

MYTHS OF MODERN INDIVIDUALISM

*Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan
Robinson Crusoe*

IAN WATT



Canto

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Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe was all but completed when Ian Watt's health deteriorated in 1994 after a serious operation. At the time of his hospitalization, he was working on final revisions in response to careful and discerning readings of the manuscript by M. H. Black and others.

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Preface

This book, alas, began more than forty years ago. I was married and had two children, and my fellowship at St. John's College, Cambridge, was due to run out in little more than a year. I had then been working endlessly, but not very satisfactorily, on a book about the effects of the alphabet and printing. The only published result of those labors is the article in collaboration with Jack Goody entitled "The Consequences of Literacy" eventually published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963).

Turning thoughts of my future in other directions, I suddenly came up with the notion of no fewer than three books. The first was a reworking of my fellowship dissertation for St. John's College, "The Reading Public and the Rise of the Novel": This was eventually published in 1957 as *The Rise of the Novel*. The second was a book about Conrad. Ever since as a boy I had cycled from Dover to Bishopsbourne to see the house where Conrad died, I'd always somehow assumed that one day I would write a book about him. That proved to be a tall order, but I published the first volume, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, in 1979. I then decided that since the myth book – I thought – was more or less complete in my mind, I would try that before doing the second volume on Conrad. My assumption was that the myth book would be easier, and quicker to finish. I was, of course, wrong.

I started writing the present text around 1980, at about the time I became the first director of the Stanford Humanities Center, and I kept working on it while in the meantime I published a study of Conrad's *Nostromo* and contributed a long introduction to Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* for the Cambridge University Press critical edition, both in 1988. What kept me going on the myth book was a sense that I was on new and fascinating terrain that had never been treated before in quite the comparative and historical fashion I intended.

Preface

That, roughly, is my story. It goes without saying that to treat the idea of the “myths of modern individualism” comprehensively would be an impossibly large task. There are many other modern myths, from Joan of Arc to Frankenstein; and quite apart from that, my chosen four have had an enormous number of versions, and have been the objects of an enormous amount of scholarship. So I have had to be highly selective, and to hurry over – even completely omit – many things.

I am not trying to be definitive: The book is essentially an amateur’s study, and it is addressed not to the scholar but to the general reader. I have, perhaps unnecessarily, translated all but the easiest and briefest passages from the French, German, and Spanish originals (translations, throughout, are my own unless otherwise stated); and I have provided documentation of a modest kind. Perhaps I should mention that during the writing and revision I have often groaned at the sight of excellent notes I did not think there was room to include. And I must also add that the fact that a work is not mentioned should not be taken to mean I have not read it. I think that the general idea is interesting and important, and I hope that others, especially professional comparatists and historians, will take up the tale more satisfactorily.

Some of the material was given as the Alexander Lectures at University College, Toronto, or as talks to the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, to the Third International Association of Sicilian Anthropological Studies at Palermo, or to the University of Houston, the University of Hawaii, or the National University of Australia.

My thanks to the good friends who both read and helpfully criticized parts of the manuscript, notably Tom Moser, Dave Riggs, Jack Goody, Joseph Frank, Fred Crews, Tony Tanner, and Bliss Carnochan. I also received invaluable help from people who managed both to decipher the manuscript and then to type it: Virginia Schrader, Mary Lou McCourt, and Meg Minto. My greatest debt, as ever, is to my wife, Ruth Watt.

Introduction

In April 1951, I published an essay called "*Robinson Crusoe* as a myth." It began:

We do not usually think of *Robinson Crusoe* as a novel. Defoe's first full-length work of fiction seems to fall more naturally into place with Faust, Don Juan, and Don Quixote, the great myths of our civilization. What these myths are about is fairly easy to say. Their basic plots, their enduring images, all exhibit a single-minded pursuit by the protagonist of one of the characteristic aspirations of Western man. Each of them embodies an *arete* and a *hubris*, an exceptional prowess and a vitiating excess, in spheres of action that are particularly important in our culture. Don Quixote, the impetuous generosity and the limiting blindness of chivalric idealism; Don Juan, pursuing and at the same time tormented by the idea of boundless experience of women; Faustus, the great knower, whose curiosity, always unsatisfied, causes him to be damned.¹

I would not write about those figures in the same way now. My impression of Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Faustus in the *Crusoe* article was a muddled subliminal form of the Romantic reinterpretation of myths created much earlier. I no longer think that the early Faustus is damned for mere curiosity. I am not sure that Don Juan is actually tormented. I am not even certain that Don Quixote is particularly effective in his generosity. But I still see Don Quixote, Don Juan, Faust, and Robinson Crusoe as powerful myths with a particular resonance for our individualist society.

Recently I discovered that the Spanish diplomat and scholar Salvador de Madariaga had hit on part of the same idea. He wrote, in *The Genius of Spain* (Oxford, 1923):

Let the four greatest characters of European Literature be named. Hamlet and Faust will be of the number; the other two will have to come from

1 "*Robinson Crusoe* as a myth," *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951), pp. 95-119.

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Spain: Don Quixote and Don Juan, and they are the greatest of the four. Hamlet is too much of a dream and Faust too much of an idea. But Don Quixote and Don Juan are men of flesh and blood, and they will live and grow as long as men are moved by love of justice or love of women.

It was gratifying to find someone who had put three of my four together in that perspective. But, of course, his fourth was Hamlet. This could, no doubt, be justified by the psychological wealth that Shakespeare put into his character; but in terms of a worldwide fame among all classes of people, Hamlet would not quite do. His fame was worldwide, certainly, but, I think, academic rather than popular. Robinson Crusoe seemed to fill the bill much better as a popular myth.

My aim in this book is to provide a historical study. Most myths known in the Western world are based on biblical or classical figures and stories. I can still remember being excited by the fact that Faust, Don Quixote, and Don Juan were neither classical nor biblical, but modern creations; moreover, they had all appeared in literature during a period of some thirty or forty years – from Faustus in the 1587 *Faustbuch* to Don Juan in the play *El Burlador*, which, though published in 1630, was probably written between 1612 and 1616. This was the period historians have called the Counter-Reformation, when the forces of tradition and authority rallied against the new aspirations of Renaissance individualism in religion, in daily life, and in literature and art. The Counter-Reformation was especially prominent in Spain, where the medieval order continued much longer than elsewhere – and where Don Quixote and Don Juan both originated.²

Faustus, Don Quixote, and Don Juan are all characterized by the positive, individualistic drives of the Renaissance; they wish to go their own way, regardless of others. But they find themselves in conflict, ideologically and politically, with the forces of the Counter-Reformation; and they are punished for it. Sinners, of course, are always more interesting than saints.

2 See Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.

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Robinson Crusoe can be seen as an articulate spokesman of the new economic, religious, and social attitudes that succeeded the Counter-Reformation; and in the context of developing individualism, his later date of creation – 1719 – strengthens the general argument of the book. The complete change in general perception of all four myths, which occurred in the Romantic period, provides a double confirmation. With the increasing dominance of the new individualism, the punitive elements in the Counter-Reformation plots were removed; and a more symbolic, indeed transcendental, view of the myths changed the way all four characters were understood. In the nineteenth century all four spread across the Western world and thus attained a universal and international status.

Two comments on the nature of that status. First, it is obviously less sacred, less authoritative, and less universally accepted than myths in the societies of non-literate people. None of the four quite fits Malinowski's description of myth, which, he writes, "expresses, enhances, and codifies belief . . . it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation of an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wish."³ But, second, the figures considered in this book have certainly acquired a status slightly different from that of the characters of most novels and plays: Faustus, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Robinson Crusoe all exist in a kind of limbo where they are seen not as actual historical persons perhaps but not merely as invented fictions either.

In this book, I do not use the term *myth* in its commonest sense of a false or untrue belief – as in the "myth of the oil shortage." That sense is still enshrined as the antiquely positivist first definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "a fictitious or imaginary person or object." At the other extreme, I do not share the apparent view of some modern anthropologists and cultural critics who jump from the correct belief that man is not a wholly rational being to the unexpressed but powerful assumption that mythological thought is

3 *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London, 1926), p. 23.

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in every way superior and desirable.⁴ I try to be more empirical and descriptive. Of course, I accept the view that mythical stories are in some way symbolic; that is, they stand for larger and more permanent meanings than their represented actions literally denote; but these meanings should not be above and beyond reason. Victor Turner's definition of myths as "sacred narratives" that "derive from transitions" seems a little too absolute.⁵ My four myths are not "sacred" exactly, but they do derive from the transition from the social and intellectual system of the Middle Ages to the system dominated by modern individualist thought, and this transition has itself been marked by the remarkable development from their original Renaissance meanings to their present Romantic meanings.

My working definition of *myth*, then, as this book begins, is "a traditional story that is exceptionally widely known throughout the culture, that is credited with a historical or quasi-historical belief, and that embodies or symbolizes some of the most basic values of a society."

4 See, for example, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949).

5 "Myth," *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), 10, d.576.

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Part I
Three Renaissance Myths

1. From George Faust to Faustbuch

THE HISTORICAL MAGICIAN

Of our four myths, that of Faust is unique in one respect: It undoubtedly began with a real historical person. Unfortunately, although there are many contemporaneous records of his activities, they are defective in many ways, and we do not really know what kind of person the original Faust was.

There was a widely known wandering magician in Germany during the first four decades of the sixteenth century who went under the name of George (in German Jörg, in Latin Georgius) Faust or Faustus; sometimes he was known merely as Doctor Faust. He was born, possibly about 1480, in the small town of Knittlingen in northern Württemberg; and he probably died in about 1540, possibly at Staufen, another small Württemberg town, not far south of Freiburg.

There are some thirteen contemporaneous references to this George Faust. They can be roughly divided into five groups: letters of scholarly opponents; sundry public records; tributes from satisfied customers; other, more noncommittal memoirs; and reactions of Protestant clerical enemies.¹

The fullest and earliest account of Faust is given in a letter by a

1 The most reliable account of contemporary sources is Hans Henning, "Faust als historische Gestalt," *Jahrbücher der Weimarer Goethe-Gesellschaft* 21 (1959), pp. 107-39. The main biographical documents are conveniently available in an English translation, with commentary and notes, in Philip Mason Palmer and Robert Pattison More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition from Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York, 1936), cited hereafter in the text as S. It has recently been argued that "Faustus" was the Latin pseudonym of one Georgius Helmstetter, who was awarded the degree of Master from the University of Heidelberg in 1487 - see Frank Baron, *Doctor Faustus: From History to Legend* (Munich, 1978), pp. 12-22 - but this view has not been widely accepted.

scholarly opponent dated 1507. It was written in Latin, as most of the documents of the time were, and was addressed to Johannes Virdung, a mathematician or astrologer who was a professor at the University of Heidelberg. The writer, Johannes Trithem, a well-known Benedictine scholar, was at that time the abbot of a monastery at Würzburg. Trithem is fiercely contemptuous of Faust: He calls him a "vagabond, a babbler and a rogue" who has shown himself "to be a fool and not a philosopher." According to Trithem, "As soon as he heard that I was there" at an inn in Gelnhausen, Faust "fled from the inn and could not be persuaded to come into my presence." Trithem writes that Faust claimed to be the "younger Faust, the chief of necromancers, astrologer, the second magus, palmist, diviner" (S, pp. 83-86).

When he called himself a "necromancer" Faust meant a practitioner of black magic who foretold the future by communing with the spirits of the dead; an "astrologer" (then as now) meant someone who interpreted the influence of the planets and stars on human affairs. In calling himself "the younger Faust" and the "second magus," however, Faust was probably claiming to belong to a much more dangerous and heretical tradition; and this goes some way towards clarifying the reasons for the conflict between Faust and the scholarly humanists who were interested in learned magic. For the early history of magic is very relevant to a fuller understanding of the Faust myth.

In Faust's day the ignorant and the learned alike believed that they inhabited a world largely governed by invisible spiritual forces. The more adventurous among the scholars of the Renaissance hoped that a better understanding of rediscovered works of the past would teach them new ways of understanding and controlling those forces. For instance, among the Greek manuscripts Cosimo de Medici collected from Byzantium, the one that most interested him dealt with magic: the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a miscellaneous compilation of astrological and theological writings belonging to the second or third century A.D. It was translated into Italian in 1471 by Marsilio Ficino. Ficino and his successors developed the assumption that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a key to the most ancient, and therefore the

most original and authentic, wisdom of the ancients from Zoroaster to Plato; it was the *prisca theologia*, the uncontaminated source of pristine knowledge of God and his creation. The Christian tradition in general had proscribed the use of such powers as the work of the devil. But Ficino persuaded himself that the orthodox view was mistaken; these powers were not demonic, but should properly be seen as analogous to Platonic ideas; they would, he thought, mediate between spirit and matter, between the soul of the world and its material body.²

Later, another Italian, Pico della Mirandola, added to this tradition of learned magic, in making a rather more heretical attempt to bridge the gap between pagan and Christian learning in the practice of magic. Trithemius was a celebrated, though somewhat controversial, successor to such men.³ But Faust does not belong to the same tradition. We do not know exactly what he had in mind in calling himself the "younger Faust" – the name was a common one, meaning "fortunate" in Latin and "fist" in German – but one possibility is a reference to the fifth-century St. Faustus who was attacked by Augustine for his allegedly Manichean heresies.⁴ The heretical analogy in the second title, "second magus," however, is much clearer: it must refer to Simon Magus, Simon the Mage, or magician. Our word "magic" is derived from the Magi, an ancient tribe of Medes who were famous as diviners;⁵ they are best known to the West from the three wise men of the East in St. Matthew's Gospel, whose command of judicial astrology had enabled them to foretell the birth of Christ. Simon Magus was supposedly a magician belonging to a Gnostic sect at the time of the Apostles.⁶ In Samaria he was so

2 Francis A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), pp. 12–17.

3 Yates, *Bruno*, pp. 11–19, 140–45. See also Klaus Arnold, *Johannes Trithemius, 1462–1516* (Würzburg, 1971).

4 *Confessions of St. Augustine* (London, 1950), pp. 80–88.

5 E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (1948; Cambridge, 1993), pp. 15–20.

6 Acts 8.9 (biblical citations throughout are from the King James Version). See Butler, *The Myth of the Magus*, pp. 73–83; S, pp. 12–14; Beatrice Daw Brown, "Marlowe, Faustus, and Simon Magus," *PMLA* 54 (1939), pp. 82–121.

impressed by the power of Peter and John to bestow the gift of the Holy Spirit by the mere laying on of hands, that he offered the two Apostles money if they would teach him how they did it. For this Simon was condemned by Peter, and thus gave his name to the sin of "simony," which is not merely a reprehensible selling of ecclesiastical offices, but, since it abuses a divine gift for personal profit, is considered to be the unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost.

The opposition between Simon Magus and the Apostles marks a very significant moment in the long history of the conflict between religion and magic. The view that there were different and equally legitimate ways of controlling supernatural forces had not been challenged decisively until the advent of Hebrew monotheism. But from the time of the Apostles onwards, the Christian church increasingly laid exclusive claim to the control of the invisible world; and it is this assertion of the Christian priesthood to exclusive rights to all rituals and other magical practices that is enacted in the confrontation of Simon Magus and St. Peter.

According to various apocryphal works such as *The Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, Simon set up his own religion, in which he was worshiped as the son of God, and attempted to rival the miracles of Jesus. His most spectacular feat was to contrive his own resurrection. A ram was bewitched to take on Simon's appearance; it was then beheaded; and three days later Simon astounded the Emperor Nero by reappearing with his top appendage intact. This put Peter's monopoly of miraculous power into jeopardy; but Peter triumphed when Simon, correctly but foolishly, tried to follow up his resurrection with his ascension. Having apprised Nero of his coming apotheosis, Simon took off from the top of a specially constructed tower on the Campus Martius in Rome. Seeing this, Nero said to Peter: "This Simon is true . . . you see him going up into heaven." With the future of Christendom hanging in the balance, Peter summoned up his invisible forces: "I adjure you, ye angels of Satan, who are carrying him into the air, to deceive the hearts of the unbelievers, by the God that created all things, and by Jesus Christ, whom on the third day He raised from the dead, no longer from this hour to keep him up, but to let him go." There-

upon, *The Acts of the Holy Apostles* continues, "being let go, he fell into a place called Sacra Via, that is, Holy Way, and was divided into four parts, having perished by an evil fate" (S, pp. 33-34).

In the traditions of the church Simon survived as the supreme monitory example of what awaited heretics whose magic challenged the Christian priesthood's claim to an exclusive control over the supernatural world. Simon's fate, in fact, remotely foreshadowed the conflict which was ultimately to transform the foolish German conjuror who called himself the second magus into the grandly defiant protagonist of the Faust myth.

Tritheim regarded Faust as an overt, though hardly serious, heretic. Faust, he reported, "said in the presence of many that the miracles of Christ the Saviour were not so wonderful [*non sint miranda*], that he himself could do all the things which Christ had done, as often and whenever he wished" (S, p. 85). Tritheim was alarmed lest this indiscreet and foolish vulgarian should give the classical studies and the learned magic of the humanists a bad name among orthodox Christians. Conrad Mutianus Rufus, an eminent humanist and an influential local ecclesiastic at Erfurt, had a similar fear: in a letter of 1513 he dismisses "a certain soothsayer by the name of George Faust," as "a mere braggart and fool"; but then Rufus adds significantly: "The ignorant marvel at him. Let the theologians rise against him and not try to destroy the philosopher Reuchlin" (S, pp. 87-88). Johann Reuchlin was an eminent contemporary of Erasmus, and his biblical scholarship had fallen foul of the Dominicans, who regarded Hebrew studies as in themselves blasphemous, if not heretical. But Reuchlin was also interested in mystical and magical lore, and in the *Cabala*; there was, therefore, an additional reason why he and the humanist movement in general should have felt that they already had enough difficulties without being pilloried through an identification of their learning and magic with the cheap tricks of an ignorant marketplace cheat such as Faust.

Tritheim reports that Faust claimed to have mastered the classical tradition of Greece and Rome: specifically, to have "acquired such knowledge of all wisdom and such a memory, that if all the books of Plato and Aristotle, together with their whole philosophy, had to-