
H-France Review Vol. 15 (June 2015), No. 87

Joseph Acquisto, *Crusoes and Other Castaways in Modern French Literature: Solitary Adventures*. Lanham, Md.: University of Delaware Press, 2012. ix + 271 pp. Works cited and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-61149-406-8.

Review by Christy Wampole, Princeton University.

In his excellent study of French appropriations of the Crusoe story, Joseph Acquisto shows his impressive breadth of knowledge, not only of the French literary canon but of the large body of critical literature on Defoe's novel and its afterlife. Acquisto makes very clear his objective: he wants to trace the transformation of Crusoe-like narratives in France from adventure stories into what he calls introspective, solitary adventures. He claims that, in contrast to British retellings of Crusoe, the French ones tend to focus less on the figure of Friday and on the imperial, colonial aspects of Crusoe's management of the island and more on the potential of this solitary experience to allow thought and reading to become their own kinds of imaginative adventure. Acquisto shows, through a series of well-structured arguments and a strong selection of examples, that the original castaway eventually turned inward over time and became the embodiment of a certain meditative sensitivity. Unlike Defoe's character, the later castaways were less occupied with reshaping their external circumstances and more occupied with making good use of their minds and their readerly intuitions.

In his introduction, which provides a strong overview and helpful orientation to the reader, Acquisto traces the contours of his project, giving a full account of existing literature on the topic and illustrating what is unique about his findings. It is clear from this survey that he has mastered the material, not only in the French-language tradition but in English as well, which is, I believe, essential in any study of the afterlife of Defoe's story. He creates a fine balance between literary, cultural, and theoretical analysis and shows competency in both detailed readings and panoramic contextualization. Acquisto's emphasis on what his book does *not* try to do is very beneficial to the reader, as it sets distinct expectations of what he hopes to accomplish. He makes clear, for example, that he has no intention of providing an exhaustive account of all French reworkings of Crusoe, a cultural history of the castaway, or a study of what he calls the "'domestic' or 'idyllic' castaway narrative" (p. 5). Instead, he uses the term "solitary adventures" to describe the kinds of stories that he has taken up as a corpus. He defines the term in this way: "At the most general level they all feature some kind of castaway figure in isolation, but that isolation could be geographical or psychological, or both; and it could be lived either in actual solitude or, in some cases, within a group. Solitary adventures participate in, without being reduced to, many other genres, including adventure novels, *robinsonnades*, and *voyages imaginaires*. They all feature some kind of encounter with an other [...]" (pp. 4-5). Acquisto argues that the solitary adventure is the endpoint for Defoe's castaway, who, in the original iteration, directed most of his attentions outward rather than inward.

He illustrates this claim through a wide range of French authors. In the first chapter, he begins with Rousseau's restriction that the only book Émile should read at first is *Robinson Crusoe*. Claiming that it was more the *idea* of the text than the reality of its details that fascinated Rousseau, Acquisto shows the ways in which Rousseau reads naively, customizing Defoe's work for his own purposes. He goes on to analyze Balzac's *Louis Lambert*, suggesting that this book was a pivotal moment in the afterlife of *Crusoe*

as a thought-as-adventure narrative. The second chapter focuses on the nineteenth century and catalogs many of the moral aspects of the popular *robinsonnade* of the period, particularly several works by Jules Verne. Acquisto argues that “with Verne’s novel [*L’île mystérieuse*] the tradition of the nineteenth-century *robinsonnade* has reached its maturity and old age” (p. 118). Chapter three analyzes the subsequent shift toward a more introspective and solitary hero for whom reading plays an increasingly important role. The physical industriousness of the Crusoe avatars is replaced by a cognitive, meditative, or readerly industriousness. This transition allows Acquisto to argue in chapter four that poetry is a particularly apt place for the hero’s inward turn to be put into words. Using the poetry of Dierx, Saint-John Perse, Jammes, and Paul Valéry, he argues that “*fin de siècle* poets played a crucial role in redefining the solitary adventure as it was to take shape in the twentieth-century serious novel” (p. 18). Chapter five focuses on the most important Crusoe retelling in France in the twentieth century: Michel Tournier’s masterful *Vendredi, ou les limbes du Pacifique*. Acquisto counters the most common readings of the novel, claiming that “Tournier’s fiction is just as much an idealization of a certain approach to morality as his nineteenth-century precursors” (p. 19). The sixth and final chapter of the book explores post-Tournier solitary adventures by writers such as Compère, Poulin, Hervé, Cadiot, and Barilier, who recasts the Crusoe story as a reality television series, much like *Survivor*. In the conclusion, Acquisto notes the strange fate of the tale, which began as a popular adventure story known to children and adults alike and which has ended up finding a home in more serious and introspective literature. He concludes, “With this shift in the cultural imagination comes, paradoxically perhaps, the potential to open up the solitary adventure even further, as it will not depend, for its legibility, on a certain culturally predominant interpretation of the castaway, whether it be Defoe’s adventurous hero or Rousseau’s revision of him, the colonialist, the founder of capitalist economics, the wayward sinner, or any other of the many visions of the castaway that we have seen operating in these many texts” (p. 259). Using rich, wide-ranging, and well-selected source texts throughout the book, Acquisto manages to build an extremely convincing genealogical account of the shift from the castaway as a popular adventure character to a more philosophical, readerly figure.

I find the chapter on poetry particularly original, given that one tends to think of Crusoe and castaways that resemble him as somehow inextricably bound to the novel genre. Acquisto successfully shows that only through poetry is the figure given a fuller introspective life, thus paving the way for a centripetal reworking of the solitary character. This solitude is transformed by the poets into a condition of meditative possibility rather than a cause for despair. Unlike most of the novelists of their time, poets allow “the reader to conceive of thought as action” (p. 143). Acquisto continues, describing the new castaway refashioned by *fin-de-siècle* French poets, “The new solitary adventurer is a reader and writer, an observer and thinker” (p. 154). The original Crusoe was a man of action; his literary descendants, people of contemplation. This disposal of the body in favor of the mind simultaneously moves Crusoe from the realm of popular fiction to a more serious, philosophically engaged literature.

Acquisto’s book will be significant for a wide variety of scholars: generalists in the field of French literature, particularly the novel and poetry; comparativists who study French and British literature; and specialists of the *robinsonnade*, the adventure novel, the philosophical novel, the *voyage imaginaire*, and philosophical poetry. His highly readable prose complements his well-rounded arguments. The book has a strong theoretical apparatus and makes use of important critical contributions, such as Margaret Cohen’s *The Novel and the Sea*, Hans Blumenberg’s *Shipwreck with Spectator*, and Derrida’s close reading of *Crusoe*. Talented as both a generalist and specialist, Acquisto creates a compelling narrative of the transformation of Defoe’s character into the introspective castaway he becomes throughout the twentieth century in France. The relevance of his project is unquestionable.

Acquisto answers larger questions through his book as well. For example, he answers in part why the castaway figure has such a captivating power over readers, what happens when a figure of popular literature becomes a figure of high literature, and how introspection can be depicted through poetry and prose. Clearly, Crusoe remains a pivotal figure in European literature and culture and will continue to

be recast as a new kind of castaway again and again. It is for this reason that Acquisto's book is an important contribution to the field of French literary studies and to literary studies at large. I highly recommend it for readers at all stages—from undergraduate and graduate students to professors and researchers—as it is both accessible and extremely learned and is proficient in its synthesis of rather complex problems of genre and literary genealogy. This book is a significant one.

Christy Wampole
Princeton University
cwampole@princeton.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172