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Picturing Crusoe's Island: Defoe, Rousseau, Stothard

At the beginning of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), we read:

For readers reared on travellers' tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway's thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home. But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place. [...] (Coetzee, 7)

Susan Barton, the female castaway of Coetzee's novel, proceeds to offer a very detailed sketch of the island, presenting it as a hostile and by no means picturesque environment; an impression which is created by such details as "drab bushes", "swarms of large pale fleas" and rocks "white with [birds'] droppings" (Coetzee, 7-8). This pictorial moment is introduced by way of evoking the typical expectations of a desert island the reader might have and then negating them, very much in line with the poetics of counter-canonical writing that *Foe*, at least to a certain degree, follows. But the paradise-like setting referred to by Susan Barton is a construct that does not go back to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; rather, it is a product of a significant transformation in the way the environment of the island was depicted in the eighteenth-century Robinsonade. My aim in this article will be to reconstruct some of the fundamental steps in this process.

1. Defoe

Defoe's interest in painting and his use of pictorialism in narrative prose have already been given substantial critical attention¹. In sum, while the author of *Crusoe* would not deserve the credit of a Dickensian stylist, he was able to include well-developed pictorial passages in his prose fiction that as a rule drew attention to crucial ideological and narrative moments². These include the memorable portrait of Roxana in her Turkish dress in *Roxana* (1724), illustrative of her protean identity and social ascension, or the first meeting with Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), constituting the core of *Crusoe*'s imperialist iconography.

In the island section of the first volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, there are several scenes rendered in pictorial terms, which prompted the formation of what might be termed the Robinsonade iconography: Robinson's reaction on the shore, when he is "making a thousand gestures and motions which [he] cannot describe" (91);³ Robinson and his "family", concluding the survival narrative of the island section (166); Robinson sketching his appearance (167-168); Robinson describing his "Plantations" and "Fortifications" (169); Robinson and the footprint, with the memorable indication of stasis – "I stood like one Thunder-struck" (170); Robinson in his cave-magazine (188-189), which Maximillian Novak has analysed with reference to the iconography of eremite saints (Novak, 163); Robinson meeting Friday (207); and, finally, Robinson prepared for a battle with the English mutineers (245). In these, Defoe diversifies the writing in terms of length, level of details, objects described, but one thing does not change – an apparent obliviousness to the beauties of nature.

There are moments in the early parts of the desert island section when Robinson is clearly observing his surroundings, but his interests lie in practicalities and everyday necessities:

I began to look round me to see what kind of Place I was in, **and** what was next to be done [...] (91)

I look'd about me again, **and** the first thing I found was the Boat [...] (92)

1 See, especially, Novak 43-60.

2 My understanding of pictorialism in this essay will be in line with the traditional definition put forward by Jean Hagstrum: "In order to be called 'pictorial', a description or an image must be, in its essentials, capable of *translation* into painting or some other visual art" (Hagstrum, 20).

3 References to *Robinson Crusoe* use the following edition: Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). *The Novels of Daniel Defoe*. Edited by W.R. Owens and P.N. Furbank. Vol. 1. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008.

My next Work was to view the Country, **and** seek a proper Place for my Habitation [...] (96)

The parallel structure of the above – the repetitious use of “and” changing or specifying Robinson’s interests – is indicative of a narrative pace in which there is no room for descriptive passages. This is indeed the case but only to a point. As mentioned before, Robinson does from time to time introduce narrative pauses to make space for detailed pictorial passages; landscaping is simply not his priority.

The strongest piece of evidence for Crusoe’s insensitivity to natural scenery can be found when Robinson climbs a hill to view the environs (96-97). Again, there is little more that the reader learns from the account than the fact that the place is an island. Robinson is much more articulate on his use of rifles and first attempts at hunting. This is surprising not least because of the fact that in the contemporaneous travel accounts literary landscapes tended to be introduced by travellers ascending a hill for the sake of a better view. The scene involves the reader’s visual imagination: we concretise the island by imagining what it looks like to Robinson, the focaliser in this scene, while Robinson himself concentrates on the culinary prospects of the place.

The perspective is reversed in another memorable pictorial moment, towards the end of the island section. This time the castaway braces himself for the upcoming encounter with visitors to *his* island. The scene would have inspired the frontispiece to the first edition of *Crusoe* (fig.1), frequently reprinted, despite some differences between the sketch and the picture. The more developed portrait of Crusoe given earlier on, in turn, inspired the French illustrator Bernard Picart, who created the frontispiece for the first French edition published in 1720 (fig.2). While there is nothing that we learn about the natural scenery constituting the background against which Crusoe poses, the two frontispieces include a bit of the island in the background.

Bibliographers and book historians, most notably Rodney Baine, have pointed out that Defoe himself had nothing to say as to the preliminaries of *Robinson Crusoe* and the other novels, including the frontispieces (Baine, 185). Nevertheless, contemporary print culture scholars, for example Janine Barchas, have persuasively demonstrated how the paratext becomes a meaningful element of the text, despite the author’s intentions or lack thereof (Barchas, 5). In this sense, the frontispiece, as an important framing element, functions as a “threshold of interpretation”, to use Gérard Genette’s words (*Paratexts*). The island as depicted in the frontispieces provides a lens through which the reader can view its presence in the actual narrative. The visible palisade, an element of Robin-



Fig. 1. Frontispiece to the first edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. HathiTrust Digital Library.



Fig. 2. Bernard Picart, Frontispiece to the first French edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. 1720. Beinecke Digital Collections.

son's fortifications, foregrounds the idea of enclosure, possession and conquest over the natural world, thus corresponding to Crusoe's shifting attention, from the presence of the surrounding wilderness to his own survival and civilising ventures. This use of the natural world is central to *Robinson Crusoe* throughout the narrative, and it even prompted Maximilian Novak to argue that conquest of nature should be regarded as a determinative element of the Robinsonade as a genre, distinguishing it from other types of desert island fiction (Novak, 112)⁴.

In the early 1720s, Defoe started producing his monumental *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*. The account features a number of pictorial passages, including those describing estate gardens, seemingly centring on

4 Ilse Vickers offers an insightful analysis of this aspect of the Crusoe story with reference to the developing New Sciences. See the chapter "Robinson Crusoe: man's progressive dominion over nature", in Vickers 99-131.

the beauties of landscape. In these, nevertheless, Defoe is still faithful to the classical ideal of nature controlled; Defoe praises the *art* of landscaping, rather than landscapes themselves.

2. Rousseau

To Crusoe, the island becomes a positively evaluated space only when contrasted with the dangers elsewhere or when serving a specific narrative and ideological function – of Crusoe's kingdom. A fuller appreciation of the natural beauties of the island for their own merits takes place in the second half of the century, especially following a new reading of Defoe's text offered by J.J. Rousseau⁵. This brings Crusoe's island closer to the ideals of a sentimental, and later Romantic, delight in the natural world, a tradition that stems from mythological visualisations of the island as a paradise regained, as represented in Antoine Watteau's series of paintings *Pilgrimage to Cythera*. Before addressing Rousseau himself, I would like to quote a seemingly unrelated passage from August Fryderyk Moszyński's *Essay sur le jardinage Anglois*, which the author – the last Polish King Stanislaus' architect and advisor – presented to the monarch. Among the several dozen recommended embellishments, "Robinson Crusoe's habitation" is described as a fashionable addition to the Royal Gardens in Łazienki, Warsaw:

The remnants of what used to be a path and the few fallen trees make one curious to delve into the forest. Having taken some turns through trees and bushes, the visitor reaches Robinson's habitation, just as it was described in the novel. The hut can be entered by an underground passage, and the interior corresponds to what it was like for Robinson. His tools are hung on the walls and serve as embellishments. A wooden palisade, masked by the brush from the outside, encloses and conceals the hut when one views it from the meadow located in this part of the forest. ... One can walk back taking the same path or turn right and go further into the forest to reach Trophonius' cave. (Moszyński, 110, trans. mine)

There is no evidence that the proposed plan materialised, but the context of the neighbouring Trophonius' cave suggests that the idea of Robinson's hut as

5 Two notable examples preceding Rousseau and Robinsonades in its wake, and characterised by a greater sensitivity to the beauties of nature, are Peter Longueville's *The Hermit, or, the Unparalleled Sufferings and Surprising Adventures of Mr Philip Quarll, an Englishman* (1727) and Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751).

an element of garden design corresponded to other “caves”, “grottos”, “huts” or “hermitages” in picturesque gardens. As such, it is testimony to a sentimental reading of Defoe’s novel, with the reader’s focus centred on the relationship between the solitary individual and Nature – an ideal form of contact encouraged by the picturesque garden and the possibilities of spiritual retreat that it offered.

This ideal was promoted by J.J. Rousseau, and not only in his *Emile, or, On Education*, which is a typical reference point in studies of the Robinsonade, but also elsewhere. In fact, as Mary Bellhouse persuasively argues, when Rousseau reinterpreted the story of Crusoe, he separated two mythical aspects: the myth of reunion with nature (constructed in *Confessions*, *The New Heloise* and *The Solitary Walker*) and the educational myth. As Bellhouse writes, the former was the ideal for Rousseau himself; the latter, for the social and political programme he promoted (Bellhouse, 121). Descriptions of nature are, of course, prioritised in the former set of writings. For example, in *The New Heloise*, which influenced the changing fashions in garden design, St. Preux (having himself spent some time on a desert island) compares the garden of Julie to the isle of Juan Fernandez, where Alexander Selkirk, the real-life model for Crusoe, was stranded:

This place [Elysium], although quite close to the house, is so well hidden by the shaded avenue separating them that it cannot be seen from anywhere. ...Upon entering this so-called orchard, I was struck by a pleasantly cool sensation which dark shade, bright and lively greenery, flowers scattered on every side, the bubbling of flowing water, and the songs of a thousand birds impressed on my imagination at least as much as my senses; but at the same time I thought I was looking at the wildest, most solitary place in nature, and it seemed to me I was the first mortal who ever had set foot in this wilderness. Surprised, stunned, transported by a spectacle so unexpected, I remained motionless for a moment, and cried out in spontaneous ecstasy: O Tinian! O Juan Fernandez! Julie, the ends of the earth are at your gate! (Rousseau, 1997, 387)

A similar construct of the island as a new paradise, this time in the context of positively evaluated isolation, is given in Rousseau’s *The Solitary Walker*:

When the evening approached, I descended from the summits of the island, and I went gladly to sit down on the border of the lake, on the shore, in some hidden nook: there, the sound of the waves and the agitation of the water, fixing my senses and driving every other agitation from my soul, plunged it into a delicious reverie where the night often

surprised me without reverie, my having perceived it. The flux and reflux of this water, its continual sound, swelling at intervals, struck ceaselessly my ears and eyes, responding to the internal movements which the reverie extinguished in me, and sufficed to make me feel my existence with pleasure, without taking the trouble to think. (Rousseau, 1971, 110-111)

3. Stothard

Rousseau's appreciation of *Robinson Crusoe* revived and reoriented the interest in the myth of Robinson, especially on the Continent. That said, in Britain, after the initial surge of editions, there was an observable slowdown in the mid-century decades, and what renewed the interest in Defoe and *Crusoe* was the 1781 edition, included in James Harrison's series *The Novelist's Magazine*, which included seven drawings by the renowned illustrator Thomas Stothard (see Blewett, 1995, 45-48). This was the first major illustration project for *Robinson Crusoe* after the early editions, and the change in artistic quality is striking. This gave way to the 1790 edition by John Stockdale, which included fourteen illustrations by Stothard. As David Blewett points out, in contrast to the relatively random set for the 1781 edition, these constituted an autonomous narrative programme "very much in the tradition of eighteenth-century narrative painting in the manner of Hogarth's well-known 'progresses'" (Blewett, 2018, 166), and as such have been regarded as "the first English pictorial treatment of Robinson Crusoe as a progress" (Blewett, 1995, 49), beginning with *Crusoe*, here considerably younger, taking his leave of his parents.

Blewett argues that Stothard's pieces bring Defoe's novel closer to Rousseau's thought system, though he focuses on the representation of Friday (Fig. 3) and the concepts of the noble savage and state of nature (Blewett, 2018, 166). In this, the illustrator elaborated on a concept that is present not only in Rousseau's interpretation, but also in Defoe's novel itself: let us recall the sketch of Friday's figure, foregrounding his "Sweetness and Softness", and *Crusoe*'s discussion of the natural predisposition for correct judgment that comes shortly after (209, 212).

Pointing to the muscular torso of Friday, Blewett recognises Stothard's use of Raphael's aesthetic (Blewett, 2018, 166). That being clearly the case, I would like to draw attention to the other aspect of Stothard's Rousseauvian interpretation, which rather than elaborating on an aspect of Defoe's novel, compensates for a meaningful omission: the beauties of nature. If the foregrounding of the naturally noble Friday may be taken as a response to the socio-educational myth promoted by Rousseau, the greater attentiveness to the natural world should



Fig. 3. Thomas Stothard, “Robinson Crusoe first sees and rescues his man Friday”. From John Stockdale’s 1790 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Photo: Philip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/stothard/17.html>

be seen as elaborating on the myth of back to nature. I would argue that in Stothard’s illustrations the mythical dimension of the back to nature narrative is reflected in a twofold manner: literally, by way of reconstructing the natural world in a more attractive and detailed manner; and metaphorically, by implying the dominance of the environment and man’s reunion with Mother Nature.

The idea that seems to be displayed by the majority of Stothard’s illustrations is that of nature welcoming and encompassing Crusoe rather than being conquered by him. The natural environs, for the most part, are presented as if from the inside; they are certainly beyond the colonising grasp of the castaway, and create the illusion of a three-dimensional space in which the character is immersed, rather than being represented as a flat surface to be written over by demarcating lines. Stothard’s Crusoe does not seem to need “three or four Compasses, some Mathematical Instruments, Dials, Perspectives, Charts, and Book of Navigation”, instruments that in Defoe’s novel indicate a scientific perspective on the island as a space of colonial exploration and conquest. In a sense, Stothard’s Crusoe is healed of what Robert Marzec labels “the Crusoe syndrome” – that is, “the terror of inhabiting the other space *as other* [...] until the land is enclosed and transformed” (Marzec 3).

This is best reflected in the two scenes that depict Crusoe’s civilising acts as no threat to the island: “Robinson Crusoe and Friday making a boat” (Fig. 4) and “Robinson Crusoe and Friday making a tent to lodge Friday’s father and

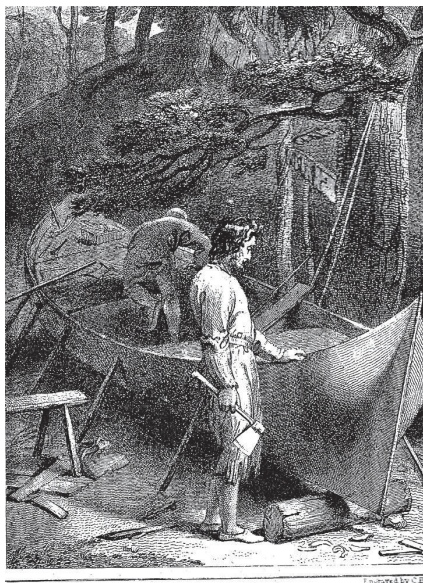


Fig. 4. Thomas Stothard, “Robinson Crusoe and Friday making a boat”. From John Stockdale’s 1790 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Photo: Philip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/stothard/18.html>



Fig. 5. Thomas Stothard, “Robinson Crusoe and Friday making a tent to lodge Friday’s father and the Spaniard”. From John Stockdale’s 1790 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Photo: Philip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/stothard/19.html>

the Spaniard” (Fig. 5). In both illustrations the background dominates and encompasses the human figures. The diagonal placement of the boat amplifies the illusion of three-dimensionality, while the contemplative countenance of Crusoe and his gentle stroke of the boat do not give the idea of a hard worker transforming the natural resources but rather of a pensive solitaire, maybe not even willing to leave the regained paradise. The making of the tent, in turn, foregrounds the idea of a harmonious co-existence. The tent itself is hardly visible and the focus is placed on one of the supporting poles that runs parallel to the surrounding trees. Phillip Allingham points out that Stothard emphasises here the motif of familial relations against a welcoming natural backdrop. As he writes, the scene shows “Europeans fitting into the natural environment rather than simply imposing their will upon it” (Allingham).

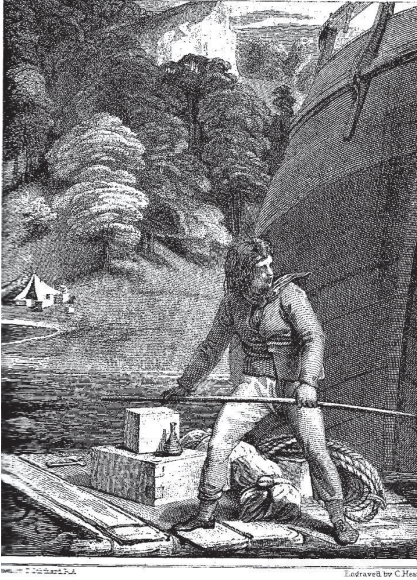


Fig. 6. Thomas Stothard, “Robinson Crusoe upon the raft”. From John Stockdale’s 1790 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Photo: Philip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/stothard/12.html>

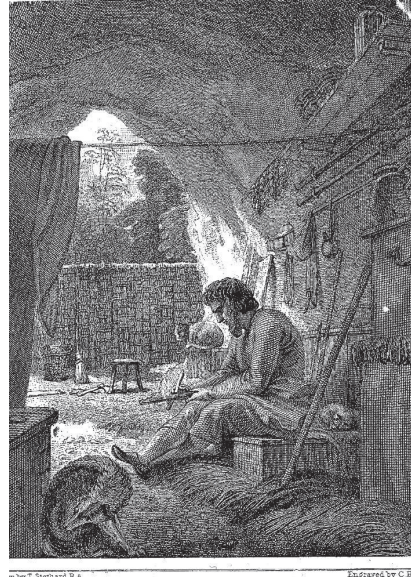


Fig. 7. Thomas Stothard, “Robinson Crusoe at work in his cave”. From John Stockdale’s 1790 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Photo: Philip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/stothard/13.html>

The same strategy of designing the human forms in a way that would imply a blend of the characters and their natural backdrop is used in the already-mentioned illustration of Robinson rescuing Friday (Fig. 3). The classical iconography of *figura serpentinata* is used here to emphasise the harmonious co-presence of man and nature, as the serpentine postures of Robinson and Friday reenact, as it were, the shapes of the bended trees. Stothard may have been applying the theoretical observations of William Hogarth, who argued in his *The Analysis of Beauty* that the waving line – the line of beauty – is derived from the world of nature and supported the argument with a number of examples ranging from trees and flowers to the human body.

Two of Stothard’s engravings sketch a wider panorama of the island. In the scene showing Crusoe retrieving goods from the shipwreck (Fig. 6), the background offers skilfully composed and sentimentally biased scenery, which, as Blewett argues, brings to mind the qualities of a “beautifully landscaped English

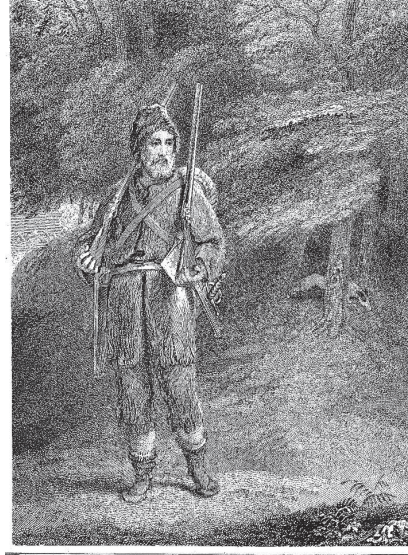


Fig. 8. Thomas Stothard, “Robinson Crusoe in his Island dress”. From John Stockdale’s 1790 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. Photo: Philip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/stothard/14.html>

park” (1995, 52). A similar idea seems to be conveyed by the scene of Crusoe in his cave (Fig. 7), in which the opening displays a view very much in line with the way views were meant to present themselves through the windows of eighteenth-century country houses – an impression created by the framing of the cave’s walls and the palisade, and the curtain drawn to the side.

The island then does become a familiar space, but this is not done through Crusoe’s transformation of it; on the contrary, Stothard’s landscaping implies an approval of the modern view on the garden as a space that should preserve or recreate the naturalness of the natural world⁶. Stothard’s island is not a geographical spot for conquest, but an idealised background for Crusoe’s moderately civilizational ventures, which – importantly – seem to be doing very little damage to the island as such. The myth of civilisation is not rendered here in terms that suggest a thorough restructuring of the setting, as is indeed the case in Defoe’s novel and the early illustrations, but as a process of harmonious co-existence.

The final illustration that merits attention is the one directly alluding to the previously mentioned frontispieces to the early editions of *Crusoe* in English and French. Unlike its models from 1719 and 1720, though, the background

6 As Robert L. Patten puts it, Stothard “responded to developments in landscape gardening and the picturesque. Crusoe’s island was a kind of paradise, and Crusoe’s labors looked easy and successful.” (Patten, 336).

shows no human interference whatsoever. Crusoe's figure merges with the background – an effect achieved by the engraver's use of the same technique for the castaway's outfit and the leaves of the trees behind him. Rather than showing how Robinson transformed the space, the scene seems to imply that the space transformed the man and gave birth to a new “natural” Crusoe.

4. Conclusion

Even if not pictured in an extensive manner, the island in Defoe's novel is by all means given names: the labelling varies from “a horrible desolate Island”, “this dismal unfortunate Island”, and “the Island of Despair” to “this horrid Place”, “this dreadful Place” and “Prison”; this negative evaluation changes in the course of the narrative as Crusoe redefines his condition in the context of God's Providence and asserts his authority on the island, but even then, the changed perspective is offered when the conquered and homely island is juxtaposed with the dangers of the unknown at sea or with Crusoe's recognition of himself as a coloniser and king. Seventy-nine years later, Maria Edgeworth in *Practical Education* (1798) would write “A desert island is a delightful place, to be equalled only by the skating land of the rein-deer, or by the valley of diamonds in the Arabian tales” (Bainbridge, 261). This is a major shift in evaluating the island setting, which proved highly influential for the Romantic Robinsonade in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This “transvaluation”, to use Genette's term (*Palimpsests*, 367), goes back to sentimentalised readings of *Crusoe* and his island which were gathering momentum in the second half of the eighteenth century, aligning the Robinsonade poetics to the rococo iconography of islands as paradise regained.⁷

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| Abstract

JAKUB LIPSKI

Picturing Crusoe's Island: Defoe, Rousseau, Stothard

This article analyses Thomas Stothard's illustrations of *Robinson Crusoe* arguing that the heightened interest in and appreciation of nature in Stothard's set should be seen in the context of sentimental readings of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which, unlike the original, recognised the benefits to a solitary life in natural surroundings. The article traces some fundamental steps in this change of paradigm, first by showing Defoe's reticence about natural beauties, and then by juxtaposing Stothard's contribution with how J.J. Rousseau read and interpreted *Robinson Crusoe*.

Keywords: Daniel Defoe, J.J. Rousseau, Thomas Stothard, *Robinson Crusoe*, art of description, book illustration, nature

| Abstrakt

JAKUB LIPSKI

Obraz wyspy Crusoe: Defoe, Rousseau, Stothard

W niniejszym tekście analizie poddane są wybrane ilustracje Thomasa Stotharda przedstawiające wydarzenia z powieści *Robinson Crusoe* Daniela Defoe. Wyeksponowanie tła naturalnego, wyraźnie widoczne w omawianych ilustracjach, odczytywane jest w kontekście sentymentalnych interpretacji powieści Defoe, które – inaczej niż tekst oryginalny, którego autor wydaje się być nieczuły na piękno natury – zdecydowanie pozytywnie wartościowały samotne życie w harmonii z naturą. Ten aspekt ilustracji Stotharda interpretowany jest w kontekście myśli J.J. Rousseau, a w szczególności tego, jak francuski filozof odczytywał powieść Defoe.

Słowa kluczowe: Daniel Defoe, J.J. Rousseau, Thomas Stothard, *Robinson Crusoe*, sztuka opisu, ilustracja książkowa, natura

| Bio

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