

INTRODUCTION

TO GILDON'S PAMPHLET

When De Foe's novel, the *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, was issued on the 25th of April 1719, its extraordinary and immediate success filled the poor hack-writers of Grub-street with envy. The author, whose name was easily guessed, was not one of the literati that frequented Swift and Pope, or Steele and Addison ; he was a popular journalist, living by his pen, whose poor instruction excited much raillery, and whose dubious political dealings gave rise to much scandal. His book had already a second edition on the 12th of May, a third on the 6th of June, and a fourth on the 8th of August ; success so tremendous was unheard of before. Gildon, who could scarcely sell out one edition of those learned works which revealed his extensive knowledge of the Ancient writers, was full of jealousy at the triumph so easily achieved by a rival writer who always wrote hastily, was no scholar, and who, besides, had formerly abused him in two poems, *More Reformation*, and the *Pacificalor*.

Gildon reflected that he could do a good piece of business, and at the same time have his revenge on De Foe, by writing a sharp criticism of *Robinson Crusoe* : any thing connected with this great book was sure of an easy sale. He had De Foe's work read to him, and, on hearing each passage, dictated reflections upon it. He intended to

compose an open epistle to the author of *Robinson Crusoe*; this was the form then generally taken by controversial pamphlets between politicians or men of letters. The epistle occupied Gildon a whole fortnight in August, for he was obliged to work slowly, and could not afford to interrupt his drudgery for the booksellers.

Gildon had scarcely ended his *Epistle* when, on the 20th of August, the second volume of *Robinson Crusoe* appeared. He thought this a good opportunity to double the size of his projected pamphlet, and thus raise its price from 6 d to 1 s. He continued to work hastily, for he was eager to profit by the popularity of De Foe's novel to launch his little work, and he dictated a long *Postscript*. Then a bright idea occurred to him : he had hitherto considered *Robinson Crusoe* only as an absurd romance, entirely invented by De Foe's « prolific brain » ; he was struck now by a passage in the preface to the *Further Adventures*, De Foe, finding that he could not long pretend that *Robinson Crusoe* was, as he at first claimed, « a just history of fact », had cleverly managed an escape for himself, in case he should be convicted of « lying » : « The just application of every incident », he insinuated, « the religious and useful inferences drawn from every part, are so many testimonies to the good design of making it public, and must legitimate *all the part that may be called invention or parable in the story* ».

The word *parable* was a flash of light to Gildon's mind. Very likely, De Foe had written it without attaching any great importance to it ; he merely had a vague intention of asserting later, that *Robinson Crusoe* was an example of man's helplessness in the hands of Providence, designed to bring the readers to complete submissiveness to the Divine Will. This idea, however, was only dawning on his mind : his primitive intention had simply been to

write a fictitious biography, and pass it off as truth. But Gildon understood how much more pointed his satire would be, if he connected the chief events of Crusoe's life with De Foe's past ; he could easily ridicule De Foe by showing that he was more stupid and insane, even, than his hero.

Gildon dictated a dialogue, which has little originality in form, but contains a long tirade, the most interesting part of the pamphlet, in which De Foe himself explains to Robinson that he was merely his image ; and, to emphasize this similitude, Gildon added a title, closely copied from De Foe's, which suggested the idea expressed in the dialogue, that *Robinson Crusoe* is an allegory of De Foe's life. Full of confidence, Gildon gave his work to the bookseller J. Roberts, who issued it on the 28 th of September. It was advertised in the *Daily Courant* for the same day, and again, as « Just published », in the number for the first of October.

Gildon was well rewarded for his labour. His little book was, as he had expected, a success. Pamphlet-writing was not, indeed, very lucrative; booksellers generally paid 2 guineas for every 500 copies sold ; but even such poor payment was welcome to a starving author. The *Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Daniel De Foe* soon had a second edition, then a third, issued in Dublin in the same year. Though it had been published anonymously at first, the name of the author was known, and was advertised in later editions. The work created much discussion in the literary world, and this had a happy effect on the sale of Gildon's other works.

Gildon's pamphlet is desultory ; the paragraphs follow one another in chance succession, without any logical connexion. His blindness obliged him to compose in that manner, so that no unity was possible. The chief interest

of the work is in the details it gives of De Foe's life and of his novel. Thanks to Gildon we know that *Robinson Crusoe* was written in De Foe's residence at Stoke Newington, and thus we can put aside the claims of other cities, — Halifax, Gateshead, Witechapel, Hartley, — to be the place of its composition. The general public was amused by a pamphlet that enumerated the contradictions and impossibilities in a famous book, and fellow-writers were pleased to find some one who gave utterance to their envious hatred of a successful colleague.

In clubs and coffee-houses, in broadsheets and ballads, some inconsistencies in *Robinson Crusoe* had already been satirized. Cox, the piratical bookseller, had suppressed a few, and tried, often awkwardly, to palliate the grossest impossibilities of the book, in the abridged edition he issued in August, to the great annoyance of De Foe and still more of Taylor, the editor of *Robinson*. Gildon repeated many criticisms already commonly made, and added considerable new material. Several of his attacks are unjust, but most show his critical finesse. His pamphlet was only a short essay ; he passed over a great many important contradictions, though this may be due to his infirmity, which was a terrible handicap for the task. He did not notice De Foe's frequent errors in dates and numbers. It is strange also that Gildon who had specially studied the first pages of the novel did not notice the following glaring anachronism : in 1651, Robinson's father talks of his *late* elder son, while on the preceding page we are told that this son was killed at the battle against the Spaniards near Dunkirk, which took place only in 1658. A whole book might be made of the inconsistencies in the novel, but Gildon had neither the time nor the means to make a close study of the text.

The most interesting fact about Gildon's pamphlet is

the influence it exercised on De Foe. Gildon's criticism stung De Foe to the quick, but at the same time furnished him with a good defence against the charge of being a « novelist », that is a « liar ». In the preface to the *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe*, published on the 6th of August 1720, De Foe declared impudently that *Robinson Crusoe* was no romance, but an allegory of his own unhappy life : « (The story) is the beautiful representation of a life of unexampled misfortunes, and of a variety not to be met with in the world, sincerely adapted to and intended for the common good of mankind, and designed at first, as it is now farther applied, to the most serious uses possible. » He proceeds to show how several episodes of Crusoe's story were suggested by real episodes in his own life : « In a word, there is not a circumstance in the imaginary story, but has its just allusion to a real story, and chimes part for part and step for step with the inimitable *Life of Robinson Crusoe*. » He wisely refrains from trying to demonstrate in detail the truth of this assertion ; for, in spite of his talent for paradox, he could hardly have proved decisively the allegorical character of his novel. But he explains why, instead of telling simply his own life, he had recourse to such a curious stratagem ; this astounding piece of impudence shows that De Foe was not afraid of fooling the public from whom he derived his living : « Had the common way of writing a man's private history been taken, and I had given you the conduct or life of a man you know, and whose misfortunes and infirmities perhaps you had sometimes unjustly triumphed over, all I could have said would have yielded no diversion, and perhaps scarce have obtained a reading, or at best no attention ; the teacher, like a greater, having no honour in his own country. Facts that are formed to touch the mind must be done a great way off, and by somebody never heard of.

Even the miracles of the blessed Saviour of the world suffered scorn and contempt, when it was reflected that they were done by the carpenter's son ; one whose family and original they had a mean opinion of, and whose brothers and sisters were ordinary people like themselves.» — In this preface, De Foe took care not to mention Gildon ; at the most, a contemptuous sentence in the Publisher's Introduction may apply to him : « those who challenged the author most maliciously with not making his pen useful, will have leisure to reflect, that they passed their censure too soon, and, like Solomon's fool, judged of the matter before they heard it. » Indeed, why should De Foe have been offended with a man who had furnished him with a helpful suggestion, and who, by attacking *Robinson Crusoe*, advertised it and contributed to augment its sale ?

The *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe* consist mostly of old essays which De Foe had long kept in his papers, and which he tried to adapt to his story. From Gildon he took many a hint : thus his long chapters on the state of religion in the world were certainly inspired by one of Gildon's criticisms. But De Foe too often forgot that he had adopted the idea that *Robinson Crusoe* was an allegorical tale, and told anecdotes about himself which could not be applied to « wild, wicked Robinson Crusoe », and vice versa.

Gildon's pamphlet was read carefully by the booksellers ; in the abridgment of the three volumes of De Foe's novel which was published by Bettesworth on the 27 th of February 1722, all the inconsistencies pointed out by Gildon are suppressed : we may even ask, as the preface of this work repeats Gildon's theories on the legitimacy of abridgments, if Gildon himself had not something to do with this more or less piratical compilation : the author must at least have closely studied the pamphlet.

Gildon's attacks on *Robinson Crusoe* were resumed in November 1725 by Bishop Hoadly in an article of the *London Journal*. De Foe answered in *Applebee's Journal* for Nov. 20 th, but refrained from any precise refutation of the Bishop's charges ; he merely contended that if *Robinson Crusoe* was a lie, the *London Journal* was also full of « many Fables and forged Stories, not to say Lies ». Then, dropping the subject, he launched into a long digression on the wickedness of the time.

After a few years, while the glory of *Robinson Crusoe* was still in the ascendant, Gildon's pamphlet fell into oblivion : it was brought to light again much later by De Foe's early biographers. In 1785, the bookseller Stockdale entrusted an eminent jurist named De Lolme with the direction of a reprint of De Foe's *History of the Union*, and at the same time wrote letters to all his learned friends in order to get material for a Life of De Foe. He received from the Rev. Lort a copy of Gildon's pamphlet and was full of hope at the title. But he was extremely disappointed on reading the contents, as, for a man unacquainted with the particulars of De Foe's life, Gildon's allusions are mere riddles. Stockdale then resumed his search and was fortunate enough to receive an excellent essay from De Foe's first great biographer, George Chalmers.

In his long *Life and Times of Daniel Defoe*, Wilson is very severe on Gildon's pamphlet, which, without having much inquired into its contents, he calls « a low performance ». Lee, De Foe's next biographer, dismisses it as « indecent and scurrilous ». Wright alone, in his biography of De Foe, recognizes the merits of the performance, and after an impartial examination of Gildon's pamphlet concludes with these words : « In fine, because we admire De Foe and Crusoe, we are not going to follow

our predecessors in the biographical office, and call Gildon a carping fool. » — We think that such will be the reader's mind, when he has studied Gildon's work ; and we hope that those who will undertake this short excursion into the world of the poor hack-writers of the Augustan Age, will not be repelled by the filthy streets and the stench of the dark deep courts.

The following pages are an exact reprint of the first edition of Gildon's pamphlet. For the convenience of the reader, we have numbered the lines. The asterisks in the margin refer to the notes at the end of the book.