juan Fernández Islands off Chile,

Dampier's crew found a "Ploskito Indian" who had been marooned for three years, surviving by hunting goats. Dampier was later stranded himself with two others on an island in the Indian Ocean, but he managed to reach Sumatra and ultimately found his way back to England, where he published his account to great acclaim.

So much so, indeed, that Dampier was given command of a warship of the Royal Navy and sent on a mission to New Holland in Australia. On the return journey he was forced to land his damaged ship at Ascension Island in the middle of the South Atlantic, where he and his crew were stuck for five weeks before being rescued by a vessel of the East India Company.

In 1703 Dampier was sent with a gunship to defend English interests against Spain and France during the War of the Spanish Succession. Rounding Cape Horn, he arrived again at the Juan Fernández Islands in 1704, where one of his officers, a Scot named Alexander Selkirk, complained that the *Cinque Ports*, a smaller ship accompanying Dampier's vessel, was not seaworthy. The commander of the *Cinque Ports*, one Thomas Stradling, was glad enough to grant the troublesome Selkirk's request and put him ashore on the island of Más a Tierra. (Selkirk was soon proved correct, when the *Cinque Ports* sank off the coast of what is now Colombia.)

How Selkirk thought he would survive alone on his island wasn't clear. But he did, for four years. He was finally rescued in 1709 by another English privateer, Woodes Rogers, who gave an account of Selkirk's solitary survival in his book *A Cruising Voyage Round the World* (1712). Rogers's book, too, was wildly popular, and Selkirk became a reluctant celebrity in English society.

Selkirk first appeared to his rescuers, Rogers wrote, as "a Man cloth'd in Goat-Skins, who look'd wilder than the first Owners of them." The account he gave of his time on the island bears all the ingredients of Crusoe's strategies:

> He had with him his Clothes and Bedding, with a Fire-lock, some
> Powder, Bullets, and Tobacco, a Hatchet, a Knife, a Kettle, a Bible,
> some practical Pieces, and his Mathematical Instruments and Books.

> He diverted and provided for himself as well as he could; but for the
> first eight months he had much ado to bear up against Melancholy,
> and the Terror of being left alone in such a desolate place. He built
> two Hutts with Piemento Trees, cover'd then with long Grass, and
> lin'd them with the Skins of Goats, which he kill'd with his Gun as he
> wanted, so long as his Powder lasted.

He survived by eating crawfish and goat, killing the latter by hand when
he ran out of gunpowder. He grew turnips from those that Dampier's
crew had left him, and found "Cabbage-Trees" and small black plums.
He got by without shoes when his wore out, and stitched crude clothes
from goatskins and a store of linen. He established a daily routine re-
sembling Crusoe's: keeping a log of his hunts, taming goats, reading the
scriptures. By the time Rogers found him, however, he had almost for-
gotten how to speak: "we could scarce understand him, for he seem'd to
speak his words by halves."

The privateer captain saw a moral in this:

> We may perceive by this Story the Truth of the Maxim, That Neces-
> sity is the Mother of Invention, since he found means to supply his
> Wants in a very natural manner, so as to maintain his Life, tho not so
> conveniently, yet as effectually as we are able to do with the help of all
> our Arts and Society. It may likewise instruct us, how much a plain
> and temperate way of living conduces to the Health of the Body and
> the Vigour of the Mind, both which we are apt to destroy by Excess
> and Plenty.

Rogers admonishes himself for coming on here more like a "philosopher
and Divine than a Mariner." But he'd hit the target squarely: Selkirk's
tale was not just entertaining but exemplary.

While it seems all too obviously the template for *Crusoe*, we can't
assume that Rogers's account was Defoe's main source. Stories of daring
voyages, attended by storm, mutiny, disaster, pirate battles, and fantas-
tical new lands, had become so popular by 1710 that the Earl of Shaftes-
bury denounced them as hackneyed, the equivalent of those old books

of chivalrous deeds that had bewitched Don Quixote. Selkirk's exploits were particularly apt to be recycled—they feature, for example, in Edward Cooke's *Voyage to the South Sea* (1712) and an article in the periodical *The Englishman* in 1713. But there were other models too, such as sea captain Robert Knox's account of a twenty-year captivity while on a voyage for the East India Company in his *Historical Relation of Ceylon* (1681). For an ambitious writer like Daniel Defoe, always looking out for the next wave to ride, the ubiquity of these tales was no deterrent. On the contrary, the public hunger for them presented an opportunity.

Defoe is slippery, there's no two ways about it. He was a social agitator and Dissenter who advocated revolutionary Puritanism. In 1703 he was sentenced to public pillory in the stocks for writing a leaflet criticizing the repression of Dissenters encouraged by the Tory party during the reign of the Catholic Queen Anne. The court condemned him as "a Seditious man and of a disordered mind, and a person of bad name, reputation and Conversation." And yet he claimed (although there is no real evidence to support it) that he acted as a secret agent of the Crown in the 1690s, and he later became a Tory apologist.

The Foes—Daniel added the grandiose "De" himself—were dissenting Presbyterians, a compromising situation that Defoe compounded with his wheeler-dealer activities. Although he acquired a tidy sum by marriage, he squandered it on speculative business projects such as his efforts to breed civet cats for the perfume ingredient they secrete. By 1692 he was in the debtors' prison in Newgate, bankrupt by an enormous sum, alleged by some to be a barely credible £17,000.

Despite his radical politics, Defoe would write on just about anything for anyone if the price was right. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more prolific writer in England in those times, although the quantity of his output can't be said to have done much for its quality: paid by the page, he was determined to fill it. Between around 1704 and 1713 he produced a periodical, *The Review*, three times a week, to which he was the sole contributor.

It wasn't just for need of cash that Defoe was prepared to overlook his political principles. His conviction for sedition drew an unusually harsh sentence, and it wasn't clear how long he could expect to languish in jail. So he petitioned the Tory politician Robert Harley, Speaker of the House of Commons, who got him released and pardoned. In return, Harley seemed to consider that Defoe was now his man, and Defoe was happy to oblige, writing essays supporting Harley's views where previously he had called the Tories "plunderers" and "betrayers of liberty." He traveled the length and breadth of the country gathering information that might help Harley consolidate power and influence, and defended his master against attacks from the Whigs.

He knew how incongruous, not to say hypocritical, this was. On occasion he even published anonymous articles criticizing the views he had expressed in *The Review*. Still, it was a profitable trade: Harley rewarded him well, and by the 1720s he was living in a large house in Stoke Newington, just north of London, with a retinue and carriage. Most of the books Defoe produced date from this period, from around 1715 until his death in 1731. They were not the kind of thing a gentleman would write: tales of disreputable characters like Moll Flanders ("Twelve Years a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother) Twelve Years a Thief, Eight Years a Transported Felon in Virginia") and Colonel Jack ("Born a Gentleman, put 'Prentice to a Pick-Pocket, was Six and Twenty Years a Thief, and then Kidnapp'd to Virginia, Came back a Merchant; was Five times married to Four Whores"). But they sold, and it's not hard to see why.

We don't do Defoe any real injustice, then, by calling him a hack. In *Robinson Crusoe* his literary shortcomings are plain to see, plot being one of them. He is evidently making it up as he goes along—for example, he neglects to tell us until well after the event that Crusoe has saved a dog and two cats from the wreckage. "The stream of his writing merely flowed around any obstacle in its way," says critic James Sutherland, adding that "many of his best things came to him on the spur of the moment." That was probably as true in Defoe's life as it was in his writing.

Robinson Crusoe shows us the modern novel in infancy: a mirror for the issues of the day, but messy, undisciplined, and sometimes baffling. Character psychology is crude at best, and the plotting amounts to little more than stringing episodes together one after the other. We all know about the shipwreck, Crusoe's hardships on the island, and the appearance of Friday—but what surrounds these events often feels like mere baggage.

But Defoe didn't know how to write a novel, because no one did; some scholars identify him as its inventor. The result was often as makeshift as Crusoe's first shack, full of holes and not to be prodded too hard lest the entire edifice collapse.

One curious aspect of *Crusoe*'s genesis is that its author seemed to insist on its being taken as fact. In the manner of the day, it doesn't have a title so much as a précis:

> 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 deliver'd by Pyrates.

Defoe's name did not appear on the title page of the first edition, printed by W. Taylor "at the Ship in Pater-Noster Row." Rather, the book is "Written by Himself"—that is, Crusoe. Now, there is nothing so unusual in this at one level. The title page resembles those of *Moll Flanders* ("Written From her Memorandum") and *Colonel Jack*, and anonymous publication was common—that was how Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* first appeared in 1740, and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in 1759. (Henry Fielding, in contrast, put his name to the picaresque *Tom Jones* in 1749.) However, not only did this mode of presentation blur any distinction between fiction and memoir, but Defoe maintained the pretense for years, leaving it ambiguous whether he had concocted the tale or merely related it (he called it an "emblematick history"). When accused of lying or inventing the tale, Defoe defended himself with a hint

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WITH

An Account how he was at last as strangely deli-
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Written by Himself.

Title page of the 1719 first edition of Robinson Crusoe.

of the very modern discussion about whether *any* fiction is just "making things up"—or whether it serves a deeper truth. After all, how much of alleged reported fact is also a good part fiction?

Still, Defoe's motive for this ploy isn't obvious. Was he eager to create an illusion of authenticity as a sales gambit, thinking that readers would accept the book more readily if they thought they were reading about real events? At any rate, by presenting the story as a series of entries in a journal, he was using a form audiences would recognize from genuine memoirs. In its attention to minute detail, Defoe wrought a narrative that could plausibly pass as true; so much so, in fact, that in its time the book was not widely seen as "literary" at all.

But when you look closely, the structure of *Crusoe* is incoherent. The "Journal" section only begins many pages into the book, after we have heard about Crusoe's early life, his shipwreck, and his efforts to create a serviceable home inside a cave. This journal plods back over events related previously, but before long the daily entries peter out and Crusoe, feebly pleading a shortage of ink, falls back into a continuous narrative while pledging "to write down only the most remarkable Events of my Life." Even if he had no blueprint for a novel, Defoe seems to have lacked the will to impose a stable structure on his tale.

For the reader anticipating the familiar castaway narrative, Robinson Crusoe takes a long time to get himself marooned. He goes to sea against his father's wishes, only to be nearly drowned in a storm off the English coast. Too obstinate to return home after this scare, he signs up for a voyage to Guinea. Between the Canaries and the north African coast the ship is attacked and overwhelmed by Turks. Crusoe is taken prisoner and sold into slavery under the Moors of Morocco. He escapes by canoe with a young Moorish lad named Xury and is picked up by a Portuguese captain, who bears him across the Atlantic to the Brasils. At last, we think: the shipwreck is coming.

But not yet. With the money he left in England, Crusoe buys a sugar plantation and becomes a prosperous colonist. And there he might have remained and thrived, were he not tempted by a proposal from some other merchants and plantation owners of his acquaintance. They are short of slaves but can buy them only with the consent of the kings of

Portugal and Spain, and then at a high price. So they plan to sail secretly to Guinea to acquire slaves and divide them among themselves. Knowing that Crusoe is a canny trader, they ask if he might come with them to conduct the negotiations.

Crusoe is wealthy enough not to need this bounty, but his seafaring urge gets the better of him, and off he goes on a 120-ton ship. The slave-hunters are blown off course by a hurricane, and as they head up the South American coast they are caught in a second storm and driven onto a sandbank offshore from some unknown territory. They figure the stranded ship will be wrecked, and attempt to row to shore in a boat. But they are overturned by a wave, and Crusoe finds himself washed up on the sand, alone.

So at last begins the account of how Crusoe makes his island a home. He builds a sturdy palisade, at first fearing attack by wild animals; finding none on the island, he then worries (with more justification, it transpires) about visiting cannibals. He shoots goats, but has the foresight also to catch and domesticate them and raise a herd. He builds a canoe to circumnavigate the island but is almost carried out to sea in a current. Despite coming to feel comfortable in his island kingdom, he makes plans to escape. When he saves Friday from being slaughtered by cannibals, he enlists the man's help to construct a sailing boat.

But before they are ready to set out, Crusoe spots the sails of an English ship. In due course a party comes ashore, whereupon Crusoe and Friday discover that the crew has mutinied. They help the commander and those loyal to him overcome the mutineers, and (with remarkably little ceremony given that Crusoe has dwelt on the island for twenty-eight years) the castaway and his companions make for England. Crusoe finds that his plantations have flourished and that he is now a rich man.

Here the story ends—but the book does not. In a bizarre coda, Crusoe returns with Friday from having settled his estate in Lisbon, journeying by land with a group of other travelers across the Pyrenees. As they pass through Languedoc and Gascony, the party is attacked in the woods by wolves and a bear. This encounter is dragged out for several pages, including an almost slapstick account of how Friday taunts and shoots

the bear. The whole escapade seems like an afterthought. Might Defoe have intended some allegory about the threats from Catholic powers (wolves) and the Russian tsar (the bear)? Or might he simply have read an account of an attack by wolves and bears on Languedoc villagers in the 1718 *Mist's Weekly Journal* (perhaps he even wrote it—he was a contributor) and decided to tack it on regardless of the narrative value?

Robinson Crusoe was a great success. The first print run of a thousand to fifteen hundred sold out quickly, even at the high price of five shillings—not bad when the entire reading public in England probably numbered in the tens of thousands. There were four more editions that same year, as well as serializations and (appropriately enough) pirate copies. Yet Defoe scarcely benefited financially. Writers tended to be paid in a lump sum, and Defoe's fee was likely to have been a modest fifty pounds or so. It's small wonder, then, that he was eager to capitalize on the book's success by publishing sequels. *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) describes Crusoe's return to his island and travels elsewhere, while *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1720) is a collection of essays musing on what the author has learned from his experiences.

Quite who "the author" was is another matter. Some of *Serious Reflections* was presented as Crusoe's work, some as Defoe's. Still, Defoe defended the pretense that Crusoe's tale is historically true and not just a "romance." In particular he refuted the charges of the writer Charles Gildon, who satirized the invention in his book *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr. D— de F—, of London, Hosier* (1719). In his riposte, Defoe makes a comparison to the fictional *Don Quixote*, reminding readers that that tale too was (allegedly) based on the real-life exploits of the Duke of Medina Sidonia. What was to be gained by maintaining the deception with such laborious effort is not clear.

Who is Crusoe anyway? If he was Defoe's alter ego then that does the writer few favors, for he is one of the least attractive heroes in adventure

literature. It's not that he is unpleasant; after all, villainous protagonists have their own appeal. Rather, there is a moral and spiritual emptiness to the man. He discharges obligations dutifully and repays his debts when he can, but he forges no strong relationships that are not ultimately pragmatic: everyone must serve his own ends. He mouths pious formulas without evincing any deep engagement with his faith. He is a callow dullard with little capacity for self-reflection. James Joyce thought he had the measure of Crusoe ("the English Ulysses"), and it was a character that a twentieth-century Irishman knew all too well. He is, said Joyce,

> the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday . . . is the symbol of the subject races. The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe: the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy; the practical, well-balanced religiousness; the calculating taciturnity.

Crusoe is a bookkeeper and bean counter with not an ounce of artistry or poetry in his soul. All he does is utilitarian: making tools and furniture, baskets and clothes, obsessively inventorying his domain. Even once comfortably settled and supplied, he indulges no urge to express himself, nor gives any sign of having the imagination to do so. Despite his exotic escapade, Crusoe seemed to Virginia Woolf to personify the humdrum existence of the bourgeois middle class:

> Everything appears as it would appear to that naturally cautious, apprehensive, conventional and solidly matter-of-fact intelligence. He is incapable of enthusiasm. He has a slight natural distaste for the sublimities of Nature. . . . Everything is capable of a rational explanation, he is sure, if only he had the time to attend to it.*

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* You might infer from this that Woolf doesn't think much of *Robinson Crusoe*. On the contrary, she saw plenty to praise it its style, commending Defoe for using the small, telling observation in place of labored descriptive prose—as when, from Crusoe's discovery of a pair of mismatched shoes on the sand, we understand that all the rest of the shipwrecked crew are dead.

Robinson Crusoe, from the 1719 first edition.

Everything in the book, Woolf says, is seen through "shrewd, middle-class, unimaginative eyes."

Even in his introspection Crusoe thinks like an actuary. He weighs up the pros and cons of his situation "very impartially, like Debtor and Creditor," listing as if on a spreadsheet his bad and good fortune:

Evil	*Good*
I am cast upon a horrible desolate Island, void of all hope of Recovery.	But I am alive, and not drown'd as all my Ship'd Company was.

And so forth. True, God seems to have thrown him into a difficult place. But it could have been much worse. One hears the ancestral ghost of that most British of dispositions: "Mustn't grumble."

Charles Dickens called *Robinson Crusoe* "the only instance of an universally popular book that could make no one laugh and could make no one cry." It has no heart, he complained, no "tenderness and sentiment"—and Crusoe himself lacks the depth to be changed by what he has experienced: he's no different after twenty-eight years of a mostly solitary existence than he was before. Risking the classic confusion of author and character, Dickens (of all people!) suspected that Defoe was not dissimilar: "I have no doubt he was a precious dry disagreeable article himself"—a man devoid of humor, a defect that for Dickens places him beyond the pale.

Dickens's near-contemporary, the critic Leslie Stephen, regarded Crusoe's imperturbability as implausible: no one could be so resilient to such utter and protracted isolation. Wordsworth agreed: the "extraordinary energy and resource of the hero," he said, were "so far beyond what was natural to expect, or what would have been exhibited by the average of men." Robert Louis Stevenson's Ben Gunn in *Treasure Island* suggests what a pathetic state the marooned sailor might really soon fall into. Some went mad, like the Dutch seaman stranded on St. Helena who (the story went) dug up a dead colleague and set out to sea paddling in his coffin. As Aristotle said, "He who is unable to live in society, or who

has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god." He can't be an accountant.

There seems no reason to think that Defoe intended his hero to appear so unsympathetic. On the contrary, his levelheaded pragmatism was probably meant to be admirable. He was the epitome of the stolid, contented bourgeoisie, the self-made (and self-satisfied) English middle class. This "middle state," his father tells Crusoe, is

> the most suited to human happiness, not exposed to the miseries and hardships, the labour and sufferings of the mechanic part of mankind, and not embarrass'd with the pride, luxury, ambition and envy of the upper part of mankind.

Perhaps we expect too much of our heroes these days; making them capable yet a little self-pitying and dim is no longer enough. But Crusoe's very blandness serves the myth: he is a cypher, a blank canvas, existing to tell the tale but too unremarkable to give it any particular flavor. He is a vehicle, indeed a mere chassis, ready to carry our own invention.

No one has ever suggested that *Robinson Crusoe* exhibits much in the way of literary style. (They'd have a job on their hands if they felt so inclined.) The early nineteenth-century essayist Charles Lamb was impressed by the way it managed to appeal both to the educated and the "servile" reader: in a fine example of appreciative condescension he said that the book "is an especial favourite with sea-faring men, poor boys, servant-maids," and that Defoe's novels in general "are capital kitchen-reading, while they are worthy, from their interest, to find a shelf in the libraries of the wealthiest and the most learned." He added pointedly, however, that *Crusoe* "is written in a phraseology peculiarly adapted to the lower condition of readers." When Lamb said that "it is like reading evidence in a court of Justice," he might not have meant it to sound quite as negative as it does now—but he's not far wrong.

It seems to be the style, as much as the content, that recommended the book to children, who would scarce be troubled by Crusoe's psychological vacuity and will see nothing amiss in his perfect lack of any hint of a sexual life. The only relationships he has for most of his