

**The End of Robinson Crusoe**  
by Michel Tournier

"It was there! Right there, I tell you. Off the coast of Trinidad, at 9° 22' northern latitude. No doubt about it. No error in my measurements."

The drunkard tapped his sun-blackened index finger on a fragment of geographical chart covered with grease stains, and each one of his passionate claims brought a fresh burst of laughter to a group of fishermen and dockworkers sitting around his table.

We all knew him. He was a character who took his joys from a different world. He was part of local folklore, and we had invited him to drink with us in order to hear, in his rough unmistakable voice, a few of his stories. As for his life's chief adventure, it was a heartrending moral journey and a shipwreck tale, as is often the case.

Forty years earlier, this guy had disappeared at sea, along with many others who did not survive. We had inscribed his name in the interior of our church along with those of his fellow crewmen. Then we forgot about him. Not to the point, however, that we didn't recognize him when he reappeared twenty-two years later, very hairy and very vehement, with a nigger for a companion. And the story he constantly spewed-out was stupefying! Sole survivor of his foundered ship, Robinson would have stayed alone on his tropical island populated by parrots and wild goats, except for that nigger, so he told us,

whom he claimed to have saved from a horde of savage cannibals. Finally, an English schooner picked them up, and he returned, but only after reaping a small fortune thanks to the easy-to-find, often shady deals going on around the Caribbean in those days.

Of course, we all threw him a party. He quickly married a pretty, young girl who could have been his daughter, then ordinary existence apparently closed the gaping parenthesis of his life, incomprehensible, full of luxuriant greenery and beautiful bird cries, suddenly opened up in his past by a caprice of destiny.

Yes, apparently. His ordinary life had begun again. However, in truth, from year to year, an increasingly hollow sound seemed to be coming from the interior recesses of the Robinson Crusoe family household. Their servant, that darkie they called Friday, was the first to succumb. After months and months of irreproachable conduct, he suddenly began to drink, discreetly at first, then more and more boisterously. Next, there was the thing about the two young mothers, who were received and cared for at Saint-Esprit hospital, and who gave birth almost simultaneously to two mulatto babies who unmistakably resembled him. Wasn't this his signature on a double crime?

But no matter. Robinson defended Friday with a unique fierceness and tenacity. Why didn't he just get rid of him? Or possibly send him back to where he came from?

What shameful secret—something unconfessable perhaps—linked him to that nigger anyway and made him so strangely loyal?

Finally, a substantial sum of money was stolen from Robinson Crusoe's neighbor, and, before we even suspected that it was him, Friday disappeared.

"The idiot!" Robinson declared. "If he wanted some money to leave, he only had to ask me!" Then he imprudently added:

"Anyway, I know very well where he has gone."

Well, after hearing that, the neighbor who'd been robbed yearned for justice. He put considerable pressure on Robinson either to give back the money, or personally deliver the man who took it. So after resisting weakly, Robinson decided to pay. However, from that day on, we noticed him walking around the docks, more and more somber, wandering aimlessly beside the docks & anchored ships, in-and-out of the local watering holes & gambling dens, talking to himself and repeating aloud, "He's gone back! Yes, I'm sure of it! That scalawag is there right now!"

Indeed, an ineffable secret did link him and that black man Friday, and this secret, what they shared was a little green stain of solid land that Robinson, as soon as he returned, had our port cartographer add to a new map of the territory and turquoise waters of the Caribbean ocean. For that island, after all, it was his youth, his gorgeous adventure, his splendid and solitary Garden of Eden. What

was he waiting around for under our constantly rainy skies? In this mucky gray city? Among all these businessmen and moribund retirees?

His young wife, bless her heart, was astute and emotionally intelligent. She was the first to notice her husband's strangely mortal grief.

"You're bored and depressed. It's perfectly plain to me. Go ahead and tell the truth. Say that you miss it very much."

"Who me? You're crazy," Robinson said. "I miss who? What? Exactly what do you mean?"

"Your tropical island—what else? And I know just who is keeping you from leaving tomorrow morning. I know very well. It's me!"

Of course, Robinson yelled and protested that she was mistaken. But the more he cried out, the more she was sure that she was right. Robinson's wife loved him tenderly and had never consciously refused him anything. She died. Right away he sold the house and all his land, then booked passage on a sailing ship heading toward the Caribbean.

Several more years passed. We started to forget him once more.

When he came back again, he seemed much more changed than after his first voyage. This time it was as a galley-hand with a cargo ship on which he'd made his way across the Atlantic, and when Robinson returned this final time he looked like an old man, his skin weathered and shriveled up by too much hard alcohol.

Yet what he told made us all howl with laughter.

Un-find-able!!!

Despite months and months of stubborn searching, his beloved little green island remained hidden. It could not be found, and Robinson had worn himself ragged in his vain explorations with an intense, despair-filled rage, wasting away all his strength, health, and money in order to rediscover this land of happiness & freedom which appeared to have been mysteriously swallowed-up and taken away from him forever.

"But it was there! Right there, I tell you!" Robinson kept insisting, with his dark finger on the map that night, as we were all gathered around with our glasses lifted.

Suddenly, an old helmsman pulled apart from the group and tapped him gently on the shoulder.

"Want to know something, Robinson? Your desert island is still there. Of course it's there. Indeed, I can even assure you that you saw it several times. You found it again after all."

"Found it?" Robinson said, almost suffocating from disbelief. "But weren't you listening. Didn't I just say ... "

"Listen to me," the old helmsman calmly told him. "I'll bet you probably passed that island ten or twelve times at the very least. But you didn't recognize it."

"Didn't recognize it?"

"That's exactly right. Don't you see? Because just like you that island has gotten older. Yes sir. The flowers become fruit, the fruit becomes wood, and the green wood

becomes dead wood. Everything goes very fast in the tropics. And you? Look in a mirror, you imbecile, and then tell me something else, okay? Did the island recognize you when you sailed right by?"

This advice was superfluous, though. Robinson didn't look in the mirror. He just slowly turned and looked at all of us sitting and drinking at the table, his face so haggard, so sad that our wave of noisy laughter came to a sudden halt, then an immense silence suddenly filled the tavern.

—translated by Thomas Jeffrey Vasseur

#### Contributor's Note

Michel Tournier was born in Paris and has been called "one of the most gifted and original novelists to emerge from France since World War II." He was educated at St.-Germain-en Laye and at a large number of private schools, mostly religious. During the war he completed his undergraduate studies and continued to higher degrees in philosophy and law at the Sorbonne. Tournier gained fame at the age of forty-three with his first novel, *Vendredi, ou les limbes du pasifique*, an ingenious, full-length reworking of the classic Robinson Crusoe theme. Tournier's often philosophical and parodic work can be read as disturbing comments upon our contemporary world. This short story appeared in his book *Le coq de bruyère* published in 1978. His other works include *Le roi des aulnes* and *Les météors*, plus seven books for younger readers. He also

wrote for the magazine *Nouvelles Littéraires* and has translated Erich Maria Remarque's novels into French.

Thomas Jeffrey Vasseur is the author of *Discovering the World: Thirteen Stories (2001)* and the novella *Touch the Earth: An Aftermath of the Vietnam War (2005)*, both published by Mercer University Press. He graduated from Transylvania University with a degree in English and Philosophy and received a Ph.D. in contemporary literature from the University of Utah.