


2-28-2017

Picturing *Robinson Crusoe*: Edward Gordon Craig, Daniel Defoe and Image-Text Inquiry

Eric T. Haskell
Scripps College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/mimejournal>

 Part of the [Book and Paper Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), [Printmaking Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Haskell, Eric T. (2017) "Picturing *Robinson Crusoe*: Edward Gordon Craig, Daniel Defoe and Image-Text Inquiry," *Mime Journal*: Vol. 26, Article 10. DOI: 10.5642/mimejournal.20172601.10
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/mimejournal/vol26/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mime Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Picturing *Robinson Crusoe*: Edward Gordon Craig, Daniel Defoe, and Image-Text Inquiry

Eric T. Haskell

Edward Gordon Craig's illustrations for *Robinson Crusoe* present an intriguing yet uncommon case of image-text inquiry. Although his Cranach Press *Hamlet* is universally considered to be a *chef d'oeuvre* of modernity in the landscape of twentieth-century book arts, Craig's woodcuts for Defoe have gone largely unnoticed, even in the scholarly community. But if *Hamlet* was Craig's passion, *Robinson Crusoe* was his obsession. The saga of Defoe's protagonist who departed from York to eventually find himself stranded for twenty-eight years on a deserted island resonated profoundly with Craig who early on identified himself with Crusoe, tentatively agreed to illustrate the book for Count Harry Kessler in the late 1920s, and then spent the rest of his life producing the images for a volume that would have to wait until 1979 to be published posthumously under the direction of his son. This present investigation is two-fold. It seeks not only to consider the terrain of interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe* in the arts but, more importantly, to shed new light on the signification of Craig's illustrations as they chart new ways of imagining and imaging Defoe's masterpiece.

Daniel Defoe was sixty years old when he wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, roughly the same age at which Craig created the bulk of his illustrations in the late 1930s. The novel was originally published in London by W. Taylor in 1719 with a single illustration, a frontispiece by an unknown artist, engraved by John Clark and John Pine, and featuring the protagonist dressed in goatskins. An overnight success, the novel was reprinted four times within that year. By the beginning of the twentieth century, few books other than the Bible had known a more prolific career in the history of printed editions. Because it was the original castaway novel, a precursor (if you will) to a host of sagas most recently alluded to in the film *Life of Pi*, *Robinson Crusoe* has also been the source for a seemingly endless panorama of ventures in the fine arts (painting, works on paper, sculpture), in the performing arts (plays, pantomimes, operas, film, television), and in the decorative arts (bookbinding, ceramics). A brief tour of the horizon of these artistic activities allows us a glimpse into the post-publication visual universe of *Robinson Crusoe*. Consider, for example, Charles Leslie Robert's painting (1858), Walter Crane's watercolor (1909), or Charles Samuel Keene's graphite sketch (1847), or even the life-sized sculpture (1885) by Thomas Stuart Burnett of Alexander Selkirk, whose real-life adventure served as the model for Defoe's story. In the performing arts, there is Jacques Offenbach's 1867 opera, a pantomime featuring a rather curious Robert Hale at London's Royal Alhambra Theatre circa 1915, the 1916 musical starring Al Jolson, and an impressive panoply of filmic versions, including Luis Buñuel's 1954 rendition. However, Paramount Pictures' 1964 science fiction thriller, *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, no doubt deserves the Oscar for having deviated the most from Defoe's original story. The world of television and video games, such as Newgrounds' *Robinson Crusoe: The Game*, has also cashed in on Defoe in the least memorable ways imaginable. And finally, the

decorative arts have demonstrated their passion for the tale in an infinite assortment of objects from wallpaper, to ceramics, and bookbindings. Last but not least, Robinson Crusoe sunglasses, manufactured by Oliver Goldsmith Eyewear in 1962, seem useful for all prospective castaways headed for deserted islands under tropical suns.

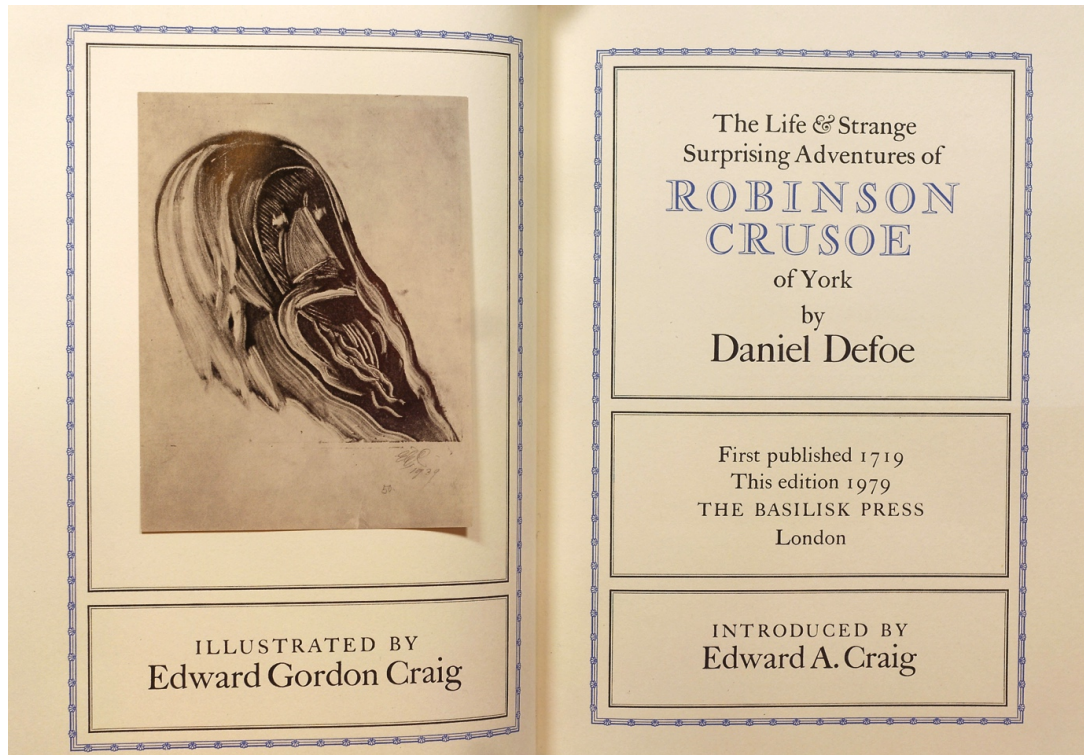


Figure 1. Title page of Daniel Defoe, *The Life & Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York*, illustrated by Edward Gordon Craig. The Basilisk Press, 1979. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Of course, not every retelling of Defoe adheres strictly to the author's text. Notable mis-tellings, such as Agnus MacDonall's turn-of-the-century painting (ND), include Crusoe's anachronistic discovery *par excellence* of a crate of Jello on his island retreat. More often, however, the misreadings have to do with the introduction of female companionship into scenarios as different as United Artists' 1932 film, starring Douglas Fairbanks in one of his few "talkie" movies, or Pierce Brosnan's 1996 caper, which received rave reviews from the infamous film rating site, Rotten Tomatoes. Both demonstrate Hollywood's eternal search for sex in the cinema rather than for accurate adaptations of great literature.

However, it is in the book arts, and specifically in the realm of the illustrated book, that *Robinson Crusoe* has had its most impressive impact. Over 125 artists have pictured the novel. As we have seen, the first edition's frontispiece was geared to an adult readership commensurate with Defoe's text. Prominent nineteenth-century artists, such as George Cruickshank, J.J. Grandville, Gavarni, and John Everett Millais continued in this vein. However, by the end of the century and into the early years of the twentieth century, children's literature had enthusiastically adopted Defoe. Willy Pogany's circa 1914 illustrations typify the genre and demonstrate its appeal as an adventure story even for the nursery. Of the numerous examples produced during this period, many remain anonymous. What we might call the golden age of *Robinson Crusoe* illustrations, however, dates from 1900 to 1950. During the almost 300 years since the publication of Defoe's novel, over fifty of the 125 illustrated editions appeared during this specific period. Their general tone seems to be situated halfway between an adult and a young-adult viewership. The Rhead Brothers' edition from 1900 and N.C. Wyeth's images from 1920 epitomize the spirit of this golden age. When one considers visual representations of *Robinson Crusoe*, these are the ones that most frequently come to mind, not only because of their intrinsic beauty as works of art but, more importantly, because they assist the reader in seamlessly following the plot of Defoe's story. Thus, what the vast majority of

these illustrated editions have in common is that they are fundamentally narrative in nature. They approach the text with the explicit desire of rendering into visual terms precisely what is presented by the author. Thus, their primary function follows the traditional mode of picturing literature in what we might call the “CliffsNotes style.” Pushed to its limit, this “style” might culminate in such version as Sam Citron’s graphic novel from 2011 in which image entirely eclipses text.

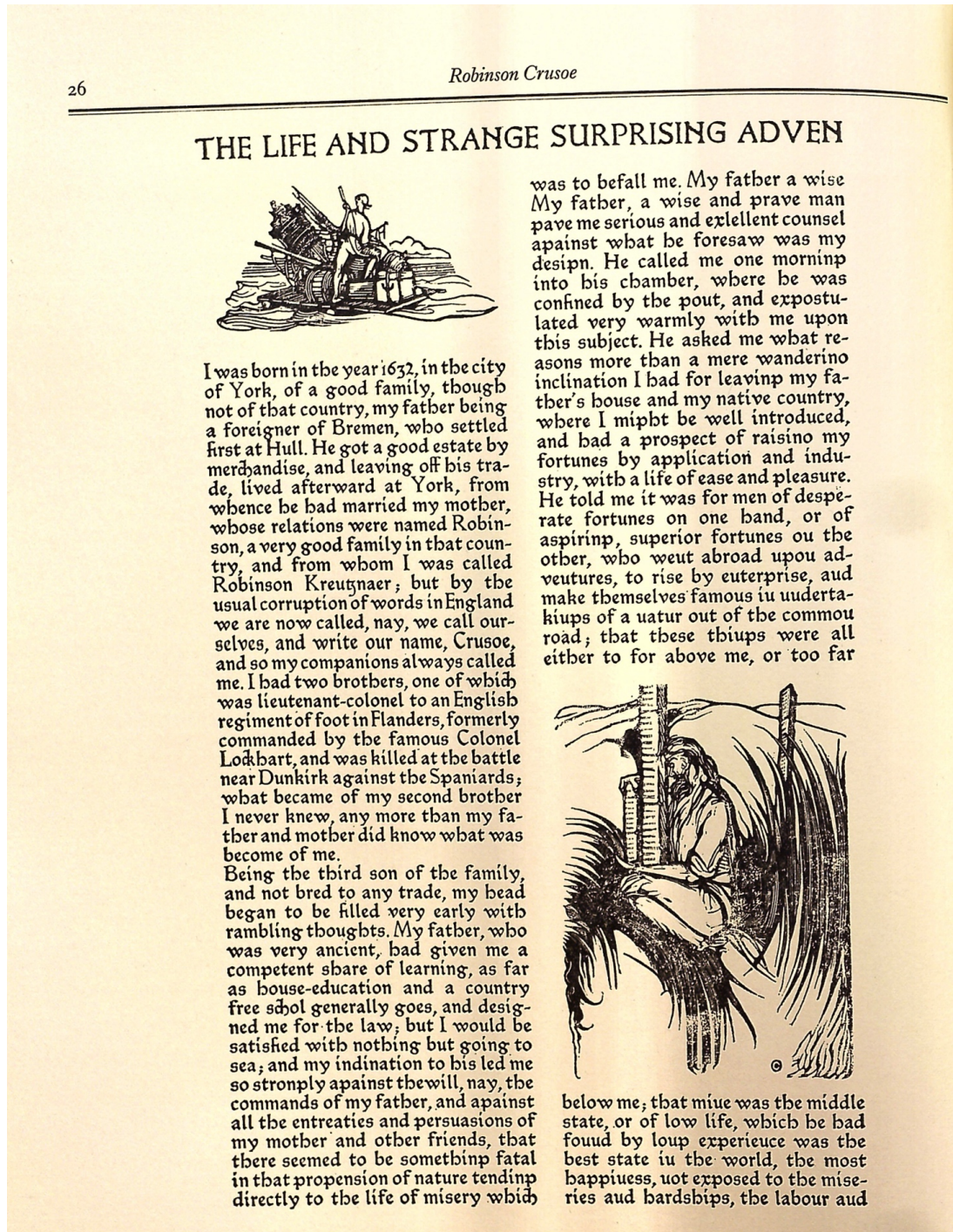


Figure 2. Edward Gordon Craig, trial proof for rejected page design. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 26. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

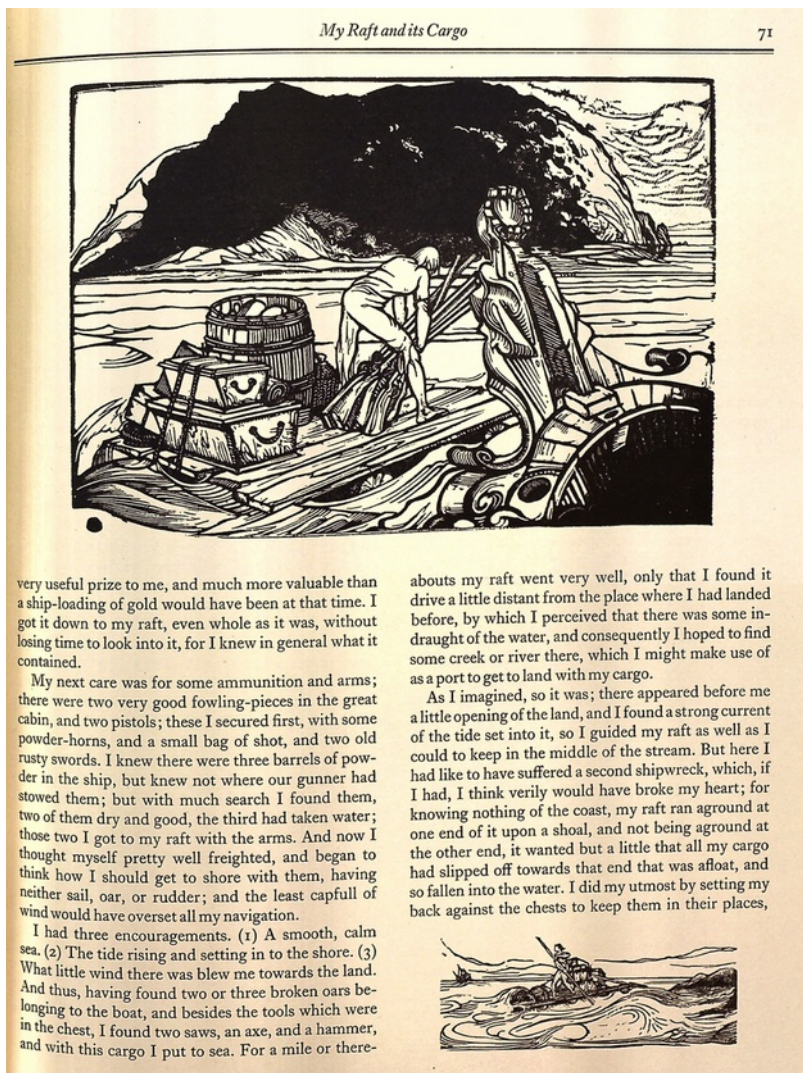


Figure 3. Edward Gordon Craig, woodcut illustration. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 71. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Edward Gordon Craig breaks new ground in his interpretation of *Robinson Crusoe*. His goal is to transcend traditional illustration in order to arrive at a psychological illumination of Defoe's text. In doing so, he goes beyond the figurative to a quasi-abstract vision of the novel. From 1924 to 1962, Craig worked intermittently on this illustrative suite, which was printed by the John Roberts Press and published by the Basilisk Press in 1979, twelve years after his death. Limited to 515 copies, this edition of Defoe contained Craig's black and white woodcuts, along with an informative account of the artist's nearly four-decade project written by his son, Edward ("Teddy") A. Craig. Since his father was deceased, Teddy made the pictorial selection out of a host of blocks that Craig had made during his lifetime. Teddy's sister, Helen, placed the images within Defoe's text according to her recollections of her father's wishes. Text and illustrations were arranged in double-column mode.

The genesis of the book is notable; it reflects Craig's lifelong zeal for Defoe, which as we have said bordered on the obsessional. The actor-artist first read the novel in 1894 at the age of twenty-two while studying acting at the London Lyceum. In his *Daybooks* entry for November 27 of that year, Craig writes with enthusiasm: "Read *Robinson Crusoe* for the first time: ENCHANTMENT" (Craig 12). Craig's first efforts at illustrating the text date from 1924-30, in the wake of the success of his collaboration with Count Kessler on the Cranach Press *Hamlet*. With two of Craig's woodcuts, Kessler prepared a trial page for *Robinson Crusoe* fashioned after the *Hamlet* template [Figure 2], but the typeface was, according to Craig, "too heavy for an eighteenth-century subject," and the project was soon abandoned due to the publisher's

failing health (Craig 23). The second and most intense phase of woodcut production for *Robinson Crusoe* came in 1938 when Craig moved to the Parisian suburb of St. Germain-en-Laye. As World War II broke out, the artist's depression was acute. In Defoe's text he sought solace. Teddy postulates that Crusoe helped Craig cope with the loneliness he felt as an Englishman in Occupied France. Robinson Crusoe, he notes, "always had a unique position among his special friends and advisors" (Craig 11). Craig writes: "What is it [that] attracts us so much to this lonely figure who is monarch of all he surveys and is so much alone? Is it not our desire to be alone ... to be alone at last? And we experience all that through him—for we become Robinson ... Is it that we recognize ourself (sic) in Crusoe ... " (Craig 12). About his father, Teddy further recounts that "he read it over and over again ... and in the silence of the reading he entered the silence of the island—and became Robinson Crusoe. He achieved a kind of peace that we inherit in some fifty of his finest blocks" (Craig 12).

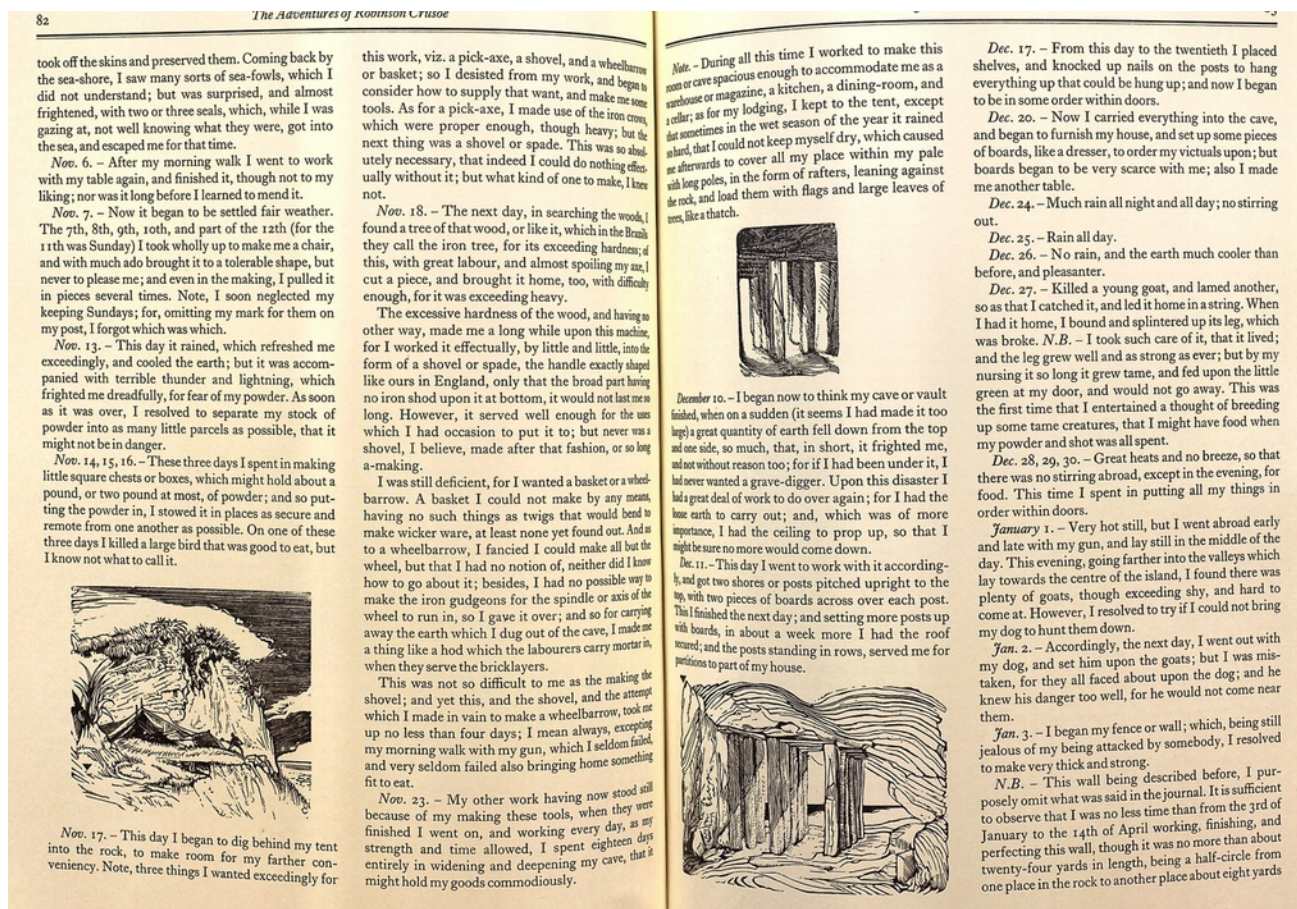


Figure 4. Edward Gordon Craig, woodcut illustration. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, pages 82-83. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Craig's first illustrations for *Robinson Crusoe* were primarily narrative. This is not astounding when we think that Craig carried with him throughout his life a copy of Defoe illustrated by the celebrated George Cruikshank, and these illustrations were entirely narrative. Craig's first attempts include what the artist called his "raft pictures" [Figure 3], as well as images of his various cave retreats [Figure 4]. A master stage designer, Craig seems anxious to set the scene so that the island scenario can unfold. Other woodblocks, such as "Robinson Reading the Bible" and the discovery of the footprint, follow closely the habitual stock scenes that traditional illustrators had always pictured from the novel (Defoe, Basilisk 116-17). A radical change occurred, however, when Craig suddenly notes, "Why echo Defoe's words—how can there be anything in that? But then if we don't do that, how [to] illustrate the book?" (Defoe, Basilisk 47). This revelation irrevocably changed the way in which the artist would continue his quest of

illustrating the text. In sum, it constituted an “aha moment” that seemingly spearheaded the shift from mere representation to the exceptional precinct of picturing ideas rather than mere plot. This abrupt transition curiously coincided with Craig’s discovery of a wooden mask [Figure 5] in a Parisian shop of the Quartier Latin. He immediately purchased it, and his project gelled. A sort of talisman for Craig, the mask pushed him past the figurative into the realm of abstraction so central to our concerns.



Figure 5. Anonymous wooden mask. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 25. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Until that point in time, Craig relates, “I could not see Robinson Crusoe” (Defoe, *Basilisk* 44). Suddenly, his departure from simple storytelling manifested itself in the form of a suite of portraits of Crusoe that constitute a gallery of theatrical masks. The frontispiece for the volume clearly demonstrates the influence of the wooden mask on Craig’s artistic inspiration [Figure 1]. Here, the nose of the mask morphs into a sail while the lips act as a boat moving across the waters of the face. Craig articulates the fact that Crusoe’s physiognomy is distinguishable from all others because of his twenty-eight-year-long sojourn on the island. Since it is the sail and ship that symbolically transport the protagonist to what he first calls his “island prison,” the artist references them directly (Defoe, *Basilisk* 87).

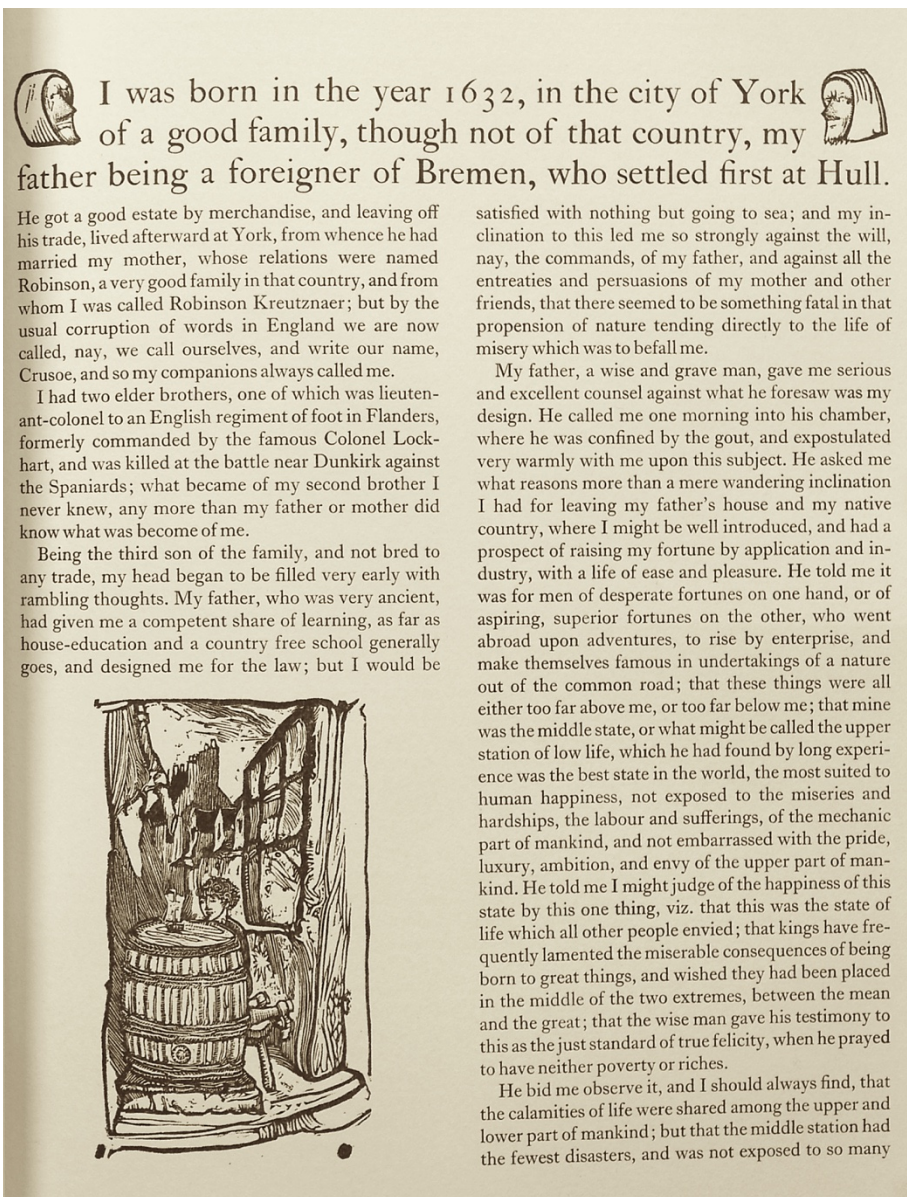


Figure 6. Edward Gordon Craig, woodblock illustration. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 52. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

On page one of the volume, the first line of the text is cleverly flanked by a pair of thumbnail masks, which face one another [Figure 6]. Although the young Robinson featured below only contemplates his future voyage as he launches a tiny sailboat across water that has accumulated on the top of a barrel in the streets of York, Craig prefigures the real voyage ahead that will change the lad's life forever. With the artist's focus on the solitude Crusoe experiences once on the island, he demonstrates that his interest lies primarily in the tribulations surrounding the isolation of the castaway and the crippling effect they exert upon his psyche. The series of portrait-masks that follows thus serve as a barometer of Robinson Crusoe's interior landscape. Exasperated at the outset [Figure 7], these portraits demonstrate, in rapid succession, the various stages of the human condition: fright, bewilderment, loneliness, denial, hopelessness, oblivion, anxiety, despair, and finally total depression [Figure 8]. The triangular nose-sail is the single most prominent defining feature of these portraits. It remains ever-present throughout the series. We see it when Crusoe sleeps (Defoe, Basilisk, 57) and even when his physiognomy espouses that of the natural world with which he has become one [Figure 9]. This announces his definitive isolation from humankind. When he runs out of ink and realizes that he will no longer be able to keep his journal, his anguish is at its

apex [Figure 10]. Craig pictures him sullen and encased in a tomb-like structure, a metaphor of his imprisonment on the island. As a suite, the portrait-masks record the evolving transformations of Crusoe's move from societal order to primitive disorder and from civilization back to nature in a sort of Rousseau-esque dirge.

From Defoe's text, Craig derives the essence of Crusoe's path of physiological disarray. His portrait-masks are akin to the Stations of the Cross in the protagonist's downhill spiral to despair. Indeed, there is an almost religious fervor in the descent which echoes across the suite in an ominous silence. Crusoe states: "I seemed banished from human society ... I was alone, circumscribed by the boundless ocean, cut off from mankind, and condemned to what I call silent life" (Defoe, *Sterling* 143). Crusoe dubs his new home the "Island of Despair," calling it a "miserable" and "dreadful" place (63, 70, 80). All of this is clearly mirrored in the portrait-masks, which impeccably reflect his state of mind as it grows more and more despondent. The viewer of these illustrations needs not see what Crusoe sees simply because mere contemplation of these portraits constitutes the most accurate revelation imaginable of the protagonist's tortured soul. As his existentialist drama unfolds in Defoe's text, Craig pictures it to perfection.

In his rendering of the mask series, Craig sees himself as an actor-illustrator. "An actor," he writes, "makes gestures and movements that help develop the mood of the play, but these are his own ideas put against the backdrop of the play" (Defoe, *Basilisk* 21). For Craig, there is an intrinsic link between the art of acting and the art of illustrating. To be lasting in their impact, both require more than simply aping text or copying stage directions verbatim. Rather, Craig operates in an uncommon precinct where understatement and insinuation reign over mere re-telling of the textual entity. Thus, the hallmark of these images resides in their ability to project onto the paginal plane the psychological disarray, the emotional destitution, and agony of solitude experienced by the castaway.



Figure 7. Edward Gordon Craig, woodblock proof. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 76. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

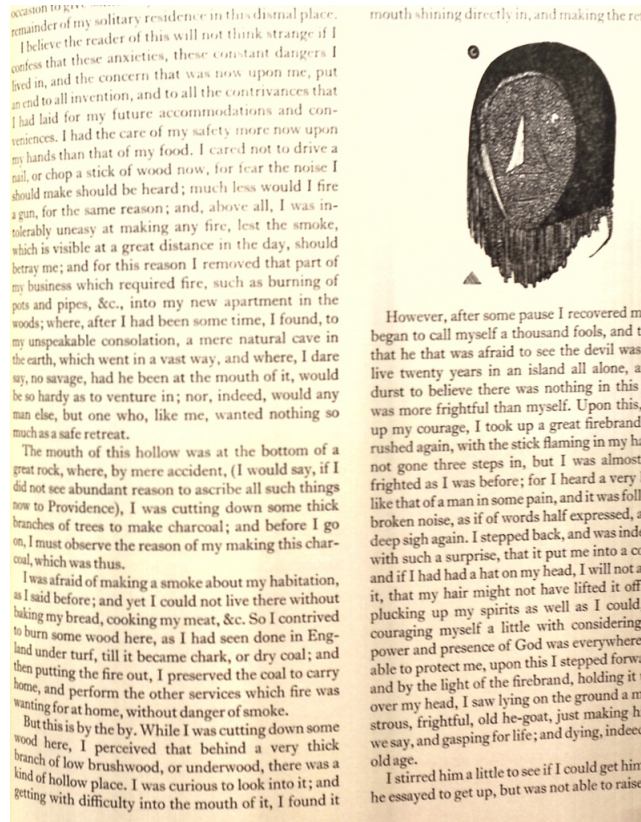


Figure 8. Edward Gordon Craig, woodcut illustration. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 115. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

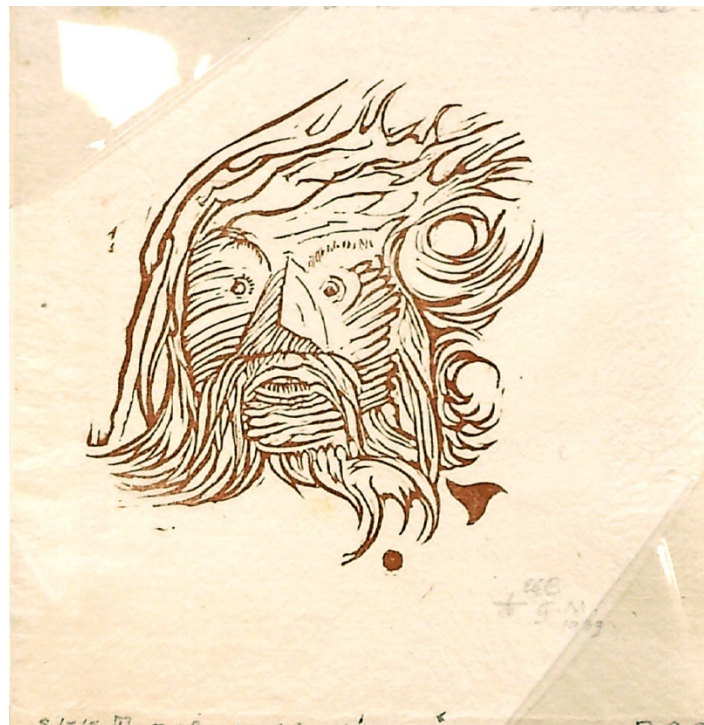


Figure 9. Edward Gordon Craig, woodblock proof. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 119. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Craig's interest in Defoe's novel has an unusual slant. His focus is almost entirely on Robinson Crusoe's sojourn on the island. Between the beginning of the text and the shipwreck, there are a total of three letter decorations and one small illustration. Similarly, as soon as others arrive on the island, Craig's interest wanes. He has completed his self-reflective task, and there are only a few minor woodcuts between that point in the saga and the end of the book. He never pictures any other human being in his suite, not even Crusoe's much-illustrated man Friday. Clearly, the artist's self-identification with Crusoe is pivotal. In fact, it is the very *raison d'être* of his obsession with Defoe's text. What eventually transpires, of course, is an evolution in the protagonist as he transitions from despair to delight in his new hermetic life in which he is the self-proclaimed king of the island. Suddenly, his cave becomes his "castle" (Defoe, Sterling, 180). However, if Craig does not choose to picture this shift, he does recognize it in the witty poem he pens as follows:

Our birthdays ...
 Rarely does Fate give us much a present
 on this day of days.
 ...
 But Robinson on his birthday (his 28th)
 was actually given a whole Island by Fate.
 Ponder this well. (Craig 13)

In conclusion, the Cranach *Hamlet's* success was due to Craig's ability to evoke a sense of place using his expertise as a brilliant stage-crafting magician to illuminate the *clair-obscur* of Elsinore across the acts of Shakespeare's tragedy and thus create the genius of the place. Reflected in a series of portrait-masks, *Robinson Crusoe's* sense of place is a psychological rendering rather than a scenic one. There is no architectonic stagecraft here, but rather a suite of masks that record the evolving inter-configurations of the protagonist's mental disarray as he faces a life of solitary confinement. More than any other illustrator to date, Edward Gordon Craig moves the reader-viewer into a new terrain where the plot is seconded by a specific focus on the interior landscape of the protagonist. There is indeed some traditional retelling in his work, but almost half of his illustrations are portrait-masks. This new dimension points to the modernity of Craig's vision as an artist. Through him, an early eighteenth-century text is revived in potent ways, shedding new light on an almost 300-year-old literary masterpiece. Thus, in his peerless avant-garde fashion, Craig maps new visual terrain, leaves an indelible mark on Defoe, and reminds us of the intrinsic value of book illustration as textual illumination.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay benefited greatly from invaluable insights provided by my colleagues Thomas Leabhart (Resident Artist and Professor of Theatre at Pomona College), Judy Harvey Sahak (Sally Preston Swan Librarian and Director of Denison Library at Scripps College), and Carrie Marsh (Director of Special Collections and Libraries at Honnold Library, Claremont). It is dedicated to my Pomona College professor and mentor *par excellence*, Leonard C. Pronko, Professor Emeritus of Theatre, Pomona College.

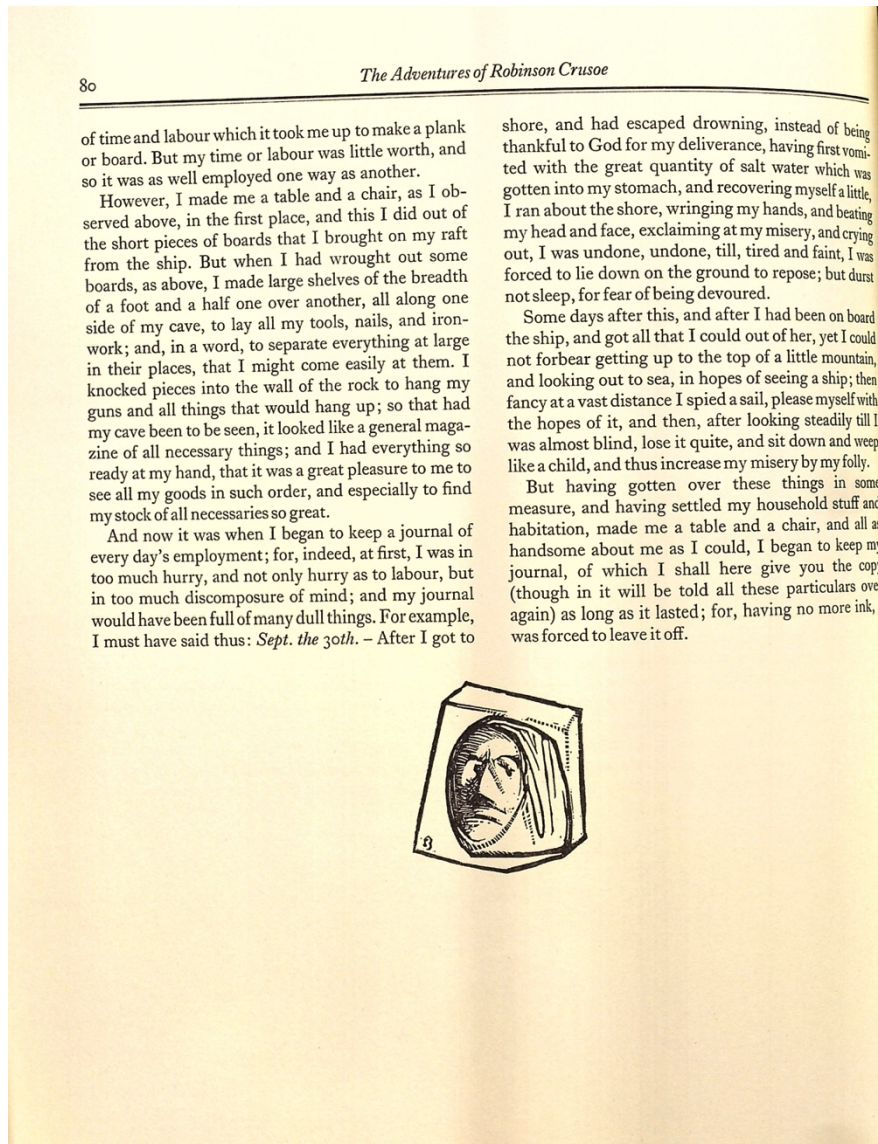


Figure 10. Edward Gordon Craig, woodcut illustration. *Robinson Crusoe*, The Basilisk Press, 1979, page 80. Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

WORKS CITED

- Craig, Edward A. Introduction to *The Life & Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York*. By Daniel Defoe. The Basilisk Press, 1979.
- Defoe, Daniel. *The Life & Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York*. Illustrated by Edward Gordon Craig. The Basilisk Press, 1979.
- Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*. Illustrated by Scott McKowen. Sterling Children's Books, 2011.

Eric T. Haskell is professor of French Studies & Interdisciplinary Humanities and Director of the Clark Humanities Museum at Scripps College, Claremont University Center, California. His publications (two books, twelve exhibition catalogues, forty scholarly articles) in English and French cover a wide range of topics from 19th-century poetry and image-text inquiry to garden history. A frequent guest lecturer, Dr. Haskell has delivered over 550 public lectures in twenty-eight states and twelve foreign countries. He has been knighted by the French Minister of National Education as *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques* and by the French Minister of Culture as *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.