The Child Robinsonade

3. Ever since Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe (1719), the desert island has been used, among other things, as a vehicle for discussing ideas about society and nature. Moreover, because of its early adoption into the canon of children’s literature, it is also a key text about childhood and the child. Robinsonades, whether for adults or children, share certain motifs: isolation, self-reliance and survival of the shipwrecked; the strange environment and encounter with alien others; the building of a new society/civilization; and, finally, the escape and re-integration of the shipwrecked with the world.

4. The texts I will focus on are Jules Verne’s Two Years’ Vacation (1888, in English often referred to as Adrift in the Pacific), Lisa Tetzner’s The Island of the Shipwrecked Children (1944), and Sven Wernström’s The Secret Islanders (1966). In the chosen texts the child characters display a high degree of autonomy; these are narratives where un-chaperoned children are shipwrecked and build their own communities without adult supervision and caretaking. These are texts that chart the murky, ideological waters of variously deserted children, and how the child Robinsonade evolves over time. Thus we see how the derring-do and supremacist position of Two Years’ Vacation is replaced by a humanist and inclusive perspective in The Island of Shipwrecked Children and a dose of Marxist utopianism in The Secret Islanders.

Two Years’s Vacation

5. Jules Verne’s Two Years’ Vacation (1888) is a child robinsonade in which he describes the endeavors of a group of fifteen boys between 9 and 14 years of age who have been shipwrecked on an island off the coast of Chile. Verne displays an optimistic faith in the capacity of children (or boys, at least). But he shows more awareness of how negative character traits, poor group dynamics, and national (and ethnic) differences can jeopardize survival. Much of the tension in the group is due to the competition between the natural leader Briant (who is French) and Donagan [Doniphan] (British). The practical and diplomatic Gordon (American) manages the situation as chief during the first year, but when Briant is
voted chief the second year, the group splits up. Ultimately, however, Verne’s boys overcome their differences, successfully battle a gang of mutineers and are able to return to civilization.

6. The boys are completely isolated from the rest of the world. They have to become self-reliant in order to survive. But survival is not the biggest problem. On Charman Island (named after their New Zealand boarding school) there is plenty of game and arable land. The boys are also excellently stocked, since, conveniently, the ship ended up on the shore and the goods could be salvaged. Luckily too, they find the abandoned cave (and skeletal remains) of a former castaway, where they can set up their abode. The environment does present some problems, however.

7. On Charman Island, the harsh environment and the relative vulnerability of the small boys make it necessary to be organized and structured. Everyone’s talents and skills are made use of, each after his own capacity. Someone knows about plants, another one is a crack shot, another boy can device mechanical contraptions, another one is a good cook etc.

The school the boys go to is modeled on the British public school, and with a few exceptions all of the boys are British. This gives Verne an opportunity to comment on the nature of British education, with its emphasis on daring and physical prowess. As if the struggle to survive is not enough the shipwrecked boys prepare a “sports terrace” where they can play games, exercise their bodies and compete with each other. Verne summarizes the underlying ethos with the following words:

In order not to overburden the youngsters with work too great for their age, every opportunity would be taken of exercising their bodies as well as their minds. When the weather permitted they would be allowed out, in suitable clothes of course, to run and enjoy themselves in the fresh air, or work at such labour as their strength allowed them. In short, the plan was drawn up on the four main principles which form the basis of English education:

- If you are frightened at a thing, do it.
- Never lose a chance of doing your very best.
- Never fear fatigue, for nothing you can do is useless.
- A healthy body means a healthy mind.
And this is what was agreed upon after discussion at a general meeting of the boys. (80)

8. Verne does not, however, embrace the public school code completely. He shows this by portraying both the French boy, Briant, and the American boy, Gordon, as better leaders than Donagan. Both Briant and Gordon are also shown to be in opposition to some of the British school traditions. When Gordon is made chief he:

decided to have nothing to do with faggism such as they had been used to at Charman’s School. His whole effort was directed to accustoming the boys to the idea that they were almost men, and had to act as such. There were to be no fags at French Den, that is to say the younger boys were not to be the servants of the elders. (79)

Both Briant and Gordon represent democratic, egalitarian and republican principles. Leaders are elected, important things are decided after discussions and meetings, and everyone is equal (regardless of age or ethnicity/national provenience).

**The Island of Shipwrecked Children**

9. In its own way Lisa Tetzner’s *The Island of Shipwrecked Children* (1944) is as chilling as *Lord of the Flies* (which came out ten years later) – but in other ways. Written during World War II in Swiss exile, by the radical author Lisa Tetzner (and married to Jewish communist, Kurt Held), the book was not published in its original German until well after the war. Actually, it was first published in the Swedish translation referred to here.

10. The book belongs to a series of books, a “Children’s Odyssey,” which focuses on the adventures of the children of “Number 67” before, during and after World War II. Some of them try to flee from Europe.

11. This is the story in the prequel to Tetzner’s Robinsonade *Ship without Destination* from 1943 in which a vessel with refugees from Europe (political dissidents and Jews mainly), sails to South America. It is presumably the late 1930s, and the story is based on actual events. The refugees are not allowed entry and exile anywhere. So the ship sails from harbor to harbor, from Pernambuco, to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires and Montevideo, and on to ports in
Chile. By then the ship is in a very bad condition, and the supplies are running low. It seems they will have to return to Europe. The book ends with a storm that sinks the ship. All three hundred passengers drown, except seven of the children and a cat who are cast ashore on an island – an unusually grim ending to a children’s book.

12. In the next book, *The Island of Shipwrecked Children*, we follow their struggle for survival. Lack of food and water make their plight difficult. There are also internal problems. One boy, Bartel, puts all of their lives in jeopardy through his self-centered and destructive behavior. After having stolen water from their only casket of fresh water and then accidentally leaving the tap running, he abandons the group. The turning point is when he finds fresh water, returns to the group and volunteers to be the one carrying water every day to the rest of the group. They are saved, and Bartel becomes a better person.

The motif of the encounter with alien others is given a twist in Tetzner’s narrative. When the oldest of the surviving children, Hans Suter, goes exploring the island in search of food and water, he has a Friday moment when he meets what he thinks is a native boy. Instead it turns out to be a French boy, Pascal Pagnol, who has also been shipwrecked and who has lived on the island for some time. He is overjoyed that he is no longer alone. When he hears about the other six children (three girls, two boys and a baby) he exclaims: “C’est bon! We shall found a whole colony.”

Tetzner’s robinsonade is not the extended “vacation” of Verne’s schoolchildren; they want to get away, it is hard for them to survive, and they are glad to be saved. At the same time *The Island of Shipwrecked Children* presents a more optimistic outlook than *Lord of the Flies*, at least with regard to child rule. On the face of it, it does not look too good. One of the boys is lame, another puts the whole group at risk through his meanness; they also have to take care of a baby. Moreover the group is heterogeneous compared to earlier Robinsonades: there are boys and girls; the group consists of Jews and gentiles; they speak different languages. Still, these children manage to cohabit and build a makeshift society. In the context of World War II and the collapse of a peaceful adult world order, that is in itself a remarkable achievement. Tetzner’s Odyssey may be damning with regard to adult rule, but holds out the hope that children may be better equipped to rule – now and in the future.

**The Secret Islanders**

13. Swedish writer Sven Wernström’s *De hemligas ö* [*The Secret Islanders*, my translation] has a similar message. He retains some of the optimism of Verne – the two groups of scouts
who are stranded on an unknown island seem to consider their stay as a prolonged vacation, just as in Verne – yet their society is also threatened by dissolution and tribalization as in *Lord of the Flies* (or *Two Years’ Vacation*, for that matter). The difference is that Wernström’s socialist outlook provides the dramatic structure. Thus, in a microcosm, the secret islanders re-enact a Marxist view of human history through primitive communism (hunting and gathering, shared property, no leadership), slave society, feudalism and capitalism to socialism (after a revolution). This is basically an optimistic vision; there is a *telos*: communism. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the communism achieved is depicted as a harmonious return to the *ur*-communism of stone-age society, not the latter-days communism envisioned by Marx. The children are happy nevertheless and loath to leave; they have developed further than their parents, since adult society has not attained communism yet. Driving home the point, Sweden (i.e. the society governed by adults) is actually referred to as “the enemy” (191). In the closing pages, the children are forced to return “home,” but as a concession, the children are allowed to return every summer to the island where they can live stone-age life again.

14. In *The Secret Islanders* some of the Robinsonade motifs are downplayed. After a rather unconvincing shipwreck (the children, adrift on a big Swedish lake manage to jump off on an island after which the boat continues down a waterfall, a calamity which makes everyone think the children have drowned), the children have to live as hunters and gatherers. Like Verne’s boys they also have to contend with a rather cold climate, but this is not an exotic or strange environment to them. Nor are there any encounters with alien others. “Alienation” in Wernström’s book is rather when the colonists lose control over their means of production, and become “workers,” while others become capitalists. In *Two Years’ Vacation* the threat from within is national pride and undemocratic ways; in *The Island of the Shipwrecked Children* it is Bartel’s bad morals; in *Lord of the Flies* it is the regressive savagery of Jack. But in *The Secret Islanders*, Håkan, the capitalist figurehead, is not savage or immoral or even chauvinistic. He just wants to profit from other people’s labor rather than work hard himself. When his régime is defeated, he too adapts to the ideal communist society. Wernström’s focus is on the building of a new society through class struggles. The final re-integration with society is problematic and left unresolved, but as in Tetzner child rule is preferable to adult rule.

**Conclusion**
In the texts chosen for this essay we can see how the central motifs of *Robinson Crusoe* are taken up and adapted. Child rule and child autonomy are involuntarily achieved through the isolation, self-reliance and survival of the shipwrecked children in a strange and usually exotic environment. In Wernström’s case the children are shipwrecked in their own country in an environment that should be familiar to them, but they are deprived of home and civilization. When it comes to the motif of the encounter with the alien other the responses vary more. In *Two Year’s Vacation* the alien others are at the same time adults who threaten to disrupt the harmony that the children have established.

The “building of a new society/civilization” is perhaps that which the authors of the studied works have devoted most attention to. *Two Years’ Vacation* endorses a western, white and masculine world-view, albeit in different ways. The boys in these narratives can be characterized not so much as children but as small adults (at least until they meet real adults). Yet, they project a positive message: children can cope, cooperate and survive under harsh circumstances. This is a message shared with *The Island of Shipwrecked Children, The Secret Islanders*– and, with some major reservations, with *Lord of the Flies*. Tetzner’s novel is perhaps not so much concerned with society-building, but rather with peaceful co-habitation and day-to-day survival – which they do, until help comes. By contrast, the children in Wernström’s novel achieve a communist utopia, and only reluctantly leave their island.

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