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Robinson's Anthro-poiesis

Abstract I: Dopo trecento anni dalla sua pubblicazione *Robinson Crusoe* continua a offrire una potente riflessione sul rapporto tra cultura e natura. Il romanzo ridisegna i confini tra umanità e animalità e insinua l'idea, molto moderna, che l'identità umana non è un dato naturale, bensì l'esito di un lungo processo di costruzione. Quest'idea viene ripresa ed esplorata in alcune riscritture contemporanee del mito di Robinson. Con esempi tratti dal *Robinson Crusoe* di Defoe e da due riscritture contemporanee del romanzo – *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* di Michel Tournier e *Foe* di J. M. Coetzee –, affronterò alcuni aspetti del dibattito sul binomio natura-cultura e proverò a dimostrare come alcune ipotesi avanzate da Defoe e dagli artisti da lui ispirati siano in sintonia con le teorizzazioni più recenti dell'antropologia.

Abstract II: Three hundred years after its first publication *Robinson Crusoe* continues to stand out as a powerful reflection on culture and nature. The novel re-draws the boundaries between humanity and animality and insinuates a very modern idea: human nature is not a given, but the result of a lengthy process. The idea is taken up and explored in some contemporary re-writings of the Robinson myth. By drawing examples from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and from two contemporary re-writings of the novel – Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* – I will explore some aspects of the nature-versus-culture debate and show how Defoe's hypotheses – and those of the artists who were inspired by him – are in tune with the most recent anthropological theories.

The title of my contribution refers to a theory that in Italy has found a sophisticated spokesperson in the anthropologist Francesco Remotti. It is the theory of anthro-poiesis, according to which human nature is not defined biologically, once and for all, but is rather the result of a process of cultural construction. According to this theory, man is a malleable being, which is continuously shaped by external forces: the natural and social environment, and, within the latter, traditions, religious models, technical and scientific discoveries (Remotti 2013: 4-59). This is in fact an old idea, rediscovered and re-elaborated in the twentieth century in various fields, from philosophy to anthropology and neuroscience. Remotti traces a grand genealogy from Plato to Montaigne, Pascal, Vico and Herder. A first formulation of the theory is found in Pico della Mirandola's *De hominis dignitate*, where Pico re-writes

the famous statement of Genesis that man was made in the image of God, thus opening to man an absolute freedom. Pico writes: “there remained no archetype according to which He might fashion a new offspring” [nec erat in archetipis unde novam subolem effingeret] (Pico della Mirandola 1941: 6). And then, in the voice of God speaking to Adam, he adds: “We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer” [Nec te celestem neque terrenum, neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et factor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas] (Pico della Mirandola 1941: 8, my translation)¹.

Following a similar line of thought, Johann Gottfried Herder remarks, three centuries later, that “man takes shape depending on the hands in which he falls” (Herder 1992: 160, my translation). For supporters of the idea of stable and universal human nature, from Descartes to Kant, culture (or, to use a pre-nineteenth-century term, costumes) obscures the universal laws of human nature: ‘the rock in the sand’, as Descartes puts it. For the advocates of anthropo-poiesis, by contrast, culture or, rather, cultures are the only possible forms of humanity.

Herder’s theory of the incompleteness of human nature had a vast echo in twentieth-century anthropology. In the Seventies, Clifford Geertz linked this tradition of thought to the latest discoveries of paleo-anthropology and neurobiology, to conclude that the modern human brain (i.e. the brain of *homo sapiens sapiens*) is not a precondition for the birth of culture but rather a product of culture itself (Geertz 1987: 110). From a paleo-anthropological perspective it makes little sense to think of a biologically formed human being who then creates culture: instead Geertz evokes the idea of an incessant cultural process that gives shape to human beings, whose anatomical and cerebral structure develops in parallel with their cultural inventions. Or, to put it in the words of an influential book of the early Eighties, *Not in Our Genes*, written by a biologist, a geneticist and a psychologist: “[T]he only sensible thing to say about human nature is that it is ‘in’ that nature to construct its own history” (Rose *et al.* 1990: 14). Recapitulating his ingenious reconstruction of a tradition of thought that embraces several centuries, Remotti writes: “Non vi è l’uomo e poi le sue forme; l’uomo è invece e subito le sue forme di umanità, nessuna delle quali può pretendere all’universalità, proprio perché non vi è una natura umana che precede il lavoro dell’antropo-poiesi” (Remotti 2013: 31).

The natural environment in which man is born and lives is thereby recognized as an essential modeling factor that defines human identity. This is also not a new idea; although we have become more cautious about notions of natural and social environment, or nature and culture, and more aware of the difficulties of assessing the influence that nature exerts on man (and vice versa)². And yet, it is commonly accepted that our relationship with the environment deeply reflects our identity, our beliefs and ways of life, and our idea of how future generations might live. In this article, I will explore some of these issues in relation

¹ For a detailed analysis of this passage, see Remotti 2013: 27-30.

² For a discussion of the nature-culture divide as a problematic and historically contingent dichotomy, see Descola 2014: 83 and ff.

to *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, a novel that, like many works of its times, seems obsessed with the need for a definition of human nature³. In a typically eighteenth-century manner, Defoe's novel is also a thought experiment: what remains of a human being when he is propelled into a natural world completely untouched by man? Can our form of life conceive of a truly uncontaminated world, or does our mere presence suffice to transform this world into something different? *Robinson Crusoe* still offers, after three hundred years, some very topical insights into the relationship between nature and culture, the boundaries of humanity and animality, and, last but not least, the very definition of humanity itself.

To sketch some possible approaches to these complex issues, I will start from two famous re-writings of Defoe's novel, Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), and then return to the source text. I have chosen these two among many because both focus on the relationship between nature and culture – a topic that is treated with great political urgency in these extremely political re-writings. I will suggest that the two novels offer distinctive models of possible relationships with nature, while Defoe's novel presents a different and in many ways more nuanced treatment of the same topic.

At the start of Tournier's novel, nature and culture are presented as two entirely separate and indeed contrasting realms. Thrust onto an island which at first appears to him impenetrable, covered by an overwhelming vegetation and populated by repellent animals, Tournier's Crusoe slowly loses the sense of his own humanity. At the mercy of every hostile element, he clings to the only remnant of civilization that is still in his possession, "ces pauvres hardes – usées, lacérées, maculées, mais issues de plusieurs millénaires de civilisation et imprégnées d'humanité" (Tournier 2008: 30). Soon, however, the elements have the upper hand: without his companions, alone in the wilderness, Robinson loses his sense of decency, the need for spoken language, the wish to adorn his person, his upright posture:

Robinson ne savait plus depuis combien de temps il avait abandonné son dernier haillon aux épines d'un buisson. D'ailleurs il ne craignait plus l'ardeur du soleil, car une croûte d'excréments séchés couvrait son dos, ses flancs et ses cuisses. Sa barbe et ses cheveux se mêlaient, et son visage disparaissait dans cette masse hirsute. Ses mains devenues des moignons crochus ne lui servaient plus qu'à marcher [...] il ne se déplaçait plus qu'en se traînant sur le ventre. Il savait maintenant que l'homme est semblable à ces blessés au cours d'un tumulte ou d'une émeute qui demeurent debout aussi longtemps que la foule les soutient en les pressant, mais qui glissent à terre dès qu'elle se disperse. La foule de ses frères, qui l'avait entretenu dans l'humain sans qu'il s'en rendît compte, s'était brusquement écartée de lui, et il éprouvait qu'il n'avait pas la force de tenir seul sur ses jambes (Tournier 2008: 37-38).

From this condition, which is later called "la souille", Tournier's Robinson emerges one morning when, in a fit of nostalgia, he finally decides to explore the shipwreck. The

³ On the relationship between Defoe and contemporary philosophical thought, especially with regard to the definition of human nature, see Novak 1963: 22-64.

sight of once familiar objects causes him pangs of longing. He strips the ship of everything that he can transport back to the shore. With a vulture quilt he writes the first words on a sheet of paper, and sheds tears of joy: “Il lui semblait soudain s’être à demi arraché à l’abîme de bestialité où il avait sombré et faire sa rentrée dans le monde de l’esprit en accomplissant cet acte sacré: écrire” (Tournier 2008: 44). Robinson begins to keep a diary and convinces himself that if he saves his language through writing, he will be able to escape “la souille”.

Je sais maintenant que chaque homme porte en lui – et comme au-dessus de lui – un fragile et complexe échafaudage d’habitudes, réponses, réflexes, mécanismes, préoccupations, rêves et implications qui s’est formé et continue à se transformer par les attouchements perpétuels de ses semblables. [...] Autrui, pièce maîtresse de mon univers. [...] Et ma solitude n’attaque pas que l’intelligibilité des choses. Elle mine jusqu’au fondement même de leur existence. De plus en plus, je suis assailli de doutes sur la véracité du témoignage de mes sens (Tournier 2008: 52-54).

Anthropo-poiesis is shown to be a very fragile process: being human is not a condition that one acquires once and for all, but a social construct which, to resist or even to exist, relies on the presence of other humans. It is impossible to remain human when we are alone – this is what Tournier seems to suggest in these early pages of his novel⁴. Nature, at this early stage, is “the mire”: a brute force that absorbs the human and transforms him into a beast. Robinson knows that there is only one way to resist the mire’s fatal lure: he must stage every single human ritual that he can recall. With superhuman effort he builds a hut, then a temple, acquires the habit of thinking aloud to recover the use of language, plows and cultivates the island. But these achievements now feel to him like empty rites; his desire is elsewhere. Thus begins Robinson’s metamorphosis. He discovers a cave where he crouches happily, like in the womb; he fertilizes the earth with his seed; he calls the orchids his *daughters*, born from the soil impregnated by him. He writes in his journal: “Je sais maintenant que si la présence d’autrui est un élément fondamental de l’individu humain, il n’en est pas pour autant irremplaçable” (Tournier 2008: 109). Robinson begins to split: during daytime, he wearily observes the rules of civilized society, with less and less conviction; but at night he slides toward the vegetal origin of life. “N’était-il pas – writes the narrator – le dernier être de la lignée humaine appelé à un retour aux sources végétales de la vie?” (Tournier 2008: 114).

The arrival of Vendredi, a naked and sensual Auracanian, seals Robinson’s new condition forever but not immediately. At first, it triggers a return to old habits. Robinson, who had begun to experience the proximity of nature no longer as degrading, like in the phase of the mire, but as vivifying and liberating, takes refuge in his old ways of life. He decides that he must dominate the native, and thus reproduces, in the form of a caricature, the ‘education’ of Friday in Defoe’s novel. Robinson becomes once again the white man who

⁴ Critics are divided between those who argue that Tournier’s novel postulates a solipsistic stance, and those who claim that alterity is essential in the novel. Milne (1996: 167-181) argues that in the novel the need for the Other is irrepressible. Deleuze (1972: 277), on the other hand, writes that Vendredi does not function as a real Other. In a similar vein, Wilson (1996: 199-209) foregrounds narcissism and solipsism and refers to an “inalienable solitude, the very aspect of the Robinson myth which survives, intact, in Tournier’s retelling” (207).

forces Vendredi into a state of beastly captivity: he gives him foolish orders, punches him without reason, makes him suffer the frustrations of a white ruler who at the bottom of the heart knows that his power is void. Then comes a second phase in which Robinson studies his companion: he spies on him and follows him, unseen, on his solitary walks across the island. Sometimes he even plays with him. Finally, a great explosion, prompted by Vendredi, triggers the final phase of Robinson's transformation. When Vendredi distractedly starts a fire that destroys everything Robinson has built – the house, the temple, the hourglass, the crops and flocks – Robinson forsakes his civilization, which he had worn like an uncomfortable armour, and embraces Vendredi's creaturely mysticism. Guided by Vendredi, Robinson turns his back to the human condition he inherited from Western civilization and discovers a new form of humanity, in which human existence, plant life and the divine merge into a single, creaturely dimension. His attitude towards nature changes, too: Robinson abandons the overly human eroticism that drove him to penetrate the earth and the cavities of trees, and discovers an erotic asceticism, no longer genital but expressed through the pure contemplation of sunlight. Is this, then, Tournier's final word: a new beginning?

In Tournier's proto-environmentalist novel nature is initially seen as a threat to human culture but ultimately becomes a source of human regeneration. As Anthony Purdy (1996: 188-189) points out, the novel is a manifesto against the misery of *homo oeconomicus* and a hymn in praise of *homo ludens* who is able to break free from the iron cage of efficiency and productivity, and from the mechanical pace of time dictated by the industrial civilization. Western anthropo-poiesis is only one of many trajectories, and maybe not the most felicitous. And yet, the novel's unexpected and ambiguous ending casts a shadow on any exceedingly optimistic interpretation: Robinson rejects the English captain's offer, while Vendredi betrays his companion and leaves the island. The reader thus remains uncertain whether Robinson's new life – a happy primitivism that aspires towards an eternal present and a stylite's mystical immersion in nature – marks a fresh start or, tragically, a blind alley. When he discovers that Vendredi has abandoned him in favour of the "grand systeme", Robinson plummets into profound despair, and he only begins to feel better when he discovers a new fugitive on the shore of his island: Jan, the cabin boy, who has been brutally abused by the other seamen. Robinson takes him by the hand, leads him into the sunlight and feels, once more, "un sentiment d'assouvissement total". His mystical communion with nature has allowed him to overcome the empty rites of civilization, but it does not eradicate his primordial need for company.

The question of Robinson's relationship with nature prompts us to consider his attitude towards fellow humans. This is particularly evident in the second text I wish to consider, *Foe* (1986), by J. M. Coetzee, one of the most fascinating re-writings of *Robinson Crusoe* in recent decades. In *Foe* the story is told by a woman, Susan Barton, who was also shipwrecked on the island. She meets Cruso and his servant Friday, dumb because his tongue has been mutilated; she spends a few years on the island, then returns to England where she decides to entrust his memoirs to a successful novelist, Mr. Foe. Coetzee's re-writing of *Robinson Crusoe* challenges every assumption made by the source text. The figure of Friday, the muted servant, raises tragic questions about the privilege of speech and about what it means, in history and in literature, to be without a voice. The stratagem of the 'forgotten' female narrator draws our attention, with similar urgency, to the voices that have been silenced by

the canon. These two aspects of the novel have catalyzed critical attention, just like the typically Coetzeean themes of the boundaries of representation, the power and impotence of language, the ideological limits of realism⁵. In my reading, I wish to draw attention to a different concern, which is similarly dear to Coetzee: man's responsibility towards the land he inhabits, and from which he derives sustenance and hope. As we will see, this responsibility towards the land, for Coetzee, is always informed by a sense of obligation towards the other.

Coetzee subverts the myth of the industrious European and makes Cruso a man paralysed with apathy. After the shipwreck, he salvages nothing but a single knife; he does not keep a diary; he has lost track of time, because he never made the effort to build a calendar. In all his time with Friday he never bothered to teach him more than a few words – knife, wood, fire, sea – which he uses exclusively to give him orders. For Susan, who is likable, gentle and curious, Cruso remains a mystery until the end. When Susan suggests that they should send Friday to explore the wreck, Cruso responds: "We have a roof over our heads, made without saw or axe. We sleep, we eat, we live. We have no need of tools" (Coetzee 1987: 32). Coetzee's Cruso embodies a minimal anthropo-poiesis, where human needs are reduced to their bare essence. This systematic renunciation of all human prerogatives is also reflected in Cruso's refusal to engage with the natural environment that surrounds him. Cruso does not seem to have established any relationship with the island – neither exploitative nor communal. He neither hunts, nor cultivates, nor collects. He eats whatever Friday is able to gather: lettuce and eggs of fish or bird. The starry sky and the expanse of the sea leave him indifferent. At least this is Susan's impression, which is conveyed to us in the novel. For Cruso the island is an opaque world where one survives only if one remains hidden. In a novel published some years earlier, *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee wrote poignantly about 'the idea of gardening', which he described as an act of resistance against violence and a gesture of love, not only for the land but for the very ideal of a human existence: "there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once the chord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (Coetzee 1998: 109).

No wonder, then, that Cruso, who is deaf to the voice of his island, is also deaf to the voice of the woman who seeks to awaken in him an interest in the other, a foundation of human morality: "Cruso had no stories to tell [...] – says Susan defeated – He did not care how I came to be in Bahia or what I did there. When I spoke of England and of all the things I intended to do when I was rescued, he seemed not to hear me" (Coetzee 1987: 34). Cruso's indifference to the natural world is indicative of his indifference to humans. The only mysterious link that Cruso creates with the island are the terraces that he builds, with huge effort, on its slopes. When Susan asks him why he takes time to weed the ground if he does not intend to plant anything, Cruso replies: "The planting is not for us [...]. The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them" (Coetzee 1987: 33). As often happens in Coetzee's novels, the profound moral apathy of his characters, even when it appears entirely impenetrable, still offers us a glimpse of hope.

⁵ See for example Thieme 2003: 63-71; Attridge 2004: 65-90.

This very twentieth-century form of apathy is a reversal of the proverbial resourcefulness of Defoe's *Crusoe*, of his extraordinary technical skills, which are widely discussed in secondary literature. Defoe's novel condenses millennia of human evolution in a matter of years: the transition from hunter-gatherers to early forms of agriculture, from nomadism to permanent settlements, from free-grazing cattle to enclosures. Elsewhere (Corso 2004: 19-32) I have stressed the importance of the objects saved from the wreck, without which, as Robinson himself declares, "[he] should have lived, if [he] had not perished, like a mere savage" (Defoe 1869: 88). Christopher Hill (1980: 12) similarly emphasizes the significance of Robinson's 'mental furniture', or rather of his memories and past experience which provide, so to speak, the instruction manual for his 'inventions'. But Defoe's understanding of anthropo-poiesis remains unclear unless we also pay attention to Robinson's intense relationship with nature.

In the novel there is no single term to denote the natural world. 'Nature', when it appears, indicates human nature. Yet, although there is no term to collectively indicate the natural world, this world is nevertheless vividly present. The island is an opulent ecosystem that keeps Robinson's senses alert and poses new challenges every day. Each of Robinson's small conquests, every step on his way back to 'civilization' is also a compromise with the ecosystem that surrounds him. With his formidable toolkit Robinson reassembles the world, but he never forgets that each fragment of this world is made of leaves, bark, dirt, mud, goat-skins. From day one, Robinson is surrounded by animals: some are killed unceremoniously, others become his friends and family. The novel is full of ominous encounters with animals of different species: the tenderness of Robinson's cheerful reunion with the dog who survived the shipwreck; the sudden appearance, in the cave, of the old billy goat, who seems almost human in his fear; the encounter with the hungry little kid that is fed and tamed by Robinson; his companionship with the parrot, the only living being who, for twenty-eight years, will pronounce words in Robinson's presence. While Robinson never hides the practical and often brutal side of his dealings with the animals, he also comes to see some of them as members of his family. In one of the novel's most famous passages, he describes himself at his table, in the company of Poll, "my favourite, [...] the only person permitted to talk to me", the dog to his right, and "the two cats, one on one side the table, and one on the other" (Defoe 1869: 100).

Virginia Woolf, notoriously, complained that in *Robinson Crusoe* nature does not exist and that there are only clay pots, tables, chairs, works of man (Woolf 1969: 21). It seems to me, by contrast, that Robinson's anthropo-poiesis – his desire for objects and artefacts – necessarily presupposes a thorough knowledge of the natural world, and an awareness that every human action is always a compromise with nature. The discovery of the island's fertile soil turns Robinson into a botanist. Full of regret that in his past life he paid little attention to gardening, Robinson now studies plants and roots, eager to discover their properties and their growth cycle. His meaty diet makes him a predator in the animal world, but his curiosity makes him a zoologist: he studies the habits of tortoises and the many varieties of seabirds; he observes how the wild pigeon builds its nest in the holes of the rocks and not on the branches of trees like the wood pigeon.

Defoe's long description of the cultivation of grain – from Robinson's accidental discovery of grain to his first real harvest – is a perfect example of this patient anthropo-poiesis, in harmony with the cycles of nature. Robinson needs to wait four long years until he can

enjoy his first loaf of bread. During these years, Robinson studies the land, the seasons, the succession of dry and wet periods, but also the ecosystem as a whole. He learns, for example, which birds are likely to ruin the crop and which are indifferent to the fresh shoots. There are other difficulties that cause further delay: Robinson needs to learn how to construct a plough, a spade, a scythe, a sieve, a furnace. Finally, gratification is deferred for symbolic reasons: Robinson decides not to consume the fruits of his first good harvest, but offers them to God. He remarks: "It might be truly said, that now I worked for my bread", since "it is a little wonderful [...] the strange multitude of little things necessary in the providing, producing, curing, dressing, making, and finishing this one article of bread" (Defoe 1869: 79). If we consider this 'working for the bread', where are the boundaries between nature and culture?

Friday's arrival on the island triggers many urgent questions, and it is hardly surprising that the second part of Defoe's novel has attracted the largest share of critical interest, and has in many ways eclipsed the rest of the story⁶. *Robinson Crusoe* has been read as a manifesto of 'good' English colonialism, in contrast with the Spaniards' "butchery" deplored by Defoe in one of the novel's more famous passages (Defoe 1869: 115). Peter Hulme (1986: 205 and ff.), among others, has convincingly laid bare the novel's political ideology by reading it as a colonial wish-fulfilment fantasy: a story in which the colonist *saves* the life of the colonized and in which the latter, out of sheer gratitude, submits *voluntarily* to his power. I have argued elsewhere (Corso 2004: 171-175) that Robinson's narrative of his life as a hunter, prior to Friday's arrival, deliberately blurs the boundaries between self-defense and a war of attack. When Robinson first seizes his rifle, he does so to defend himself against the wild beasts of the island (or at least this is what he tells the reader). As a result, the reader will assume (and Robinson will suggest) that, throughout the novel, the rifle is only ever used for 'legitimate defense'. The extreme conditions of life on the island, moreover, and Robinson's many hunting stories, encourage the reader to think of killing and death as matters of fact, "for there is no necessary wickedness in nature" (Defoe 1869: 342). After twenty-five years of heroic solitude, the shipwreck, who relied on his wit and on his rifle to subdue nature, is ready to subjugate men: the hunter can now become a colonizer. Alex Mackintosh (2011: 25) has argued that Robinson controls the natives in the same way in which he domesticates the animals on the island: a combination of brutality and proto-disciplinary power that replicates "the logic of cannibalism itself, which shocks precisely because of its failure to distinguish between the two [humans and animals]". And yet, this reading, which is close to what has become the standard interpretation of the novel, fails to capture some of its more subtle nuances.

In the earlier part of my essay, I suggested that Robinson's relationship with the natural world of the island cannot be considered purely in terms of exploitation or subjection. On the contrary, Robinson often shows a rather sophisticated form of eco-consciousness. I now wish to draw attention to the ambiguities present in the relationship between Robinson and Friday, and between Robinson and the Europeans, or, to put it differently, the tension

⁶ Since the publication of Hulme's groundbreaking *Colonial Encounters* it has become customary to read *Robinson Crusoe* through a political lens – an approach which James Joyce, incidentally, anticipated with his definition of *Robinson Crusoe* as a novel of imperial propaganda. In his useful guide to essential criticism Paul Baines (2007: 117-123) offers an overview of the political and postcolonial readings of the novel in recent decades.

between Robinson's thoughts and actions and his alleged historical role. Once again, the intrinsic ambiguity of Defoe's novel stands in the way of a straightforward political reading. The majority of Defoe's contemporaries did not object to colonial exploitation, which they accepted as the standard political practice of European states, nor to the slave trade⁷. With regard to nature, the dominant ideology, sanctioned by the Bible (Genesis 1.26), considered man the ruler over all other living creatures (Thomas 1983: 17 and ff). Against this background, some of Robinson's ideas appear more noteworthy and it becomes easier to appreciate his openness towards new ways of thinking. Robinson, in fact, often appears prejudiced, but also surprisingly willing to change his mind, and to swiftly dismiss assumptions that he previously upheld as undoubtable truths. His close relationship with Friday makes him the prototype of the British colonizer, as James Joyce already remarked. But at the same time Friday's presence compels him to revisit and revise preconceived ideas about 'savages' and, more generally, about human nature. The extreme experience of the shipwreck made Robinson realize that man depends on his environment: human civilization begins with the ability to listen to nature. Now Robinson has to face another problem: is a creature, whose culture differs radically from his own, still a human being?

Friday's presence re-awakens Robinson's well-known arrogance, but it also awakens in him what Remotti might call a certain anthropo-poietic awareness, namely the knowledge that the models of humanity are manifold. On many occasions Robinson seems convinced that his idea of humanity is superior to Friday's; sometimes, however, he appears disoriented by the new horizon of life that has opened with Friday. Robinson famously evokes cannibalism as a proof of the inferiority of the 'savages'; yet more than once he also deplors the brutality of Europeans: a trait which he thinks has been made more dangerous by their technological expertise⁸. "Cooler and calmer thoughts" lead Robinson to the conclusion that cannibalism is a cultural practice among others, not very different from the European habit of eating animal flesh: "[the natives] think it no more a crime to kill a captive taken in war, than we do to kill an ox; or to eat human flesh, than we do to eat mutton" (Defoe 1869: 115). "What is the earth and sea [...] Whence is it produced? And what am I and all the other creatures, wild and tame, humane and brutal? Whence are we?" (Defoe 1869: 63) ponders Robinson, thus manifesting what we would today call a certain ecological awareness – the intuition that land, sea, humans and other animals all belong to a single system or a single food chain.

After his encounter with Friday, Robinson comes to the conclusion that God "has bestow'd upon them [the natives] the same powers, the same reason, the same affections; the same sentiments of kindness and obligation; the same passions and resentments of wrongs;

⁷ There are some remarkable exceptions. See, for instance, the memorable condemnation of European colonialism in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels*, or Voltaire's reiterated accusations against war, colonial or not (see the entry '*guerre*' in *Dictionnaire philosophique; Candide; L'Ingénu*). On these topics see Rawson 2002, and Corso 2004: 171-218.

⁸ In a famous passage, cited above, the Spaniards' colonial enterprises in America are called "barbarities", "a mere butchery, a bloody and unnatural piece of cruelty" (Defoe 1869: 115). In *The Further Adventures* the English who settle in the colony are called 'barbarians' and the Spaniards "thought themselves much better among the savages [than among them]" (Defoe 1869: 227). The most shocking episode is probably the massacre in Madagascar (Defoe 1869: 315 and ff.). For an analysis of this episode see Corso 2004: 191-193.

the same sense of gratitude, sincerity, fidelity, and all the capacities of doing good, and receiving good, that He has given to us" (Defoe 1869: 140). The dividing line between *us* and *them* remains clear, but it coexists with the idea that we differ from each other because of distinct cultural practices (or 'customs', in Robinson's eighteenth-century vocabulary), that are always reversible and open to 'progress' as well as to 'degeneration'.

In the final part of *The Further Adventures*, Robinson reflects on his life and times and admits that he is traumatized by the massacre of Madagascar, where "our English butchers" committed horrendous crimes "with a fury something beyond what was human" (Defoe 1869: 324). At the beginning of his adventures, he was more afraid of being among 'savages' than of falling prey to lions, but now he thinks that "it were much better to have fallen into the hands of the savages" (Defoe 1869: 350) than to end up as a victim of the English or Dutch, "a parcel of rash, proud, insolent fellows, that neither know what belongs to justice, nor how to behave themselves as the laws of God and nature direct" (Defoe 1869: 346); "for the savages, give them their due, would not eat a man till he was dead; and killed him as we do a bullock; but these men had many arts beyond the cruelty of death" (Defoe 1869: 350). Exiled in the Indian Ocean, and deprived of all spatial and ideological coordinates, the alleged champion of the Western values distances himself from the 'arts' of the Europeans – and in a sudden and perhaps unintended outburst chooses to identify with 'savages' and with slaughtered beasts.

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