

Eurocentrism: Plato, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Tournier's Friday

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Abstract

Ernest Gellner (1994) contending with Edward Said (1993) critiquing Western attitudes towards the East in *Culture and Imperialism*, wrote the following: "At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism" (p.169). This assertion leads to a question which constitutes the starting point of this article. Why do Europeans venerate so deeply their culture, and why do they think of it as if it were somehow transcending the everyday world? It is Plato's fault. This essay is a speculative contention of the foregoing assertion using theorists and characters (as tropes) from philosophy and literature of antiquity and contemporary experience.

Keywords: Eurocentrism; Plato; Defoe; Robison Crusoe; Tournier; Friday

Introduction

In the beginning, we have Plato, the inevitable reference of western thought, indeed. In the *Phaedo*, Plato sets forth his fundamental idea of a two-levelled world. Above, the pure essential ideas in which are meaning and reality; below, is the world of appearance and sign, which are *representations* of ideas. In addition, in the *Cratylus* (canto 389a), Plato's first meditation on *meaning* is found. For Plato, a privileged instance, pre-established and predetermined, gives the world its meaning. "Not just anyone can give a name, but only a maker of names, who, it seems, is a lawmaker, that is, the rarest artisan among humans". In this lies the trap of transcendent values. After two thousand years, we are still at the same old history: Whether in concepts that are akin or in movements that are in reaction against other movements, this hard core of Western thought is present in every century. In this way, Platonism has set itself up as the guardian angel of world's cultures.

It is the reason why, instead of tackling this issue by means of anthropology or psychoanalysis like I, at first, had intended to, I rather opted for philosophy and literature; two disciplines my professors had armed me with. Philosophy, I believe, is a fundamental ground for the foundations of the lasting values of culture; it nourishes and structures political and social debates, and above all spurs creativity. Literature, especially the novel, is the cultural form where attitudes, references, values and experiences are expressed with the greatest acuity.

The eighteenth-century novel is particularly stamped by the prevalence of a pure, unique, transcendent "idea". Rousseau's "noble savage", personified by *Friday*, a literary hero in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, is an obvious example. The *noble savage* trope restores and extends the myth of a Golden Age, which implies the perfection of a primeval state of nature. The pattern of the myth is deeply anchored in collective western thought: an almighty, benevolent and blissful Nature, the domain of intuition, instinct, and the irrational, opposed to the reflection, rigour, intellect and reason of western culture.

Crusoe's Man Friday

Robinson Crusoe appears to embody the aesthetic object, and one whose connections to the expanding

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societies of Britain and France in the eighteenth century are most interesting. For that reason, I have focused on two novels which represent prototypical narrations of Western encounters with the non-Western: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Tournier's *Friday* (1994). Each of them concerns a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant non-European island. The first restricts itself to reconfirming the supremacy of a British ideology. The second does no more than juggle with western philosophical concepts.

The one portrays Friday, the non-European character in the novel, as dependent upon and subordinate to Crusoe, as if this were to be the natural status of a man of colour. The other strives to pull him out of that state, but only to transmute him into a symbol of innocence. With these novels as a starting point, I will seek to evoke the epistemological problem that surfaces at the very birth of western civilization, and that continues to structure and shape European thought.

Designed to reconfirm the validity of an original model, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* hews to the epistemology that dominates the eighteenth century. It is typical of "representation" thinking at the end of the eighteenth century. Representation is an attempt to apply a surrogate for a notion considered vulgar. According to that thinking, all the component parts of a proposed theory are "totalitarian": they cannot be challenged because they are reducible to a Platonic pre-established, predetermined schema. It was essential to demonstrate, beyond possibility of challenge, the truth of the dominant economic, political, and religious ideology: almighty Great Britain, beacon of western civilization; a Darwinian-influenced imperialism that preached a racial basis for the superiority and mission of British culture across the world; the Protestant ethic of labour and savings; and the Calvinist Puritanism that restrained the most natural components of desire and sexuality.

I would like to underline how Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* characterizes and reflects this dominant epistemology of a transcending value. This may explain what makes a European, as if he or she were blinded by the glitter of his or her own culture, unable to integrate and translate a complex reality foreign to his or her own.

First, is the topographical setting: Defoe does not care in the least about Nature as a reality with its own potentialities that ought to be acknowledged and respected. His Nature is surely short of Rousseau's pantheist view. Defoe's Nature begs to be exploited, not adored. In his newspaper, the *Review*, Defoe wrote: "Nothing follows the course of nature more than trade. There causes and consequences follow as directly as day and night" (Wilson 1830:319). Defoe puts his hero on the island for the sole end of launching an elementary process of a political economy as dogmatic as any religion. Ian writes: "Indeed, if we, perhaps unwisely, attempt to draw a general conclusion from Robinson Crusoe's life on the island, it must surely be that out of humanity's repertoire of conceivable designs for living, rational economic behaviour alone is entitled to ontological status" (Watt 1951:98). In short, nature is observed with the calculating gaze of a British colonial capitalist. British capitalism is the absolute value, "the most desolate island cannot retain its natural order; wherever the white man brings his rational technology, the jungle itself must succumb to the irresistible teleology of capitalism" (Watt 1951:98).

Space lay supine awaiting occupation and Eurocentric enterprise. Neither is time able to resist Crusoe's enterprise. Its cyclic round is derailed. "Upon the sides on this square post I cut every day a notch with my knife, and every first day of the month as long again as that long one, and thus I kept my kalendar, or weekly, monthly, and yearly reckoning of time"(Defoe 1975:52). In fact, the goal of the enterprise is to impose upon the island a linear time conceived according to the rational processes of western culture: to compute time to better control it; to direct it to appropriate it; in a word, to become master of nature.

It follows, then, that Crusoe's personal relationship too can only be treated in terms of commodity values. When a young black man, miraculously escaped from cannibals' pot, unexpectedly arrives, he is described according to the criteria of the western esthetic:

He was a comely handsome fellow, perfectly well made, with straight strong limbs, not too large. He had the softness and the sweetness of a European in his countenance. His hair was long and black not curled like wool. The colour of the skin was not quite black, but very tawny; and yet not an ugly yellow nauseous tawny, as the Brasilians, and the Virginians, and other natives of America are. His nose small, not flat like the Negroes(Defoe 1975:160).

What strikes one most is the name. Crusoe does not ask this young black man for his name, he gives one: "Friday." In *Phantasmes et littérature moderne*, Gilles Deleuze (1967:330) writes that "As soon as one names, as soon as one designates something or someone... one betrays it". In *Jacques Lacan*, Anika Rifflet-Lemaire (1970:364) adds: "When one names something, one takes a distance from it". For Robinson, a non-European is not entirely a human being. "Friday" suits him well. Friday is neither a proper nor a common noun; it is something between the two, half living and abstract, strongly marked by casual and episodic connotations. In his commentary on a letter to Columbus, Todorov provides an excellent example of this tendency of eurocentrism to "name" and to deprive the "other" of their differences:

Columbus's failure to recognize the diversity of languages permits him, when he confronts a foreign tongue, only two possible and complementary forms of behavior: to acknowledge it as a language but to refuse to believe that it is different, or to acknowledge its difference but to refuse to admit that it is a language (Todorov1984:30).

What was Friday for Defoe? Nothing. An animal. At best a savage, waiting to receive humanity from Crusoe, the westerner, sole possessor of all knowledge and all wisdom. That Crusoe can have had something to learn from Friday would not have crossed Defoe's mind. Notice that Crusoe does not learn the island language but teaches Friday his. Once, when Friday has learned English so well that he could answer almost any question, Crusoe tries to discover whether Friday has any inclination to return to his own country. He begins by asking Friday whether his people were ever conquered in battle:

The master: You have always fought the better, said I, how came you to be taken Prisoner then, Friday?

Friday: My nation beat much, for all that. They more many than my nation in the Place where me was; they take one, two, three and me; my nation over beat them in the yonder place, where me no was; there my nation take one, two, great thousand.

They run one, two, three, and me, and make go in the canoe; my nation have nocanoe that time. Yes, my nation eats mans too, eat all up" (Crusoe 1975, p.167).

Taken without a fight, Friday could be nothing else but Crusoe's slave portrayed as speaking some sort of Pidgin English – the stereotyped foreigner talk produced by the colonial tradition throughout the Western world. An indigenous person can be valued only in terms of supply and demand. Xury, the Moorish boy whom Crusoe promised "to love ever after"(p.23), to make a great man and to set

him free in six years if he turned Christian, was sold at the first opportunity to a Portuguese trader.

After Defoe, there dawned the century of great travels and great explorations; and ethnography created a sensation within the human sciences. One learned that there were no savages, but simply men and women whose civilizations and cultures differed from one's own, and that these differences must be taken into account. But western prejudice remained tenacious. Defoe's novel motivated many new versions and imitations across the world, each of them influenced by the mentality and ideological climate of its own country. Some of the best known include Madame Wolliez's *RobinsondesDemoiselles* (1850), Johann Rudolf Wyss' *RobinsonSuisse* (1929), Dominique David's *RobinsondesGlaces* (1991). They adopted more or less the same central pattern of thought.

One of the more recent is Michel Tournier's *Friday*. Formally, it recalls Defoe's work; however, it overturns Defoe's content in several ways. First, Friday is a hero as well; hence the title. Second, the narrative builds on the great novelistic polyphony of nineteenth century French literature. Third, Tournier sets the story in an unspecified time, far removed from the nineteenth century or the days of Plato's *Cratylus*, and brings into focus contemporary problems of loneliness, angst, and absolute freedom. Fourth, in order to negotiate the narrative, Tournier brackets the dogmatism of a system of pure, fixed, unique transcendent meanings and values inherited from Plato and characteristic of Defoe's work. To do so, he uses symbolism and philosophy to illuminate his theme. Symbolism occurs in the following elements: isolation and absence of the other, territoriality, temporality and corporeality.

All these elements, in their metaphorical data, work to produce a multiplicity of "meanings" for the metamorphosis of Robinson. We discover as well the meanings of the island's different forms through their names: "Island of Despair", "Island of Hope", "Island of Eternity". Finally, the hero Friday's own meaning appears. Unlike Defoe's Friday, escaped from a cannibals' pot, Tournier's is snatched from a ritual death to be transmuted into a symbol of innocence. As we seek the significance of this overlaid multiplicity of meanings, phenomena cease to be mere appearances and become "signs."

In this way, "meaning" becomes a complex notion. Several "meanings" coexist, follow one another, and interfere. Consequently, the Tournierian discourse, polysemic and dynamic, opposes an inert referentiality. Step by step, then, emerges "another world, another space, another time, another sexuality" and, eventually, "another individual," which is Friday.

Crusoe fails very quickly in his attempt to make Friday his slave. His influence on him was "nil" (Tournier 1994:188). From this point on, Tournier has Crusoe stand aside and give Friday the chance to teach him how to live on the island. We have here an inversion, a tactic dear to Tournier, whose play with antinomies, symmetries, and permutations is very artful. Only half aware that he is doing so, Friday will undermine and demolish Robinson's civilized works by reversing the "course of events." What was, in Defoe, a static myth, here stretches dynamically towards new meanings. There now begins on the island an ecstatic experience of subversion and freedom, which takes place with the help of symbols that chart the reversed "course of events." However, this revisited myth must be at first divested of its ritual charge to acquire all its significance. The significant dimension of the myth is found in the dynamic movements of Life and Death rituals whose essential function is to lay the foundation of humankind and to "uplift itself beyond its limits and accede to contemplation and to spiritual life" (Zahan 1970:89).

A full stop of the clock indicates the radical end of a time, the suspension of a certain order, and at the same time gives notice of the death and rebirth of the old Crusoe. The drying out of the rice paddy points out the inadequacy and perhaps the total failure of Crusoe's attempts to domesticate the

Araucan (Friday). When Friday tears out trees by the roots, replants them upside down, and young green shoots and even clusters of leaves appear at the tips of the roots, is it not symbolically a figure of life and death this act evokes? A Sabeian tradition, reported by Mircea Eliade in *Traité d'histoire des Religions* (1953:240) mentions that "Plato would have confirmed that man is an upside down plant whose roots are stretched up towards the sky and whose branches hang down towards the earth. The same tradition is met in the Hebraic esoteric doctrine. The Tree of Life stretches up from top to bottom and the sun lights it up entirely".

Then, Tournier leaves the world of symbols for that of psychodrama. Friday organizes a combat against a legendary goat called Andoar. Here, with an accent which recalls Flaubert, he has his Crusoe declare: "Andoar was myself" (Tournier, 1994:227). The issue of this decisive ritual combat is to liberate the Elements (air, water, earth, fire) as well as to release the old Crusoe.

The philosophical illumination appears when Tournier turns to Plato's concept of pure, fixed, unique, transcendent ideas. For the duality idea/appearance of Plato's *Cratylus*, Tournier substitutes multiple expressions from Spinoza's *Ethics* (1904). Hence, if Defoe's novel relates the reconfirmation of a western ideology, the story of Robinson Crusoe, the island, and Friday is for Tournier a pretext to bring forth a formidable western theory of knowledge.

"Stage 1): Cognitionis primi generis, Opinio, or Imaginatio = Dehumanization of Robinson."

To get rid of the hero's two thousand years of western civilization, Tournier first sinks his Robinson Crusoe slowly into madness, then degrades him to the level of an animal. Crusoe finds himself in a hog wallow:

His hair and beard had grown so long that his face was almost invisible beneath their tangled mass. His hands had become mere forepaws used for walking, since it made him giddy to stand upright [...] He lived on unmentionable foods, gnawing them with his face to the ground. He relieved himself where he lay, and rarely failed to roll in the damp warmth of his own excrement (Defoe 1975:40).

To get out of the "robinsonnade" straightjacket, Tournier has to subject his hero to a painful but indispensable initiation, a ritual agony of the body, in order to become conscious of his life as a human being. On the island, Crusoe perceives the world as illusory, as the angst of nothingness, as the precariousness of existence. He names the island "Island of Despair." Spinoza's account of this state describes the first stage of knowledge as partial and subjective, for the idea of modifications of the human body insofar as they relate only to the human soul does not reflect clear and distinct ideas, but confused ones. "The human soul builds up clear and adequate ideas when the body ceases to be "acted," that means when it accomplishes actions it is fully aware of" (Spinoza 1904:88-91).

In getting rid of a shell of two thousand years of western civilization, Crusoe begins his integration. As necessary complements to his obsession with work, he develops a passion for relaxation and sexuality. One day he penetrates to the centre of the island and there discovers a narrow crypt, where there is an archway that fits his body exactly. "Where man takes the earth as spouse, comes about a creation of the world through the rooting of the structures of scared. Consequently, this constitutes the transcending horizon of an activity which will deploy itself as a cosmic liturgy" (Gusdorf 1984:113):

The goal of this celebration is to complete the dehumanization of Crusoe and to begin his integration into Nature. Robinson Crusoe writes in his log-book: “Speranza was not a domain to administer anymore, but a person necessarily of feminine nature to whom draw his philosophical speculations as well as the new needs of his heart and his flesh (Tournier 1994:109).

“Stage 2): Cognitio secundi generis, Ratio = Robinson’s rational organization and integration.”

His dehumanization complete, Robinson Crusoe recreates himself from scratch. He inaugurates a new era on the island, that of order, organization and labor. The Island is now named “Island of Hope.” He begins by deciding to enter the world of the spiritual and of rational wisdom through the use of the “sacred act of writing”(Defoe 1975: 46), as he puts it in his logbook. According to Crusoe, writing is imposed by the necessity to understand and grasp the knowledge that defines principles of power and helps one master Nature. It is on the basis of corporeal nature that the axioms of mathematics and physical science rest. “I demand, I insist, that everything around me shall henceforth be measured, tested, certified, mathematical, and rational... I shall not be content until this opaque and impenetrable place... has been transformed into a rational structure, visible and intelligible to its very depths” (Defoe 1975:66). Therefore, Robinson makes a “clepsydra”, a kind of primitive machine to measure time:

Listening by day and night to the regular ‘plop’ of water dropping into the bowl, he had the feeling that the time could no longer slip away from him, that he had regulated and mastered time – in a word, tamed it, just as the whole island was gradually to be tamed by the strength and resolution of a single man” (Defoe 1975:65).

So, time, labour, order, accumulation and productive consumption are all well in place when Friday arrives. This Friday, unlike Defoe’s Friday, will never become Crusoe’s slave. We are far from the idyll of a master and his slave. Tournier’s Friday accepts grievous humiliations and carries out absurd tasks only to disillusion Crusoe about the success of his order. “He obeys me implicitly in everything... But in his very submission there is something too complete, something almost automatic, which chills me” (Defoe 1975:140) writes Crusoe in his logbook. To better undermine the foundation of the order Crusoe has established, Friday must be both innocent and its opposite. When Crusoe teaches him definitions, dogmas, or mysteries, Friday reacts with a laugh, a crazy laugh: “He would burst into an explosion of laughter, confounding the Governor, and putting him out of countenance” (Defoe 1975: 140:140).

There is no sex in Defoe’s novel. On the other hand, the nineteenth century novel is haunted by the disturbing designs of a sexually active protagonist. Consider the fate of Julien Sorel, or of Fabrice del Dongo. Both die because their manifest desires are not compatible with society’s mores. Emma Bovary likewise embodies the will of the realistic novel to curb desire and make social stability triumph. Even as he imitates Crusoe’s notion of desire, this is the social order that Tournier’s Friday subverts. In allowing his disruptive hero to complete his rebellion, Tournier explodes the fictional order. Friday secretly visits the “pink combe”, a kind of valley covered with silky grass; here he

too has sexual intercourse with the island, thereby betraying Crusoe and creating hybrid plants. In this way the island is ridiculed, soiled, and violated by a black man. Friday's smiling anarchy "congolises" the island before "decolonising" it.

The stain Friday puts on the island turns Robinson Crusoe away from the "pink combe". But when Friday secretly smokes Crusoe's pipe, he provokes a cataclysm that destroys every trace of civilization and strips away the very foundations of "Being" and life. In this way, Friday achieves, with brutal effectiveness, the complete destruction of Crusoe's pathetic and transitory creations; then, on this "tabula rasa," they invent a new world. The conceptual speculations, whose sole objective was the legitimation of the existing order, are over and done with. The world is shattered by the explosion of the cave, and, with it, the explosion of the legitimacy of the unique system of values and representations the cave stands for. Order has collapsed.

Once the regnant order constructed by culture has collapsed, the conflict is resolved and the hierarchies that emerge from the free movement of the cosmos are acknowledged and accepted by all – by Crusoe, by Friday, by the Island. In the reality of science, there is no room for an individual body and mind. The self, which is the centre of scientific experience, is a self which is constituted of the permanent and necessary properties common to all modes of extension and thought... As we attain to scientific knowledge, "we" must disappear: science can neither recognize nor justify the distinct being of the man of science (Joachim 1901:178-179).

"Stage 3): Tertium cognitionis genus. Scientia Intuitiva = Robinson's solar ecstasy."

The imaginative and the scientific experience describe man as "intelligence" – as a purely cognitive being. To know the absolute reality, man must reconcile his cognitive characteristics with his emotional and active being. In other words, only by the intermingling of the three stages can Crusoe be free of his western blindfold. With this, the cycle is closed. Released from the earth's gravity and brought back to the initial harmony, Tournier's Robinson Crusoe can now enter the time of his history. There follows a liberation through the body which involves the liberation of natural things as the liberation of individual natural essence. The island becomes a "solar city" hanging between time and eternity, between hell and heaven, a city where Crusoe can live an absolute moment of innocence.

And so Crusoe, hanging in his "happy eternity," arrives at a kind of joy and permanence he has never felt before. For Spinoza, this state of happy "eternity" reflects absolute knowledge in an intuition of his essence. "The intuitive knowledge of the human mind in its essence and in its individual dependence on God (which Spinoza claims), if it is to answer to the ideal of intuitive science, presupposes a complete apprehension of the total nature of the universe, and a complete scientific demonstration of the coherence and inner articulation of all its properties" (Spinoza 1904:185).

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Tournier's *Friday* are a tour de force in Eurocentrism. It will be hyperbolic though to assert as Leslie Stephen does when he declares that "it (*Robinson Crusoe*) falls short of any high intellectual interest" (Stephen 1874:51-58). *Robinson Crusoe* is simply a retrospective novel whose author, Daniel Defoe, confines himself to display and to reconfirm, with little cost, on a deserted island, the supremacy of British economic, political and religious ideology. Curiously, Karl Marx does not think otherwise. In *Capital*, he takes no account of Friday. His name is mentioned nowhere. For Marx, if prayers are a source of pleasure to him (Crusoe), the novel consists of nothing but different modes of human labour (Marx 1921:88-91). That means the novel

consists of nothing more than the necessary operations of labour-production-distribution. Therefore, characterization is only a part of the reification of commodities.

Tournier's merit is to attempt to get out of the "robinsonnade" by creating a different narrative form and by using a vivid and symbolic language whose atemporal and non-spatial significance touches the heart and the intelligence of all human beings. Having said this, does Tournier break himself out of Eurocentrism? I would say not. Thanks to Spinoza, Tournier succeeds elegantly in achieving his Robinson Crusoe's metamorphosis. But the question is raised, what about his Friday? At the beginning of the novel, Friday is seen as "the lowest stratum of humanity" (Tournier 1994:138). In the middle of the novel, he still is "not a rational being, performing deliberate, considered acts, but rather a force of nature from which actions proceeded, and their consequences resembled him, the way children resemble their mother" (Tournier 1994:179). At the end of novel, Robinson Crusoe's ecstasy as he deludes himself with his thought that Friday and he are twin brothers – a thought followed by the sublimation of Friday in Dioscuri – resonates as a deadlock. First, "the truth is that at the height to which Friday and I have soared, difference of sex is left behind. Friday may be identified with venus, just as I may be said, in human terms, to open my body to the embrace of the sun" (Tournier 1994:212).

Then, directing the eyes towards the sky, Robinson Crusoe discovers that "in Leda's egg, fecundated by Jupiter, the Swan, the Dioscuri are born, Castor and Pollux, the Twins of the Sun more intimately linked than human twins because they share a single soul" (Tournier 1994:212). In short, neither Friday nor the island is a reality endowed with own dynamic potentialities. In spite of Tournier's appeal to Spinoza, the transmutation of Friday and the island reminds me more of Plato: I see a frenzied transcendence where both Friday and the island are transformed into a sort of ethereal and evanescent entities.

Conclusion

Endowing Friday with his own dynamic "inward light" and potentialities would have reopened minds to appropriate the notion of diversity and inalienability of civilizations. It would have, at the same time, instilled values distilled from "unwritten laws" of humanity such as: human rights, race and gender equality, religious freedom instead of coercion, morality instead of myopic moralism. The issue of Tournier's adventure is one about the consecration of Crusoe. Hanging in this happy eternity, Crusoe can have access to a kind of joy and permanence that he never experienced before, as if the intellect had just begun to understand things under the aspect of eternity, as if it was about a new birth. Since God, Nature and Truth appeared identical, it seems a real entry into freedom and joy.

Tournier's message is clear: Defoe's proposition was a path to truth, but it was not the only path. His nonsexual being echoed the principle of an Initial and arbitrary Model, supporting a perpetuation of the stern economic, political, and religious order of a real British world. Crusoe's freed and exalted body, as conceived by Tournier, symbolizes; whereas it is a denunciation of such ideological insights. Tournier develops his concepts of truth, morality and ethics by relying on observation and reasoning. In so doing, he rebuffs the hierarchical Platonist logos and promotes the advent of the immanence in appealing to the Spinoza's *Saving Intuition*. This confirms, in a last instance, the renewal of Eros, the principle of desire, as he alone is able to subvert the British order, to make it come adrift and bestow the absolute necessity of Creation.

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