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AUTHOR: Gualter Cunha

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“I made him know his Name should be Friday”: language, voice and identity in the narrative of Empire

Gualter Cunha

FACULDADE DE LETRAS DA UNIVERSIDADE DO PORTO

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When for the first time I arrived at the study of *Robinson Crusoe* the figure of Friday was in the main subsidiary to Ian Watt’s interpretation of Crusoe as a Puritan proto-capitalist image of *homo economicus*, a character who thinks of himself and of his world according to the principle of profit and the rules of the market under an all-encompassing belief in the dignity of labour. Crusoe’s relations with the others were thus seen as expressions of his bourgeois ideological egocentrism, as is exemplified in his naming of Friday. Watt’s pronouncement on this episode is well known: “[Crusoe] does not ask him his name, but gives him one” (Watt 76).

That was in the 1970’s. But time passes, critical refractions change, and episodes in novels come to signify different things. In the course of time the creation of Friday, besides being mainly seen, in the wake of Ian Watt, as a functional representation of manpower, albeit in a particular colonial form, came to be rather considered as an instance of, to borrow a formula from Gayatri Spivak, “”the imperialist constitution of the colonial subject” (Spivak 1988: 294). This does not imply that the study of Friday as a function of Crusoe’s individualist world view has become meaningless or that the historicist approach that enabled this interpretation has lost any of its critical acumen. As with knowledge in general, new ways of looking at literature are built upon the old ones and in some degree always presuppose their forerunners. The example of *Robinson Crusoe* seems to be a case in point.

Ian Watt has related, as is well known, the rise of the novel form to the socio-historical conditions that made individualism the prevalent ideology of capitalism. Though not theoretically affiliated to Max Weber and R. H. Tawney, Watt had for background the connection between the Protestant ethic and the emergence of capitalism as proposed by the former and further developed within British historiography by the last. The novel as a genre thus becomes a privileged esthetic configuration of the hegemony of capitalism, which explains its growing appeal to the

reading public in the early eighteenth century in England, while the aptitude of the Protestant ethic to represent the spiritual content of entrepreneurial individualism finds in the Puritan Daniel Defoe an adequate progenitor for the English tradition of the form.

While the connection between capitalism and the English novel (or the emergence of the novel in England) via the ideological formation of individualism has thus been long since established, the role of the Empire within this connection took some time to be recognized. With a few exceptions, of which Defoe is an example, the imaginary contents of the English novel do not seem to be considerably affected by the reality of Empire until the mid-nineteenth century, even though historians have repeatedly stressed the fact that the building of Britain as a capitalist world-power is inseparable from the building of the British Empire. It was through a new concept of culture, and of the place of the novel in it, that Edward Said came to the statement that "the novel, as a cultural artifact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other" (Said 70-1).

In order for Friday to be read differently it was necessary that collation of two important critical trends that made up the so-called postcolonial studies: on the one hand, the theoretical de-centering of the subject that allowed for a critique of any centripetal structuration of meaning, or "centrism", as is the case of eurocentrism (which also brought a rethinking of the categories of "centre" and "periphery"); on the other hand, the consideration of culture as a hegemonic system of representations or discourses that are not only created by reality but are also the place where reality (or power, if we prefer) *is* created. Upon his already established status as the Other of bourgeois individualism, Friday could then become something else: in his character we could now see, if not the first, at least one of the first steps in the constitution of the colonial subject within the scope of European culture. The difference is important. Analyzed under this new perspective Friday does not belong to the tradition of the subservient Other that owns his status to his lower placement in the social order, thus being always already integrated in the scheme of things, and whose comic version is epitomized in the figure of Sancho Panza, neither is he a version of the equally traditional Other within, as represented in the Medieval figures of the good and the bad angels, though he partakes of a bit of both. Those were versions of the Other as part and parcel of the existing world, either within the objective circle of society or the subjective circle of the self. The difference with Friday is that he comes from outside, from an uncartographed and uncertainly located outside that is then becoming a periphery.

The ethic projections of the self as inherited from the medieval tradition became apparent in the ethnic versions of the Other arising in connection with the beginning of the European colonial enterprise. Bartolomé de Las Casas in the sixteenth century and Montaigne in the seventeenth both present a vigorous condemnation of the atrocities achieved by the Europeans upon the indigenous populations. This ethic criticism of the imperial action does not entail a criticism of Empire, as was observed by Claude Rawson in reference to these two authors: "none of [their] statements reflects any unequivocal rejection of imperial invasion or rule" (Rawson 20). However, they imply a fictionalization of the Other as relatively harmless in his or her radical

difference, to be respected and dealt with in fairly equal terms. Patrick Brantlinger, probably the most important historian of Victorian literature within the field of Postcolonial Studies, though not considering any link with this distant past, locates a similar view of the Other in the "early and mid-Victorian decades. . .between 1830 and the 1860s" (Brantlinger 1988: 29), while at the same time associates it with the ideology of free trade. This ethnic version of the Other is also at the origin of the figure of the noble savage, which constitutes a common stock of literary colonial characters, from Aphra Behn´s Oroonoko in the late seventeenth century to Rider Haggard's Ignosi, in *King Solomon's Mines*, two centuries later.

Though Friday does not fall within this category, there is however a moment in the narrative, before his arrival, in which Crusoe echoes the criticism of the Spanish colonization voiced by Las Casas and Montaigne while arguing for some kind of cultural relativism:

> I began by little and little to be off my design, and to conclude I had taken wrong measures in my resolution to attack the savages; . . . Upon the whole, I concluded that I ought, neither in principle nor in policy, one way or other, to concern myself in this affair . . . and I was convinced now, many ways, that I was perfectly out of my duty when I was laying all my bloody schemes for the destruction of innocent creatures - I mean innocent as to me. (Defoe 126)

It should however be stressed again that this apparent respect for the culture of the Other does never mean his or her acceptance on an equal standing, as "they" will continue to be "barbarians" and "savages". Crusoe's move is also dictated by his fear of not being able to cope with all the savages if he tries to attack them. The representation of the Other on an apparently equal cultural standing in inextricable from a strategy that is grounded on the consideration of the Other as enemy. After the arrival of the savage and after imposing a name on him (giving a name means to impose a name), Crusoe feels that he "was still a cannibal in his nature" (Defoe 151). For more than three centuries, from the culturalist indulgence of Montaigne to the anthropological abhorrence of Conrad, cannibalism was probably the most outstanding feature of this constitution of the colonial subject as a kind of Other under surveillance. This fear of being appropriated (eaten) by the Other, which is the reverse of the colonial move, would become more manifest in the "invasion scare" and in the "fear of going native" of the so-called Imperial Gothic of the late nineteenth century, in Well's *War of the Worlds*, in Stoker's *Dracula* or in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Brantlinger 2009: 45-52).

Commenting on Friday's hallucinatory reaction to the discovery of the footprint in the sand, Brantlinger considers that

> Perhaps the footprint after all was only hallucination, mirage. . . . And perhaps the cannibals and Friday, too, are only phantoms, the shadows of an objectless fear and a desire for mastery that Crusoe himself fails to understand. No doubt they are "real", in the same sense that the footprint was "real": but they might as well just be the images projected on sand, sky and water by Crusoe's fear and desire. (Brantlinger 1990: 2)

In stressing this dreamlike character of Crusoe's encounter with the Other, and in pointing to fear and desire as the ultimate ground for Crusoe's representations, Brantlinger is presenting an instance of that new reading of Friday I mentioned before.

It is worth noting that the arrival of Friday and his consequent appropriation by Crusoe is preceded by a dream in which he comes to the rescue of a savage that flees other savages who intend to eat him: "upon which I shew'd my ladder, made him go up, and carry'd him into my cave, and he became my servant" (Defoe 145). In the "real world" the appropriation of Friday is not going to be this easy, but almost. Friday is literally ensnared into Crusoe's cave, attracted to it like a fly to a spider's web. By making things simple, the dream becomes not only a prediction (which appears to be its narrative function) but also a powerful symbol of the appropriation of Friday, who will end entrapped in Crusoe's dream. Quoting Gilles Deleuze: "Si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre, vous êtes foutu". That's Friday's fate.

If cannibalism accounts, at least symbolically, for the fear that leads Crusoe to fantasies of extermination first, and afterwards to an urge for surveillance, it is desire "for a reformed, recognizable Other" (Bhabha 86) that makes him take as his charge the education of Friday, starting with language ("I made it my business . . . to make him speak" [Defoe 153]). Thus began "the white man's burden" . . . and TEFL. The naming of Friday, as well as the naming of himself as "Master" ("I likewise taught him to say Master" [Defoe 150]), is just the beginning of that process of forced acculturation through language aiming at creating an identity for the colonial subject within the colonialist discourse. Naming Friday is thus the utterance of the first word in the creation of a fully integrated system that by fashioning the Other will likewise involve a new figuration of the Self. This leads us to Said's statement quoted earlier about the inextricability of the novel and the Empire.

This process of constituting the colonial subject brings about a collapse of that duality of the ethnic Other that could be traced back at least to the sixteenth century. Though the old images of the innocent and harmless savage and of the hellish barbarian will persist through to the twentieth century (with a remarkable example of this last in *Heart of Darkness*), the educational drive will become a dominant feature in the configuration of the Empire, especially in the nineteenth century, fostering the ideology of the common imperial interest. This drive should appear as a legitimating route to equality, ending up in a full and happy integration of the colonial Other in the supposedly common values and aims of the Empire: an imperial utopia at least partially envisaged in Kipling's *Kim.* There is however a major flaw in this trend of the colonial discourse, which Homi Bhabha names as "mimicry": "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 86).

Charles Gildon, a contemporary of Defoe who first publicly denounced his anonymous authorship of *Robinson Crusoe*, had already felt this difference when he noted that Friday was still speaking broken English "twelve Years after he had been with his Master, and almost as unintelligibly, as after he had been with him but twelve

Days" (Gildon 118). Of course Crusoe's teaching methods might have been to blame, but there seems to be something more essential in this mocking of the model that mimicry substantiates. Bhabha's essay takes as one of its references the "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) by Lord Macaulay, the British politician who was responsible for introducing English in the educational system of India. I quote the most well-known passage of the "Minute":

> "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay 8).

This example confirms the collapse I mentioned above: "blood and colour" contain that part of the Other that is deemed irreducible and that accounts for the fact that, even if the Other acquires a full expertise in English taste, and opinions, and morals, and intellect, a status of equal standing will never be attained. Language, and all the knowledge that may be acquired through it, is an instrument for casting an identity of the Other that makes him or her an apt interpreter of the will of the Empire in the presence of those that are governed by it. But the more perfected that identity and the more knowledgeable the interpreter, the more displaced, inauthentic and even ridicule will become the pretense of the other to look like "one of us". This figure of mimicry that pervades the colonial discourse is well exemplified by the Babu, a character in *Kim* that is the imaginative counterpart to Macaulay's interpreter. As Edward Said writes of him,

> The native anthropologist, clearly a bright man whose reiterated ambitions to belong to the Royal Society are not unfounded, is almost always funny, or gauche, or somehow caricatural, not because he is incompetent or inept – on the contrary – but because he is not white. (Said 153)

Or to put it in the terms used epigrammatically by Bhabha to summarize the figure of mimicry, "*Almost the same but not white"* (Bhabha 89).

Language, and how it is commanded, will become a kind of litmus test for the recognition of the Other within the colonial discourse. It is as if language proficiency were a measure of the appropriation of the Other, inversely proportional to the risk that he or she presents of appropriating "us", that is, of reverting to cannibalism. To put it in other words, language becomes a gauge of desire as against fear in ascertaining the identity of the Other.

This is understandable as the acquisition of the colonial language by the Other is taken by the colonial discourse as a measure of his or her integration in and acceptance of the system. But as a matter of fact it is after all not the use of a particular language that is important, unless on a strictly practical level, as that posed by Macaulay's minute. The Other of the colonial discourse may be seen as an identity created within that very same discourse, a kind of projection or a mask that is created by the Self in order to confront and appropriate whatever is outside, and only becomes the Other the moment it enters the discourse, be it as an enemy or as a servant. That is why it may not make much difference whether Friday is read as a dream or as "real"

– what is important is that he becomes Friday only after entering Crusoe's cave. This means that it is possible to turn the question of language into a question of voice. When the Other speaks he or she always speaks with a voice that is a gift of the discourse, in a language that only makes sense in so far as it is understood within that discourse. The recognition of the other as an identity necessarily allows a margin for that identity to act and be expressed as such, but a boundary condition may be conceived in which no agency is recognized and thus no identity is formed. This is the case of what Gayatri Spivak terms subalternity: "No one can say 'I am a subaltern' in whatever language" (Spivak 2005: 476).

Strictly speaking such a figure is not susceptible of literary representation as a character, unless it be as a margin, or a stillness in the margin, outside and impervious to the narrative action, almost a paratext. There is a literary figure that comes near to complying with these requirements: it is in Forster's *A Passage to India,* and is the punkah-wallah, the man who pulled the fan suspended from the ceiling in the court-room where the trial of Aziz took place. The homoerotic content of the representation combines with its strong symbolical meaning in order to produce a memorable passage in this book:

> The court was crowded...and the first person Adela noticed in it was the humblest of all who were present...the man who pulled the punkah....Almost naked, and splendidly formed . . . [h]e had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god...he seemed apart from human destinies, a male Fate, a winnower of souls. (Forster 204-5)

The punkah-wallah doesn't speak, he cannot speak, because he doesn't belong to that world, and only unconsciously does he indirectly interfere in it. The more a character belongs, the more his or her voice is audible, as with the talkative Ignosi in Haggard's *King Salomon's Mines*, who is a monument to the civilizing mission of the Empire. When the white men tell him that they will be able to "darken the sun" (because they know that there will be an eclipse), Ignosi replies: "It is strange, and had ye not been Englishmen I would not have believed it; but English "gentlemen" tell no lies." (Haggard 130)

Ignosi is thus a kind of ideal Friday that fulfills the supreme ambition of the ideology of empire, acting as the Other that assumes in his own voice the values impinged on him. With their knowledge about eclipses the British will help Ignosi to regain his throne, thus replacing the obscurantist and iniquitous authority of the usurper Twala with a state based on religious toleration and the rule of law.

Brantlinger locates in the early Victorian period, namely in Merryat's novels, a narrative of empire that optimistically conceives of a time when the colonies will become independent, and "even 'barbarians and savages' may one day become 'a great nation'", following the example of the United States (Brantlinger 2009: 31). Later on in the century, as racism would become more and more a determining factor in imagining the nation, this view would turn out to be untenable. But Ignosi's accomplishment, as it is fictionalized by Haggard in 1885, at the time of the Scramble

for Africa and one year after the Berlin Conference, is yet the imaginary "mission accomplished" of that bright myth of imperialism, running absolutely counter the invasion scares or the growing fears of going native that pervade the narrative of empire at the end of the century. There is no mimicry here, as the voice of the Other does not differ from the voice of the Self.

With Haggard's Ignosi we seem to be in the antipodes of Forster's punkah-wallah, as we have, on the one hand, the entire presence of the voice and, on the other, its total absence. But if we consider that voice, within the narrative of empire, tends to function metonymically as the seat of identity, this appears to be one of those cases where ends meet. If "subalternity is a position without identity" (Spivak 2005: 476), we can also say that the total appropriation of the Other by ideology amounts to depriving him or her of any identity. In the first case the absence of identity is a result of the operations of society, as happens with Forster's subaltern character, in the second it results from the operations of myth, as is achieved in Haggard's fully assimilated African. After all, both the voiceless untouchable punkah-wallah and the loquacious kingly Ignosi occupy similar discursive places: both are extreme representations of identity theft in the narrative of empire.

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