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REFLECTIONS

FARTHER AWAY

“Robinson Crusoe,” David Foster Wallace, and the island of solitude.

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The uninhabited island was named for a marooned eighteenth-century adventurer who likely inspired the first English novel. I thought I'd strand myself there and read it.

In the South Pacific Ocean, five hundred miles off the coast of central Chile, is a forbiddingly vertical volcanic island, seven miles long and four miles wide, that is populated by millions of seabirds and thousands of fur seals but is devoid of people, except in the warmer months, when a handful of fishermen come out to catch lobsters. To reach the

island, which is officially called Alejandro Selkirk, you fly from Santiago in an eight-seater that makes twice-weekly flights to an island a hundred miles to the east. Then you have to travel in a small open boat from the airstrip to the archipelago's only village, wait around for a ride on one of the launches that occasionally make the twelve-hour outward voyage, and then, often, wait further, sometimes for days, for weather conducive to landing on the rocky shore. In the nineteen-sixties, Chilean tourism officials renamed the island for Alexander Selkirk, the Scottish adventurer whose tale of solitary living in the archipelago was probably the basis for Daniel Defoe's novel "Robinson Crusoe," but the locals still use its original name, Masafuera: Farther Away.

By the end of last fall, I was in some need of being farther away. I'd been promoting a novel non-stop for four months, advancing through my schedule without volition, feeling more and more like the graphical lozenge on a media player's progress bar. Substantial swaths of my personal history were going dead from within, from my talking about them too often. And every morning the same revving doses of nicotine and caffeine; every evening the same assault on my e-mail queue; every night the same drinking for the same brain-dulling pop of pleasure. At a certain point, having read about Masafuera, I began to imagine running away and being alone there, like Selkirk, in the interior of the island, where nobody lives even seasonally.

I also thought it might be good, while I was there, to reread the book generally considered to be the first English novel. "Robinson Crusoe" was the great early document of radical individualism, the story of an ordinary person's practical and psychic survival in profound isolation. The novelistic enterprise associated with individualism—the search for meaning in realistic narrative—went on to become the culture's dominant literary mode for the next three centuries. Crusoe's voice can be heard in the voice of Jane Eyre, the Underground Man, the Invisible Man, and Sartre's Roquentin. All these stories had once excited me, and there persisted, in the very word "novel," with its promise of *novelty*, a memory of more youthful experiences so engrossing that I could sit quietly for hours and never think of boredom. Ian Watt, in his classic "The Rise of the Novel," correlated the eighteenth-century burgeoning of novelistic production with the growing demand for at-home entertainment by women who'd been liberated from traditional household tasks and had too much time on their hands. In a very direct way, according to Watt, the English novel had risen from the ashes of boredom. And boredom was what I was suffering from. The more you pursue distractions, the less effective any particular distraction is, and so I'd had to up various dosages, until, before I knew it, I was checking my e-mail every ten minutes, and my plugs of tobacco were getting ever larger, and my two drinks a night had worsened to four, and I'd achieved such deep mastery of computer solitaire that my goal was no longer to win a game but to win two or more games in a row—a kind of meta-solitaire whose fascination consisted not in playing the cards but in surfing the streaks of wins and losses. My longest winning

streak so far was eight.

I made arrangements to hitch a ride to Masafuera on a small boat chartered by some adventurous botanists. Then I indulged in a little orgy of consumerism at R.E.I., where the Crusovian romance abides in the aisles of ultra-lightweight survival gear and, especially perhaps, in certain emblems of civilization-in-wilderness, like the stainless-steel Martini glass with an unscrewable stem. Besides a new backpack, tent, and knife, I outfitted myself with certain late-model specialty items, such as a plastic plate with a silicone rim that flipped up to form a bowl, tablets to neutralize the taste of water sterilized with iodine, a microfibre towel that stowed in a marvellously small pouch, organic vegan freeze-dried chili, and an indestructible spork. I also assembled large stores of nuts, tuna, and protein bars, because I'd been told that if the weather turned bad I could be stranded on Masafuera indefinitely.

On the eve of my departure for Santiago, I visited my friend Karen, the widow of the writer David Foster Wallace. As I was getting ready to leave her house, she asked me, out of the blue, whether I might like to take along some of David's cremation ashes and scatter them on Masafuera. I said I would, and she found an antique wooden matchbox, a tiny book with a sliding drawer, and put some ashes in it, saying that she liked the thought of part of David coming to rest on a remote and uninhabited island. It was only later, after I'd driven away from her house, that I realized that she'd given me the ashes as much for my sake as for hers or David's. She knew, because I had told her, that my current state of flight from myself had begun soon after David's death, two years earlier. At the time, I'd made a decision not to deal with the hideous suicide of someone I'd loved so much but instead to take refuge in anger and work. Now that the work was done, though, it was harder to ignore the circumstance that, arguably, in one interpretation of his suicide, David had died of boredom and in despair about his future novels. The desperate edge to my own recent boredom: might this be related to my having broken a promise to myself? The promise that, after I'd finished my book project, I would allow myself to feel more than fleeting grief and enduring anger at David's death?

And so, on the last morning of January, I arrived in heavy fog at a spot on Masafuera called La Cuchara (The Spoon), three thousand feet above sea level. I had a notebook, binoculars, a paperback copy of "Robinson Crusoe," the little book containing David's remains, a backpack filled with camping gear, a grotesquely inadequate map of the island, and no alcohol, tobacco, or computer. Apart from the fact that, instead of hiking up on my own, I'd followed a young park ranger and a mule that was carrying my backpack, and that I'd also brought along, at various people's insistence, a two-way radio, a ten-year-old G.P.S. unit, a satellite phone, and several spare batteries, I was entirely isolated and alone.

My first experience of "Robinson Crusoe" was having it read to me by my father. Along with "Les Misérables," it was the only novel that meant anything to him. From the pleasure he took

in reading it to me, it's clear that he identified as deeply with Crusoe as he did with Jean Valjean (which, in his self-taught way, he pronounced "Gene Val Gene"). Like Crusoe, my father felt isolated from other people, was resolutely moderate in his habits, believed in the superiority of Western civilization to the "savagery" of other cultures, saw the natural world as something to be subdued and exploited, and was an inveterate do-it-yourselfer. Self-disciplined survival on a desert island surrounded by cannibals was the perfect romance for him. He was born in a rough town built by his pioneer father and uncles, and he'd grown up working in road-building camps in the boreal swampland. In our basement in St. Louis, he kept an orderly workshop in which he sharpened his tools, repaired his clothes (he was a good seamster), and improvised, out of wood and metal and leather, sturdy solutions to home-maintenance problems. He took my friends and me camping several times a year, organizing our campsite by himself while I ran in the woods with my friends, and making himself a bed out of rough old blankets beside our fibrefill sleeping bags. I think, to some extent, I was an excuse for him to go camping.

My brother Tom, no less a do-it-yourselfer than my father, became a serious backpacker after he went away to college. Because I was trying to emulate Tom in all things, I listened to his stories of ten-day solo treks in Colorado and Wyoming and yearned to be a backpacker myself. My first opportunity came in the summer I turned sixteen, when I persuaded my parents to let me take a summer-school course called "Camping in the West." My friend Weidman and I joined a busload of teen-agers and counsellors for two weeks of "study" in the Rockies. I had Tom's obsolescent red Gerry backpack and, for taking notes on my somewhat randomly chosen area of study, lichens, a notebook identical to the one that Tom carried.

On the second day of a trek into the Sawtooth Wilderness, in Idaho, we were all invited to spend twenty-four hours by ourselves. My counsellor took me off to a sparse grove of ponderosa pine and left me alone there, and very soon, although the day was bright and unthreatening, I was cowering in my tent. Apparently, all it took for me to become aware of the emptiness of life and the horror of existence was to be deprived of human company for a few hours. I learned, the next day, that Weidman, though eight months older than me, had been so lonely that he hiked back to within sight of the base camp. What enabled me to stick it out—and to feel, moreover, that I could have stayed alone for longer than a day—was writing:

Thursday July 3 This evening I begin a notebook. If anyone reads this, I trust they will forgive my overuse of "I." I can't stop it. I'm writing this.

As I came back to my fire after dinner this afternoon there was a moment when I felt my aluminum cup a friend, sitting on a rock, considering me. . . .

I had a certain fly (at least I think it was the same one) buzz around my head for a goodly long while this afternoon. After a time I stopped thinking of it as an annoying, nasty insect & subconsciously came to think it an enemy that I was really quite fond of and that we were just playing with each other.

Also this afternoon (this was my main activity) I sat out on a point of rock trying to set to words of a sonnet the different purposes of my life that I saw at different times (3—as in points of view). Of course I now see that I can't even do this in prose form so it was really futile. However, as I did this, I became convinced that life was a waste of time, or something like that. I was so sad and screwed up at the time that every thought was of despair. But then I looked at some lichens & wrote a bit about them & calmed down and figured out that my sorrow was due not to a loss of purpose but to the fact that I didn't know who I was or why I was and that I didn't show my love to my parents. I was coming close with my third point, but my next thought was a little off. I figured that the reason for the above was that time (life) is too short. This is, of course, true, but my sorrow wasn't caused by this. All of a sudden it hit me: I missed my family.

Once I'd diagnosed my homesickness, I was able to address it by writing letters. For the rest of the trip, I wrote in my journal every day and found myself moving away from Weidman and gravitating toward my female fellow-campers; I'd never been so successful socially. What had been missing was some halfway secure sense of my own identity, a sense achieved in solitude by putting first-person words on a page.

I was keen for years afterward to do more backpacking, but never quite keen enough to make it happen. The self I was discovering through writing turned out not to be identical to Tom's after all. I did hold on to his old Gerry backpack, although it was not a useful general-purpose piece of luggage, and I kept alive my dreams of wilderness by buying cheap non-essential camping gear, such as a jumbo bottle of Dr. Bronner's peppermint soap, which Tom periodically praised the virtues of. When I took a bus back to college for my senior year, I put the Dr. Bronner's in the backpack, and the bottle burst in transit, soaking my clothes and books. When I tried to rinse out the backpack in a dormitory shower, its fabric disintegrated in my hands.

Masafuera, as the boat approached it, was not inviting. My only map of the island was a letter-size printout of a Google Earth image, and I saw right away that I'd optimistically misinterpreted the contour lines on it. What had looked like steep hills were cliffs, and what had looked like gentle slopes were steep hills. A dozen or so lobsterman shacks were huddled at the bottom of a tremendous gorge, to either side of which the island's green shoulders rose thirty-five hundred feet into a cap of broodingly churning cloud. The ocean, which had seemed reasonably calm on the trip out, was beating in big swells against a gap in the rocks below the shacks. To get ashore, the botanists and I jumped down into a lobster boat, which motored to within a hundred yards of shore. There the boatmen hauled up the motor, and we took hold of a rope stretching out to a buoy and pulled ourselves farther in. As we neared the rocks, the boat lurched chaotically from side to side, water flooding into the stern, while the boatmen struggled to attach us to a cable that would drag us out. Onshore were breathtaking quantities of flies—the place's nickname is Fly Island. Competing boom boxes pumped North and South American music through the open doors of several shacks, pushing back against the oppressive immensity of the gorge and the coldly heaving sea. Adding to the stricken atmospherics was a grove of large, dead trees, aged to the color of bone, behind the shacks.

My companions for the trek to the interior were the young park ranger, Danilo, and a poker-faced mule. Considering the steepness of the island, I couldn't even pretend to be disappointed not to carry my own pack. Danilo had a rifle strapped across his back, in the hope of killing one of the non-native goats that had survived a Dutch environmental foundation's recent effort to eradicate them. Under gray morning clouds that soon turned to fog, we hiked up interminable switchbacks and through a ravine lush with maquis, an introduced plant species that is used to repair lobster traps. There were discouraging quantities of old mule droppings on the trail, but the only moving things we saw were birds: a little gray-flanked cinclodes and several Juan Fernández hawks, two of Masafuera's five terrestrial bird species. The island is also the only known breeding site for two interesting petrels and one of the world's rarest songbirds, the Masafuera rayadito, which I was hoping to see. In fact, by the time I'd left for Chile, seeing new bird species was the only activity that I could absolutely count on not to bore me. The rayadito's population, most of which lives in a small high-altitude area on the island called Los Inocentes, is now thought to number as few as five hundred. Very few people have ever seen one.

Sooner than I'd expected, Danilo and I arrived at La Cuchara and saw, in the fog, the outlines of a small *refugio*, or ranger's hut. We'd climbed three thousand feet in just over two hours. I'd heard that there was a *refugio* at La Cuchara, but I'd imagined a primitive shack and hadn't foreseen what a problem it would pose for me. Its roof was steep and tethered to the ground by cables, and inside it were a propane stove, two bunk beds with foam mattresses, an unappetizing but serviceable sleeping bag, and a cabinet stocked with dry pasta and canned foods; apparently, I could have brought along nothing but some iodine tablets and still survived here. The *refugio*'s existence made my already somewhat artificial project of solitary self-sufficiency seem even more artificial, and I resolved to pretend that it didn't exist.

Danilo took my pack off the mule and led me down a foggy path to a stream with enough water trickling in it to form a little pool. I asked him if it was possible to walk from here to Los Inocentes. He gestured uphill and said, "Yes, it's three hours, along the *cordones*." I thought of asking if we could go there right now, so that I could camp nearer to the rayaditos, but Danilo seemed eager to get back to the coast. He departed with the mule and his gun, and I bent myself to my Crusovian tasks.

The first of these was to gather and purify some drinking water. Carrying a filtration pump and a canvas waterskin, I followed what I thought was the path to the pool, which I knew wasn't more than two hundred feet from the *refugio*, and I immediately got lost in the fog. When I finally located the pool, after trying several paths, the tube on my pump cracked. I'd bought the pump twenty years earlier, thinking it would come in handy if I was ever alone in the wilderness, and its plastic had since gone brittle. I filled up the skin with somewhat turbid water and, despite my resolution, entered the

refugio and poured the water into a large cooking pot, along with some iodine tablets. This simple task had somehow taken me an hour.

Since I was in the *refugio* anyway, I changed out of my clothes, which had been soaked by the climb through dew and fog, and tried to dry the inside of my boots with the surfeit of toilet paper I'd brought. I discovered that the G.P.S. unit, the one gadget that I didn't have spare batteries for, had been switched on and draining power all day, which triggered an anxiety that I assuaged by wiping all the mud and water off the *refugio*'s floor with further wads of toilet paper. Finally, I ventured out onto a rocky promontory and scouted for a campsite beyond the *refugio*'s penumbra of mule droppings. A hawk dived right over my head; a cinclodes called pertly from a boulder. After much walking and weighing of pros and cons, I settled on a hollow that afforded some protection from the wind and no view of the *refugio*, and there I picnicked on cheese and salami.

I'd been alone for four hours. I put up my tent, lashing the frame to boulders and weighing down the stakes with the heaviest rocks I could carry, and made some coffee on my little butane stove. Returning to the *refugio*, I worked on my footwear-drying project, pausing every few minutes to open windows and shoo out the flies that kept finding their way inside. I seemed to be no more able to wean myself from the *refugio*'s conveniences than from the modern distractions that I was supposedly here to flee. I fetched another skin of water and used the big pot and the propane stove to heat some bathwater, and it was simply *much more pleasant*, after my bath, to go back inside and dry off with the microfibre towel and get dressed than to do this in the dirt and the fog. Since I was already so compromised, I went ahead and carried one of the foam mattresses down the promontory and put it in my tent. "But that's it," I said to myself, aloud. "That's the end of it."

Except for the hum of flies and the occasional call of a cinclodes, the silence at my campsite was absolute. Sometimes the fog lifted a little, and I could see rocky hillsides and wet fern-filled valleys before the ceiling lowered again. I took out my notebook and jotted down what I'd done in the past seven hours: got water, had lunch, put up tent, took bath. But when I thought about writing confessionally, in an "I" voice, I found that I was too self-conscious. Apparently, in the past thirty-five years, I'd become so accustomed to narrativizing myself, to experiencing my life as a story, that I could now use journals only for problem-solving and self-investigation. Even at fifteen, in Idaho, I hadn't written from within my despair but only after I was safely over it, and now, all the more so, the stories that mattered to me were the ones told—selected, clarified—in retrospect.

My plan for the next day was to try to see a rayadito. Simply knowing that the bird was on the island made the island interesting to me. When I go looking for new bird species, I'm searching for a mostly lost authenticity, for the remnants of a world now largely overrun by human beings but still beautifully indifferent to us; to glimpse a rare bird somehow persisting in its life of breeding and

feeding is an enduringly transcendent delight. The next morning, I decided, I would get up at dawn and devote, if necessary, the entire day to finding my way to Los Inocentes and getting back. Cheered by the prospect of this not unchallenging quest, I made myself a bowl of chili, and then, although the daylight hadn't faded yet, I zipped myself inside my tent. On the very comfortable mattress, in a sleeping bag I'd owned since high school, and with a headlamp on my forehead, I settled down to read "Robinson Crusoe." For the first time all day, I felt happy.

One of "Robinson Crusoe" 's biggest early fans was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in "Émile," proposed that it be the primary text for the education of children. Rousseau, in the fine tradition of French bowdlerization, didn't have in mind the entire text, just the long central section, in which Robinson relates his survival for a quarter century on a desert island. Few readers would dispute that this is the novel's most compelling section, next to which the adventures of Robinson before and after (being enslaved by a Turkish pirate, fending off the attacks of giant wolves) seem lustreless and rote. Part of the survival story's appeal is the specificity of Robinson's recounting of it: the "three . . . hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows" that are all that remain of his drowned shipmates, the catalogue of useful gear that he salvages from the wrecked ship, the intricacies of stalking the feral goats that populate the island, the nuts and bolts of reinventing the homely arts of making furniture, boats, pottery, and bread. But what really animates these adventureless adventures, and makes them surprisingly suspenseful, is their accessibility to the imagination of the ordinary reader. I have no idea what I would do if I were enslaved by a Turk or menaced by wolves; I might very well be too scared to do what Robinson does. But to read about his practical solutions to the problems of hunger and exposure and illness and solitude is to be invited into the narrative, to imagine what *I* would do if I were similarly stranded, and to measure my own stamina and resourcefulness and industry against his. (I'm sure my father was doing this, too.) Until the larger world impinges on the island's isolation, in the form of marauding cannibals, there's just the two of us, Robinson and his reader, and it's very cozy. In a more action-packed narrative, the pages detailing Robinson's everyday tasks and emotions would be what the critic Franco Moretti wryly calls "filler." But, as Moretti notes, the dramatic expansion of this kind of "filler" was precisely Defoe's great innovation; such stories of the quotidian became a fixture of realist fiction, in Austen and Flaubert as in Updike and Carver.

Framing and to some extent interpenetrating Defoe's "filler" are elements of the other major forms of prose narrative that preceded it: ancient Hellenistic novels, which included tales of shipwrecks and enslavement; Catholic and Protestant spiritual autobiographies; medieval and Renaissance romances; and Spanish picaresques. Defoe's novel follows also in the tradition of narratives libellously based, or purporting to be based, on the lives of actual public personages; in Crusoe's case, the model was Alexander Selkirk. It has even been argued that Defoe intended the novel as a piece of utopianist

propaganda, extolling the religious freedoms and economic opportunities of England's New World colonies. The heterogeneity of "Robinson Crusoe" illuminates the difficulty, maybe even the absurdity, of talking about the "rise of the novel" and of identifying Defoe's work as the first individual of the species. "Don Quixote," after all, was published more than a century earlier and is clearly a novel. And why not call the romances novels, too, since they were widely published and read in the seventeenth century and since, indeed, most European languages make no distinction between "romance" and "novel"? Early English novelists did often specifically stress that their own work was not "mere romance"; but, then, so had many of the romance writers themselves. And yet, by the early nineteenth century, when leading specimens of the form were first collected in authoritative sets by Walter Scott and others, the English not only had a very clear idea of what they meant by "novels" but were exporting large numbers of them, in translation, to other countries. A genre now definitely existed where none had before. So what exactly is a novel, and why did the genre appear when it did?

The most persuasive account remains the political-economic one that Ian Watt advanced fifty years ago. The birthplace of the novel, in its modern form, happens also to have been Europe's most economically dominant and sophisticated nation, and Watt's analysis of this coincidence is blunt but powerful, tying together the glorification of the enterprising individual, the expansion of a literate bourgeoisie eager to read about itself, the rise in social mobility (inviting writers to exploit its anxieties), the specialization of labor (creating a society of interesting *differences*), the disintegration of the old social order into a collection of individual isolates, and, of course, among the newly comfortable middle class, the dramatic increase in leisure for reading. At the same time, England was rapidly becoming more secular. Protestant theology had laid the foundations of the new economy by reimagining the social order as a collection of self-reliant individuals with a direct relationship with God, but by 1700, as the British economy thrived, it was becoming less clear that individuals needed God at all. It's true that, as any impatient child reader can tell you, many pages of "Robinson Crusoe" are devoted to its hero's spiritual journey. Robinson finds God on the island, and he turns to Him repeatedly in moments of crisis, praying for deliverance and ecstatically thanking Him for providing the means of it. And yet, as soon as each crisis has passed, he reverts to his practical self and forgets about God; by the end of the book, he seems to have been saved more by his own industry and ingenuity than by Providence. To read the story of Robinson's vacillations and forgetfulness is to see the genre of spiritual autobiography unravelling into realist fiction.

The most interesting aspect of the novel's origin may be the evolution of English culture's answers to the question of verisimilitude: should a strange story be accepted as true *because* it is strange, or should its strangeness be taken as proof that it is false? The anxieties of this question are still with us (witness the scandal of James Frey's "memoir"), and they were certainly in play in 1719, when Defoe

published the first and best-known volume of “Robinson Crusoe.” The author’s real name appeared nowhere in it. The book was identified, instead, as “The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe . . . Written by Himself,” and many of its first readers took the story as nonfiction. Enough other readers doubted its authenticity, however, that Defoe felt obliged to defend its truthfulness when he published the third and last of the volumes, the following year. Contrasting his story with romances, in which “the story is feign’d,” he insisted that his story, “though allegorical, is also historical,” and he affirmed that “there is a man alive, and well known too, the actions of whose life are the just subject of these volumes.” Given what we know of Defoe’s real life—like Crusoe, he got into trouble by pursuing risky business schemes, such as raising civet cats for perfume, and he had intimate knowledge of isolation from the debtors’ prison in which bankruptcy twice landed him—and given also his assertion, elsewhere in the volume, that “life in general is, or ought to be, but one universal act of solitude,” it seems fair to conclude that the “well known” man is Defoe himself. (There is, strikingly, that “oe” at the end of both names.) We now understand a novel to be a mapping of a writer’s experience onto a waking dream, and a crucial turn toward this understanding can be seen in Defoe’s tentative assertion of a less than strictly historical kind of truth—the novelist’s “truth.”

The critic Catherine Gallagher, in her essay “The Rise of Fictionality,” takes up a curious paradox related to this kind of truth: the eighteenth century was not only the moment when fiction writers, beginning (sort of) with Defoe, abandoned the pretense that their narratives weren’t fictional; it was also the moment when they began taking pains to make their narratives seem *not* fictional—when verisimilitude became paramount. Gallagher’s resolution of the paradox hinges on yet another aspect of modernity, the necessity of taking risks. When business came to depend on investment, you had to weigh various possible future outcomes; when marriages ceased to be arranged, you had to speculate on the merits of potential mates. And the novel, as it was developed in the eighteenth century, provided its readers with a field of play that was at once speculative and risk-free. While advertising its fictionality, it gave you protagonists who were typical enough to be experienced as possible versions of yourself and yet specific enough to remain, simultaneously, *not you*. The great literary invention of the eighteenth century was, thus, not simply a genre but an attitude *toward* that genre. Our state of mind when we pick up a novel today—our knowledge that it’s a work of the imagination; our willing suspension of disbelief in it—is in fact one half of the novel’s essence.

A number of recent scholarly studies have undermined the old notion that the epic is a central feature of all cultures, including oral cultures. Fiction, whether fairy tale or fable, seems mainly to have been a thing for children. In pre-modern cultures, stories were read for information or edification or titillation, and the more serious literary forms, poetry and drama, required a certain degree of technical mastery. The novel, however, was within reach of anyone with pen and paper, and the kind of pleasure

it afforded was uniquely modern. Experiencing a made-up story purely for pleasure became an activity in which adults, too, could now indulge freely (if sometimes guiltily). This historical shift toward reading for pleasure was so profound that we can hardly even see it anymore. Indeed, as the novel has proliferated subgenerically into movies and TV shows and late-model video games—most of them advertising their fictionality, all of them offering characters at once typical and specific—it's hardly an exaggeration to say that what distinguishes our culture from all previous cultures is its saturation in entertainment. The novel, as a duality of thing and attitude-toward-thing, has so thoroughly transformed our attitude that the thing itself is at risk of no longer being needed.

On Masafuera's sister island—originally named Masatierra, or Closer to Land, and now called Robinson Crusoe—I had seen the damage wrought by a trio of mainland plant species, maquis and murtilla and blackberry, which have monotonously overrun entire hills and drainages. Particularly evil-looking was the blackberry, which can overwhelm even tall native trees and which spreads in part by shooting out thick runners that look like thorny fibre-optic cables. Two native plant species have already gone extinct, and unless a massive restoration project is undertaken many more will follow. Walking on Robinson, looking for delicate endemic ferns at the blackberry's margins, I began to see the novel as an organism that had mutated, on the island of England, into a virulent invasive that then spread from country to country until it conquered the planet.

Henry Fielding, in "Joseph Andrews," referred to his characters as "species"—as something more than individual, less than universal. But, as the novel has transformed the cultural environment, species of humanity have given way to a universal crowd of individuals whose most salient characteristic is their being identically entertained. This was the monocultural spectre that David had envisioned and set out to resist in his epic "Infinite Jest." And the mode of his resistance in that novel—annotation, digression, nonlinearity, hyperlinkage—anticipated the even more virulent and even more radically individualistic invader that is now displacing the novel and its offspring. The blackberry on Robinson Crusoe Island was like the conquering novel, yes, but it seemed to me no less like the Internet, that BlackBerry-borne invasive, which, instead of mapping the self onto a narrative, maps the self onto the world. Instead of *the* news, *my* news. Instead of a single football game, the splintering of fifteen different games into personalized fantasy-league statistics. Instead of "The Godfather," "My Cat's Funny Trick." The individual run amok, everyman a Charlie Sheen. With "Robinson Crusoe," the self had become an island; and now, it seemed, the island was becoming the world.

I was awakened in the night by the beating of the sides of my tent against my sleeping bag; a big wind had blown up. I deployed my earplugs, but I could still hear the beating and, later, a loud whapping. When day finally came, I found my tent partly disassembled, a pole segment dangling from its fly. The wind had dispersed the clouds below me, opening up a view of the ocean, startlingly close,

with dawn breaking redly above its leaden water. Mustering the particular efficiency I can bring to the pursuit of a rare bird, I ate a quick breakfast, packed my knapsack with the radio and the satellite phone and enough food for two days, and, at the last minute, because the wind was so strong, collapsed my tent and weighted down its corners with large stones, so that it wouldn't blow away while I was gone. Time was short—mornings on Masafuera tend to be clearer than afternoons—but I made myself stop at the *refugio* and mark its coördinates on the G.P.S. unit before hurrying on uphill.

The Masafuera rayadito is a larger, duller-plumaged cousin of the thorn-tailed rayadito, a striking little bird that I'd seen in several forests in mainland Chile before coming to the islands. How such a small species landed five hundred miles offshore in sufficient numbers to reproduce (and, subsequently, evolve) will never be known. The Masafueran species requires undisturbed native fern forest, and its population, never large, appears to be declining, perhaps because when it nests on the ground it is prone to predation by invasive rats and cats. (Ridding Masafuera of rodents would entail capturing and safeguarding the island's entire hawk population and then using helicopters to blanket its rugged terrain with poisoned bait, at a total cost of maybe five million dollars.) I'd been told that the rayadito isn't hard to see in proper habitat; the difficulty is in getting to the habitat.

The heights of the island were still in cloud, but I was hoping that the wind would soon clear it out. As well as I could tell from my map, I needed to ascend to about thirty-six hundred feet in order to skirt two deep canyons that blocked the way south to Los Inocentes. I was cheered by the fact that the hike's net altitude gain would be zero, but, almost as soon as I'd left the *refugio* behind me, the clouds closed in again. Visibility dropped to a few hundred feet, and I began to stop every ten minutes to electronically mark my location, like Hansel leaving crumbs in the woods. For a while, I held to a trail marked with mule droppings, but the ground soon became too stony and scarred with goat tracks for me to be sure I was still on it.

At thirty-six hundred feet, I turned south and bushwhacked through dense, dripping ferns and found my way blocked by a drainage that ought to have been below me by now. I studied the map, but its Google Earth shadings hadn't become any less vague since the last time I'd studied it. I tried to work my way laterally around the sides of the canyon, but the fern cover concealed slippery rocks and deep holes, and the slope, as far as I could tell in the fog, seemed to be getting more vertical, and so I turned around and struggled back up to the ridge, orienting myself by G.P.S. An hour into my quest, I was thoroughly soaked and barely a thousand feet from where I'd started.

Checking the map, which was getting very wet, I recalled the unfamiliar word that Danilo had used. *Cordones*: it must mean ridges! I was supposed to follow the ridges! I charged uphill again, stopping only to scatter electronic bread crumbs, until I came to a solar-powered radio antenna, presumably a local summit. The wind, now stronger, was blowing cloud over the back side of the

island, which I knew to consist of cliffs plunging three thousand feet down to the seal colony. I couldn't see them, but the mere thought of their proximity gave me vertigo; I'm very afraid of cliffs.

Fortunately, the *cordón* leading south from the antenna was fairly level and not too hard to pick my way along, even with high winds and near-zero visibility. I made good progress for half an hour, feeling elated to have deduced, from scant information, the right way to Los Inocentes. Eventually, however, the ridge began to branch, presenting me with choices between higher and lower routes. The map indicated pretty clearly that I should be at thirty-two hundred feet, not thirty-eight hundred. But when I followed the lower ridges, trying to reduce my elevation, I reached sickeningly precipitous dead ends. I returned to the high ridge, which had the added advantage of heading directly south toward Los Inocentes, and I felt gratified when it finally began to descend.

By now, the weather was really bad, the mist turning to rain and blowing horizontally, the wind gusting above forty miles an hour. As I picked my way down the ridge, it began to narrow alarmingly, until I found the way blocked by a small pinnacle. I could sort of make out that the ridge continued to descend on the far side of it, albeit very steeply. But how to get around it? If I scrambled around its leeward side, I risked being grabbed by a gust of wind and blown off. On the windward side, there was, for all I knew, a sheer three-thousand-foot drop; but at least, on this side, the wind would be pushing me against the rock, rather than pulling me off.

In my rain-filled boots, I edged out along the windward side, double-checking every foothold and handhold before relying on it. As I crept forward and was able to see a little farther, the ridge beyond the pinnacle began to look like another dead end, with nothing but dark space ahead and on either side of it. Although I was very determined to see the rayadito, there came a moment when I became afraid to take another step, and I was suddenly able to see myself: spread-eagled against a slippery rockface, in blinding rain and ferocious wind, with no assurance that I was going in the right direction. A sentence so clear that it seemed almost spoken popped into my head: *What you're doing is extremely dangerous.* And I thought of my dead friend.

David wrote about weather as well as anyone who ever put words on paper, and he loved his dogs more purely than he loved anything or anyone else, but nature itself didn't interest him, and he was utterly indifferent to birds. Once, when we were driving near Stinson Beach, in California, I'd stopped to give him a telescope view of a long-billed curlew, a species whose magnificence is to my mind self-evident and revelatory. He looked through the scope for two seconds before turning away with patent boredom. "Yeah," he said with his particular tone of hollow politeness, "it's pretty." In the summer before he died, sitting with him on his patio while he smoked cigarettes, I couldn't keep my eyes off the hummingbirds around his house and was saddened that he could, and while he was taking his heavily medicated afternoon naps I was studying the birds of Ecuador for an upcoming trip, and I

understood the difference between his unmanageable misery and my manageable discontents to be that I could escape myself in the joy of birds and he could not.

He was sick, yes, and in a sense the story of my friendship with him is simply that I loved a person who was mentally ill. The depressed person then killed himself, in a way calculated to inflict maximum pain on those he loved most, and we who loved him were left feeling angry and betrayed. Betrayed not merely by the failure of our investment of love but by the way in which his suicide took the person away from us and made him into a very public legend. People who had never read his fiction, or had never even heard of him, read his Kenyon College commencement address in the *Wall Street Journal* and mourned the loss of a great and gentle soul. A literary establishment that had never so much as short-listed one of his books for a national prize now united to declare him a lost national treasure. Of course, he *was* a national treasure, and, being a writer, he didn't "belong" to his readers any less than to me. But if you happened to know that his actual character was more complex and dubious than he was getting credit for, and if you also knew that he was more lovable—funnier, sillier, needier, more poignantly at war with his demons, more lost, more childishly transparent in his lies and inconsistencies—than the benignant and morally clairvoyant artist/saint that had been made of him, it was still hard not to feel wounded by the part of him that had chosen the adulation of strangers over the love of the people closest to him.

The people who knew David least well are most likely to speak of him in saintly terms. What makes this especially strange is the near-perfect absence, in his fiction, of ordinary love. Close loving relationships, which for most of us are a foundational source of meaning, have no standing in the Wallace fictional universe. What we get, instead, are characters keeping their heartless compulsions secret from those who love them; characters scheming to *appear* loving or to prove to themselves that what feels like love is really just disguised self-interest; or, at most, characters directing an abstract or spiritual love toward somebody profoundly repellent—the cranial-fluid-dripping wife in "Infinite Jest," the psychopath in the last of the interviews with hideous men. David's fiction is populated with dissemblers and manipulators and emotional isolates, and yet the people who had only glancing or formal contact with him took his rather laborious hyper-considerateness and moral wisdom at face value.

The curious thing about David's fiction, though, is how recognized and comforted, how *loved*, his most devoted readers feel when reading it. To the extent that each of us is stranded on his or her own existential island—and I think it's approximately correct to say that his most susceptible readers are ones familiar with the socially and spiritually isolating effects of addiction or compulsion or depression—we gratefully seized on each new dispatch from that farthest-away island which was David. At the level of content, he gave us the worst of himself: he laid out, with an intensity of self-scrutiny worthy

of comparison to Kafka and Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, the extremes of his own narcissism, misogyny, compulsiveness, self-deception, dehumanizing moralism and theologizing, doubt in the possibility of love, and entrapment in footnotes-within-footnotes self-consciousness. At the level of form and intention, however, this very cataloguing of despair about his own authentic goodness is received by the reader as a gift of authentic goodness: we feel the love in the fact of his art, and we love him for it.

David and I had a friendship of compare and contrast and (in a brotherly way) compete. A few years before he died, he signed my hardcover copies of his two most recent books. On the title page of one of them, I found the traced outline of his hand; on the title page of the other was an outline of an erection so huge that it ran off the page, annotated with a little arrow and the remark “scale 100%.” I once heard him enthusiastically describe, in the presence of a girl he was dating, someone else’s girlfriend as his “paragon of womanhood.” David’s girl did a wonderfully slow double take and said, “*What?*” Whereupon David, whose vocabulary was as large as anybody’s in the Western Hemisphere, took a deep breath and, letting it out, said, “I’m suddenly realizing that I’ve never actually known what the word ‘paragon’ means.”

He was lovable the way a child is lovable, and he was capable of returning love with a childlike purity. If love is nevertheless excluded from his work, it’s because he never quite felt that he deserved to receive it. He was a lifelong prisoner on the island of himself. What looked like gentle contours from a distance were in fact sheer cliffs. Sometimes only a little of him was crazy, sometimes nearly all of him, but, as an adult, he was never entirely not crazy. What he’d seen of his id while trying to escape his island prison by way of drugs and alcohol, only to find himself even more imprisoned by addiction, seems never to have ceased to be corrosive of his belief in his lovability. Even after he got clean, even decades after his late-adolescent suicide attempt, even after his slow and heroic construction of a life for himself, he felt undeserving. And this feeling was intertwined, ultimately to the point of indistinguishability, with the thought of suicide, which was the one sure way out of his imprisonment; surer than addiction, surer than fiction, and surer, finally, than love.

We who were not so pathologically far out on the spectrum of self-involvement, we dwellers of the visible spectrum who could imagine how it felt to go beyond violet but were not ourselves beyond it, could see that David was wrong not to believe in his lovability and could imagine the pain of not believing in it. How easy and natural love is if you are well! And how gruesomely difficult—what a philosophically daunting contraption of self-interest and self-delusion love appears to be—if you are not! And yet one of the lessons of David’s work (and, for me, of being his friend) is that the difference between well and not well is in more respects a difference of degree than of kind. Even though David laughed at my much milder addictions and liked to tell me that I couldn’t even conceive of how

moderate I was, I can still extrapolate from these addictions, and from the secretiveness and solipsism and radical isolation and raw animal craving that accompany them, to the extremity of his. I can imagine the sick mental pathways by which suicide comes to seem like the one consciousness-quenching substance that nobody can take away from you. The need to have something apart from other people, the need for a secret, the need for some last-ditch narcissistic validation of the self's primacy, and then the voluptuously self-hating anticipation of the last grand score, and the final severing of contact with the world that would deny you the enjoyment of your self-involved pleasure: I can follow David there.

It is, admittedly, harder to connect with the infantile rage and displaced homicidal impulses visible in certain particulars of his death. But even here I can discern a funhouse-mirror Wallace logic, a perverse sort of yearning for intellectual honesty and consistency. To deserve the death sentence he'd passed on himself, the execution of the sentence had to be deeply injurious to someone. To prove once and for all that he truly didn't deserve to be loved, it was necessary to betray as hideously as possible those who loved him best, by killing himself at home and making them firsthand witnesses to his act. And the same was true of suicide as a career move, which was the kind of adulation-craving calculation that he loathed in himself and would deny (if he thought he could get away with it) that he was conscious of making, and would then (if you called him on it) laughingly or wincingly admit that, yeah, O.K., he was indeed capable of making. I imagine the side of David that advocated going the Kurt Cobain route speaking in the seductively reasonable voice of the devil in "The Screwtape Letters," which was one of David's favorite books, and pointing out that death by his own hand would simultaneously satisfy his loathsome hunger for career advantage and, because it would represent a capitulation to the side of himself that his embattled better side perceived as evil, further confirm the justice of his death sentence.

This is not to say that he spent his last months and weeks in lively intellectual conversation with himself, à la Screwtape or the Grand Inquisitor. He was so sick, toward the end, that every new waking thought of his, on whatever subject, immediately corkscrewed into the same conviction of his worthlessness, causing him continual dread and pain. And yet one of his own favored tropes, articulated especially clearly in his story "Good Old Neon" and in his treatise on Georg Cantor, was the infinite divisibility of a single instant in time. However continually he was suffering in his last summer, there was still plenty of room, in the interstices between his identically painful thoughts, to entertain the idea of suicide, to flash forward through its logic, and to set in motion the practical plans (of which he eventually made at least four) for effectuating it. When you decide to do something very bad, the intention and the reasoning for it spring into existence simultaneously and fully formed; any addict who's about to fall off the wagon can tell you this. Though suicide itself was painful to

contemplate, it became—to echo the title of another of David’s stories—a sort of present to himself.

Adulatory public narratives of David, which take his suicide as proof that (as Don McLean sang of van Gogh) “this world was never meant for one as beautiful as you,” require that there have been a unitary David, a beautiful and supremely gifted human being who, after quitting the antidepressant Nardil, which he’d been taking for twenty years, succumbed to major depression and was therefore *not himself* when he committed suicide. I will pass over the question of diagnosis (it’s possible he was not simply depressive) and the question of how such a beautiful human being had come by such vividly intimate knowledge of the thoughts of hideous men. But bearing in mind his fondness for Screwtape and his demonstrable penchant for deceiving himself and others—a penchant that his years in recovery held in check but never eradicated—I can imagine a narrative of ambiguity and ambivalence truer to the spirit of his work. By his own account to me, he had never ceased to live in fear of returning to the psych ward where his early suicide attempt had landed him. The allure of suicide, the last big score, may go underground, but it never entirely disappears. Certainly, David had “good” reasons to go off Nardil—his fear that its long-term physical effects might shorten the good life he’d managed to make for himself; his suspicion that its psychological effects might be interfering with the best things in his life (his work and his relationships)—and he also had less “good” reasons of ego: a perfectionist wish to be less substance-dependent, a narcissistic aversion to seeing himself as permanently mentally ill. What I find hard to believe is that he didn’t have very bad reasons as well. Flickering beneath his beautiful moral intelligence and his lovable human weakness was the old addict’s consciousness, the secret self, which, after decades of suppression by the Nardil, finally glimpsed its chance to break free and have its suicidal way.

This duality played out in the year that followed his quitting Nardil. He made strange and seemingly self-defeating decisions about his care, engaged in a fair amount of bamboozlement of his shrinks (whom one can only pity for having drawn such a brilliantly complicated case), and in the end created an entire secret life devoted to suicide. Throughout that year, the David whom I knew well and loved immoderately was struggling bravely to build a more secure foundation for his work and his life, contending with heartbreaking levels of anxiety and pain, while the David whom I knew less well, but still well enough to have always disliked and distrusted, was methodically plotting his own destruction and his revenge on those who loved him.

That he was blocked with his work when he decided to quit Nardil—was bored with his old tricks and unable to muster enough excitement about his new novel to find a way forward with it—is not inconsequential. He’d loved writing fiction, “Infinite Jest” in particular, and he’d been very explicit, in our many discussions of the purpose of novels, about his belief that fiction is a solution, the *best* solution, to the problem of existential solitude. Fiction was his way off the island, and as long as it was

working for him—as long as he'd been able to pour his love and passion into preparing his lonely dispatches, and as long as these dispatches were coming as urgent and fresh and honest news to the mainland—he'd achieved a measure of happiness and hope for himself. When his hope for fiction died, after years of struggle with the new novel, there was no other way out but death. If boredom is the soil in which the seeds of addiction sprout, and if the phenomenology and the teleology of suicidality are the same as those of addiction, it seems fair to say that David died of boredom. In his early story “Here and There,” the brother of a perfection-seeking young man, Bruce, invites him to consider “how *boring* it would be to be perfect,” and Bruce tells us:

I defer to Leonard's extensive and hard-earned knowledge about being boring, but do point out that since being boring is an imperfection, it would by definition be impossible for a perfect person to be boring.

It's a good joke; and yet the logic is somehow strangulatory. It's the logic of “everything and more,” to echo yet another of David's titles, and everything and more is what he wanted from and for his fiction. This had worked for him before, in “Infinite Jest.” But to try to add more to what is already everything is to risk having nothing: to become boring to yourself.

A funny thing about Robinson Crusoe is that he never, in twenty-eight years on his Island of Despair, becomes bored. He speaks, yes, of the drudgery of his early labors, he later admits to becoming “heartily tir'd” of searching the island for cannibals, he laments not having any pipes in which to smoke the tobacco he finds on the island, and he describes his first year of company with Friday as the “pleasantest year of all the life I led in this place.” But the modern craving for *stimulation* is wholly absent. (The novel's most astonishing detail may be that Robinson makes “three large runlets of rum or spirits” last a quarter century; I would have drunk all three in a month, just to be done with them.) Although he never ceases to dream of escape, he soon comes to take “a secret kind of pleasure” in his absolute ownership of the island:

I look'd now upon the world as a thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no expectation from, and indeed no desires about: In a word, I had nothing indeed to do with it, nor was ever like to have; so I thought it look'd as we may perhaps look upon it hereafter.

Robinson is able to survive his solitude because he's lucky; he makes peace with his condition because he's ordinary and his island is concrete. David, who was extraordinary, and whose island was virtual, finally had nothing but his own interesting self to survive on, and the problem with making a virtual world of oneself is akin to the problem with projecting ourselves onto a cyberworld: there's no end of virtual spaces in which to seek stimulation, but their very endlessness, the perpetual stimulation

without satisfaction, becomes imprisoning. To be everything and more is the Internet's ambition, too.

The vertiginous point where I turned back in the rain was less than a mile from La Cuchara, but the return hike took two hours. The rain was now not just horizontal but heavy, and I was having trouble staying upright in the wind. The G.P.S. unit was giving me "Low Battery" messages, but I had to keep turning it on, because visibility was so poor that I couldn't maintain a straight line. Even when the unit showed that the *refugio* was a hundred and fifty feet away, I had to walk farther before I could make out its roofline.

I tossed my drenched knapsack into the *refugio*, ran down to my tent, and found it a basin of rainwater. I managed to wrestle out the foam mattress and get it back to the *refugio*, and then I went back and unstaked the tent and poured off the water and gathered the whole thing in my arms, trying to keep the things inside it halfway dry, and hustled it back uphill through the horizontal rain. The *refugio* was a disaster zone of soaked clothes and equipment. I spent two hours on various drying projects, followed by an hour of searching the promontory, to no avail, for a critical piece of tent hardware that I'd lost in my mad dash. And then, in a matter of minutes, the rain ended and the clouds blew off and I realized I'd been staying in the most dramatically beautiful spot I'd ever seen.

It was late afternoon, and the wind was blowing out over the insanely blue ocean, and it was time. La Cuchara seemed more suspended in the air than attached to the earth. There was a feeling of near-infinity, the sun eliciting from the hillsides more shades of green and yellow than I'd suspected the visible spectrum of containing, a dazzling near-infinity of colors, and the sky so immense that I wouldn't have been surprised to see the mainland on the eastern horizon. White shreds of remnant cloud came barrelling down from the summit, whipped past me, and vanished. The wind was blowing out, and I began to cry, because I knew it was time and I hadn't prepared myself; had managed to forget. I went to the *refugio* and got the little box of David's ashes, the "booklet"—to use the term he'd amusingly applied to his not-short book about mathematical infinity—and walked back down the promontory with it, the wind at my back.

I was doing a lot of different things at every moment. Even as I was crying, I was also scanning the ground for the missing piece of my tent, and taking my camera out of my pocket and trying to capture the celestial beauty of the light and the landscape, and damning myself for doing this when I should have been purely mourning, and telling myself that it was *O.K.* that I'd failed in my attempt to see the rayadito in what would surely be my only visit to the island—that it was better this way, that it was time to accept finitude and incompleteness and leave certain birds forever unseen, that the ability to accept this was the gift I'd been given and my beloved dead friend had not.

At the end of the promontory, I came to a pair of matching boulders that together formed a kind of altar. David had chosen to leave the people who loved him and give himself to the world of the novel

and its readers, and I was ready to wish him well in it. I opened the box of ashes and threw them up into the wind. Some bits of gray bone came down on the slope below me, but the dust was caught in the wind and vanished into the blue vault of the sky, blowing out across the ocean. I turned and wandered back up the hill toward the *refugio*, where I would have to spend the night, because my tent was disabled. I felt done with anger, merely bereft, and done with islands, too.

Riding with me on the boat back to Robinson Crusoe were twelve hundred lobsters, a couple of skinned goats, and an old lobsterman who, after the anchor had been weighed, shouted to me that the sea was very rough. Yeah, I agreed, it was a little rough. “*No poco!*” he shouted seriously. “*Mucho!*” The boat’s crew was tossing around the bloody goats, and I realized that instead of heading straight back toward Robinson we were angling forty-five degrees to the south, to keep from capsizing. I staggered down into a tiny, fetid bunkroom beneath the bow and heaved myself onto a bunk and there—after an hour or two of clutching the sides of the bunk to avoid becoming airborne, and trying to think about something, anything, that wasn’t seasickness, and sweating off (as I later discovered) the anti-seasickness patch I’d stuck behind my ear, and listening to water slosh and hammer against the hull—I threw up into a Ziploc bag. Ten hours later, when I ventured back out on deck, I was expecting the harbor to be in sight, but the captain had done so much tacking that we were still five hours away. I couldn’t face returning to the bunk, and I was still too sick to look at seabirds, and so I stood for five hours and did little but imagine changing my return flight, which I’d booked for the following week to allow for delays, and going home early.

I hadn’t felt so homesick since, possibly, the last time I’d camped by myself. In three days, the Californian woman I live with would be going to watch the Super Bowl with friends of ours, and when I thought of sitting beside her on a sofa and drinking a Martini and rooting for the Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who’d been a star at California, I felt *desperate* to escape the islands. Before leaving for Masafuera, I’d already seen Robinson’s two endemic land-bird species, and the prospect of another week there, with no chance of seeing something new, seemed suffocatingly boring—an exercise in deprivation from the very busyness that I’d been so intent on fleeing, a busyness whose pleasurability I appreciated only now.

Back on Robinson, I enlisted my innkeeper, Ramón, to try to get me on one of the following day’s flights. Both flights turned out to be full, but while I was eating lunch the local agent of one of the air companies happened to walk into the inn, and Ramón pressed her to let me fly on a third, cargo-only flight. The agent said no. But what about the co-pilot seat? Ramón asked her. Couldn’t he sit in the co-pilot seat? No, the agent said, the co-pilot seat, too, would be filled with cartons of lobster.

And so, although I no longer wanted it, or because I didn’t want it, I had the experience of being truly stranded on an island. I ate the same bad Chilean white bread at every meal, the same nondescript

fish served without sauce or seasoning at every lunch and dinner. I lay in my room and finished “Robinson Crusoe.” I wrote postcards in reply to the stack of mail I’d brought along. I practiced mentally inserting into Chilean Spanish the “s”s that its speakers omitted. I got better views of the Juan Fernández firecrown, a splendid large cinnamon-colored hummingbird severely endangered by invasive plant and animal species. I hiked over the mountains to a grassland where the island’s annual cattle-branding festival was being held, and I watched horseback riders drive the village’s herd into a corral. The setting was spectacular—sweeping hills, volcanic peaks, whitecapped ocean—but the hills were denuded and deeply gouged by erosion. Of the hundred-plus cattle, at least ninety were malnourished, the majority of them so skeletal it seemed remarkable that they could even stand up. The herd had historically been a reserve source of protein, and the villagers still enjoyed the ritual of roping and branding, but couldn’t they see what a sad travesty their ritual had become?

With three more days to fill and my knees worn out by downhill hiking, I had no choice but to start reading Samuel Richardson’s first novel, “Pamela,” which I’d brought along mainly because it’s a lot shorter than “Clarissa.” All I’d known about “Pamela” was that Henry Fielding had satirized it in “Shamela,” his own first venture into novel writing. I hadn’t known that “Shamela” was only one of many works published in immediate response to “Pamela,” and that “Pamela,” indeed, had been possibly the biggest news of any kind in London in 1741. But as soon as I started reading it I could see why: the novel is compelling and electric with sex and class conflicts, and it details psychological extremes at a level of specificity like nothing before it. Pamela Andrews isn’t everything and more. She’s simply and uniquely Pamela, a beautiful servant girl whose virtue is under sustained and ingenious assault by the son of her late employer. Her story is told through her letters to her parents, and when she finds out that these letters are being intercepted and read by her would-be seducer, Mr. B., she continues to write them *while knowing that Mr. B. will read them*. Pamela’s piousness and self-dramatizing hysterics were bound to infuriate a certain kind of reader (one of the books published in response satirized Richardson’s subtitle, “Virtue Rewarded,” as “Feign’d Innocence Detected”), but underneath her strident virtue and Mr. B.’s lascivious machinations is a fascinatingly rendered love story. The realistic power of this story was what made the book such a groundbreaking sensation. Defoe had staked out the territory of radical individualism, which has remained a fruitful subject for novelists as late as Beckett and Wallace, but it was Richardson who first granted full fictional access to the hearts and minds of individuals whose solitude has been overwhelmed by love for someone else.

Exactly halfway through “Robinson Crusoe,” when Robinson has been alone for fifteen years, he discovers a single human footprint on the beach and is literally made crazy by “*the fear of man*.” After concluding that the footprint is neither his own nor the Devil’s but, rather, some cannibal intruder’s, he remakes his garden island into a fortress, and for several years he can think of little but concealing

himself and repelling imagined invaders. He marvels at the irony that

I whose only affliction was, that I seem'd banish'd from human society, that I was alone, circumscrib'd by the boundless ocean, cut off from mankind, and condemn'd to what I call'd silent life . . . that I should now tremble at the very apprehensions of seeing a man, and was ready to sink into the ground at but the shadow, or silent appearance of a man's having set his foot in the island.

Nowhere was Defoe's psychology more acute than in his imagination of Robinson's response to the rupture of his solitude. He gave us the first realistic portrait of the radically isolated individual, and then, as if impelled by novelistic truth, he showed us how sick and crazy radical individualism really is. No matter how carefully we defend our selves, all it takes is one footprint of another real person to recall us to the endlessly interesting hazards of living relationships. Even Facebook, whose users collectively spend billions of hours renovating their self-regarding projections, contains an ontological exit door, the Relationship Status menu, among whose options is the phrase "It's complicated." This may be a euphemism for "on my way out," but it's also a description of all the other options. As long as we have such complications, how dare we be bored? ♦

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