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Confronting European Official History: Postwar Rewritings of Robinson Crusoe as an Act of Collective Memory

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Abstract

This paper seeks to relate the rewritings of the myth of *Robinson Crusoe* and that of the desert island to postwar history and to the politics of memory, in order to apprehend several poetic¹ functions of the post-1945 social system, particularly as portrayed in two post-war European novels, namely *Friday, or, the Other Island* (1967) by Michel Tournier and *An Obscure Man* (1981) by Marguerite Yourcenar. Considering the island space as a metaphor for a European social system in-the-making, the historian Michel de Certeau argues that the story of *Robinson Crusoe* is highly representative for occidental modern historiography. After the Second World War, the rewritings of Robinson and the desert island present a completely different perspective than the one proposed in *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, as the perceptions of the nation-state, time and space, identity and the place of the individual within society are radically transformed. The post-World War II avatars of Robinson seem to constitute a literary act involving collective awareness and a therapeutic memory exercise regarding the historical violence. The rewritings of this literary myth often constitute an act of 'remembering' a colonial past, a revision of the official history, a collective memory act having the aim of soothing the present of the burden of history.

¹ Further suggested readings regarding poetics of the historical practice : Paul Ricoeur. 1997. *La métaphore vive* [*The Rule of Metaphor*]. Paris: Éditions du Seuil; Hayden White. 1973. *Metahistory the historical imagination in 19th century Europe*. London: Johns Hopkins university press; François Hartog. 2013. *Croire en l'histoire*. Paris: Flammarion

Introduction

This paper seeks to identify the place occupied by two island novels, *Friday, or, the Other Island* (1967) by Michel Tournier and *An Obscure Man* (1981) by Marguerite Yourcenar within the larger project concerning the European memory, history and collective identity that develop during the Cold War.

The myth of Robinson Crusoe seems to bear a particular importance for this study, because after the experience of the violence of the twentieth century, though Daniel Defoe's island story continues to be an important European narrative of making society - literary, but not exclusively so - the novel is nevertheless classified in libraries as "children's literature". For the French historian Michel de Certeau, the myth of Robinson Crusoe is one of the few invented within modern European society. Considering the island space as a metaphor for a European social system in-the-making, de Certeau argues that the story of Robinson Crusoe is highly representative for occidental modern historiography. According to him, the novel contains the three elements that define the modern practice of writing history, namely the *blank page*, the *text* and the *construction*: "the island that proposes an empty space, the production of a system of objects by a master subject and the transformation of a 'natural' World" (De Certeau, 1990, p. 201, my translation from the French), that I will equally identify and analyze in our support novels.

My hypothesis is that the postwar rewritings of the island myth of *Robinson Crusoe* can be read as a device for collective memory of an in-the-making social and cultural European system. More specifically my approach recalls the study of the French School des Annales, as these historians focus on cultural history. Besides the historical perspective, my approach partly originates in the studies of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, as he has helped mightily to shape my understanding of the relation between three concepts previously conceived as separated. The three concepts are fiction, history and time, and I will come back to them at several points of my article.

If we agree that the adventure of Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island, as described in the novel proposed by Daniel Defoe, is significant for "an ideological inventory of our occidental civilization" (Nordon, 1967, p. 22, my translation from the French), implying themes such as colonialism, the nation-state, the myth of the *economic man*, etc., then how can we evaluate the changes of the insular myth in our novels? What are the resemblances and the differences between the story of Robinson Crusoe and the two novels of our study and what are their esthetical, cognitive, political and ethical implications? Equally, what are the particularities of the relation between European history and postwar island literature?

I consider that the study of *Friday, or, the Other Island* by Michel Tournier and *An Obscure Man* by Marguerite Yourcenar – fictional life stories – reveal a positioning regarding the *social*, as well as a manner in which literature is capable of articulating truth. Through the analysis of the mentioned novels, my aim is to apprehend some features of a solitary poetic and historical subject that finds a voice in the postwar European literature by narrating the space of the island. I do not search for a validation or an invalidation of history (from the side of the literature), but to highlight the way in which literature contributes to the understanding of the world, through the use of a cognitive, esthetic, reflexive and sensitive dimensions.

To facilitate my analysis, I first draw on the internal changes of the discipline of history and emergence of memory. The paper then provides a brief description of *Friday, or, the Other Island* by Michel Tournier, followed by a brief description of the plot of *An obscure Man* by Marguerite Yourcenar. Finally, I draw conclusions concerning the manner in which these two novels can be related to a postwar historical, ethical, social and political discourse.

Unfolding history: history of mentalities, microhistory and the emergence of memory

As a starting point for the confrontation of our two novels with their historical context of emergence, I recall the position taken by the French historians during the 20th century, as founder of the Annales School Lucien Febvre affirms that “literature is [...] the place where brew and negotiate one mental evolution, connected to the linguistic invention of big authors” (Righi, 2003, my translation from the French). Thus, literature can be equally understood, regardless of the esthetic dimension, as invested with a social dimension. From this perspective, it seems that the history of mentalities and microhistory – to mention only two attempts meant to rescale the discipline of history – facilitate the understanding of the relation between literary fiction and history. Moreover, from a literary perspective, it can be said that the writing of our two novels is accomplished, and here I quote Marguerite Yourcenar, with “a leg in erudition, the other one in magic, or more precisely and without using a metaphor, in this ‘sympathetic magic’ that consists of conveying thoughts into someone else’s interior” (Yourcenar, 1974, p. 330).

In what concerns the internal changes of history, it seems useful to remind that the history of mentalities is defined as a shared manner of thinking and feeling by a group or community, based on the fact that “the mentality of an individual, might be a great man, is only what he has in common with other people of his time” (Le Goff in Chartier, 2009, p. 42, my translation from the French). The history of mentalities, a counter-reaction to the dominating economic history, should not be confounded neither with the collective psyche, nor with the Marxist theory of economic superstructures. For Robert Mandrou, founding member of the history of mentalities, history emerges at the intersection of intelligence with the affective (Joutard, Lecuir, 1985); to sum up, it results that the history of mentalities gives a central place to the correlation created between social production and cultural production.

Regarding the objects of study proposed by microhistory – term initially used in 1959 by the American scholar George R. Stewart (Ginzburg, 1993, p. 10) –, Roger Chartier insists on the fact that these objects can be described in two major ways: on the one hand, the objects of study of microhistory resemble to “labs that allow analyzing in a profound way the mechanisms of power that characterize a socio-political structure specific of a certain time and space”; on the other hand, these objects of inquiry can represent “a condition of access to beliefs, myths and rites which usually stay silent or are ignored, considered as *anomalies* (the term belongs to Ginzburg), and related to a cultural pedestal shared by the entire humanity. In this sense, there is no contradiction between a micro-historical technique of observation and a macro-anthropologic description” (Chartier, 2002, my translation from the French). In fact, the microscopic dimension and the larger contextual dimension are the principal elements of narration. The literary *topos* of the island equally evokes a micro-society or community.

Furthermore, at this moment of analysis, I consider essential insisting on the concept of memory: I will further argue why I consider memory more appropriate to the analysis of our novels than history. In a recent article published in the *History and Memory* review, it has been argued that “today it is almost impossible to read a text in history that does not mention the term ‘collective memory’ or its complementary counterpart ‘narrative’ ” (Gedi, Yigal, 1996, p. 30). Previously, Paul Ricœur had made a similar observation, as he stressed out that *history* is the *story* that tells *stories*. Taking into consideration these above, it seems possible to relate our novels to the notion of *story* (or *histoire singulière* in the original text by Ricœur, 1997, p. 36). Although the French philosopher refers to the concept of “collective memory”, he concludes that the actual use of the term is not enough developed and as a consequence it cannot explain subjects such as love, hatred or death, speculative by nature and strongly related to the intimate (Ricœur, 2000, p. 194).

For this reason, I bring into discussion a concept that might be useful to better understand

memory: in his writings, Enzo Traverso proposes the notion of “weak memories”, which are multiple, transversal and different memories (Traverso, 2005). They contrast “strong memories”, which are recognized, integrated and accepted by history. I will come back to this position in order to present my understanding of “weak” and “strong memories” in my literary corpus.

***Friday, or, The Other Island* by Michel Tournier: a postcolonial narrative**

Friday, or, The Other Island (original French title *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*) was published in 1967 and won the prestigious prize of the *Académie française* the same year. For Michel Tournier (1924-2016), the decision to rewrite the myth of Robinson Crusoe stemmed from his conviction that the contemporary French collective mentality had to adapt to a multicultural, postcolonial French context. Defining man as a “mythological animal” (1977, p.192), Tournier argues that narratives are essential in the shaping of human identity. Thus, he argues that “man becomes a man, acquires a gender, a heart or a human imagination thanks to the rustle of stories, to the kaleidoscope of images that surround the child from the cradle and accompany him to the tomb” (1977, p. 191, my translation from the French).

In this French palimpsest, the initial values established in *Robinson Crusoe* are reversed and new designs are introduced. While starting from the story written by Daniel Defoe and keeping the same settings and characters, *Friday, or, The Other Island* presents a gradual metamorphosis: Robinson changes radically, physically and psychologically, under the influence of his existence on the island and the presence of Friday. The island evolves as well: ironically called in the beginning “the administrated island”, it becomes at the end of the novel a “solar island”, where Robinson decides to stay. Thus he is no longer a *homo economicus* but a *homo philosophicus*.

Tournier’s text suggests the idea of a choice, of a change and of a social deconstruction (this time, of colonialist values and ideology, among others). This is not surprising, as the author states that:

A good book is only half of a book, and it is up to the reader to write the other half. Literature is therefore a lesson in freedom, a lesson in creation, and it is dangerous if it appeals to disorder and ideas. That is why, whatever they write, writers are always persecuted by tyrants. And the tyrant is right to persecute the writer, because the writer is a professor of freedom. (Tournier in de Cessole, 1996, p. 44, my translation from the French)

Arguing that the writer is “socially responsible”, Tournier conceives his rewriting of the myth of Robinson as an imaginative exercise of liberty and to some extent a projection of a collective European identity. Implicitly, it is a liberating reflexive act of power. The aim of this hypertext is to raise rather than to respond to questions of a changing, multicultural society.

***An Obscure Man* by Marguerite Yourcenar: Poetics of a solitary self**

The work of Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987), the first woman accepted as a member to the Académie Française, has an international recognition. For her, the aim of the literary creation is to be *useful* for society; otherwise said, to respond to an individual need of comprehension and to sharpen the clear-sightedness of the reader, his critical, analytical and empathic capacities (Yourcenar, 1980, p. 249). At the first sight, her writings may seem detached from the political context of the period; nonetheless, recent studies have shown that in fact Yourcenar is highly preoccupied by international political events of her time, reason for which she develops in her literary works a strong reflexive, critical function.

Published in 1981 under the original title *Un homme obscur*, Marguerite Yourcenar proposes the story of Nathanaël, a simple man from the Netherlands of the XVII century. The novel unexpectedly starts with the anonymous death of the main character. Afterwards the narrative comes back to his birth, equally anonymous, in England, in a Dutch community of carpenters. Because of a fight in the family, at fifteen Nathanaël leaves his home and finds refuge on a lost island, where he marries Foy, a local girl. Her death makes him return to England and dedicate to study. Then he decides to move to Amsterdam, where he works for his uncle as a reviser and marries for a second time a girl named Sarai. Interested in money, his wife looks for the company of other men. Sick, betrayed by both his wife and by his uncle, as the latter steals a part of his heritage, Nathanaël is hospitalized. With the help of a nurse, he finds accommodation at a wealthy family, where he fulfills the tasks of a valet.

Suffering of a serious lungs disease, his destiny appears more and more obvious: being sick, he is sent on a deserted island, which is his last destination. His loneliness recalls the isolation of Robinson Crusoe; just like him, he has in his possession a Bible. However, he does not read it, as he does not resent the lack of books. His disease getting stronger, one day, laying “like for sleeping” (Yourcenar, 1985, p. 175, my translation from the French) Nathanaël dies.

By comparing Nathanaël with other characters depicted by Marguerite Yourcenar, such as the famous emperor Hadrian or the man of science Zenon, it results the portrait of simple, non-cultured, but at peace and serene man. The writer herself considers this novel such as a literary will (Savigneau, 2002, p. 324).

Concluding remarks

Taking into consideration both changes within the discipline of history, as well as the poetics of the two island narratives in *Friday ...* and *An Obscure Man*, my hypothesis is that the secluded, remote space of the island is not separated by postwar historical tensions, on the contrary. The postwar historical regime is in fact marked by breakdowns, splits and divisions in the order of time², as François Hartog highlighted it; Michel Foucault, equally, proposed to understand history as a “series of series” (Foucault, 1969, p. 19).

I consider that the poetic of the island alludes to the changes of historical regimes: thus, if to summarize a more complex relation, it would become possible to relate *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe to modernity narratives and *Friday, or, The Other Island* by Michel Tournier and *An obscure Man* by Marguerite Yourcenar to a postmodern discourse. In contrast with the colonized island of Robinson, in her novel Marguerite Yourcenar proposes a “lost island”; in what concerns Michel Tournier, he depicts “a solar island”. Through the rewritings of the novel of Robinson Crusoe, island literature both reflects and contributes to postwar discursive changes.

Or, *Friday, or, the Other Island* and *An Obscure Man* seem to suggest the lack of importance of their insular characters, the loss of modernity discursive certitudes. In these novels, the literary language is characteristic of the postwar period; it relies on pastiche, irony, literary echoes, expansion and condensation of time. These features obviously oppose the logic of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe.

In this context, I recall once again François Hartog, because he raises the question of the relation between history, memory and fiction. The French thinker argues that often history is

² Understood within the theory proposed by François Hartog.

regarded as characterized by an official, political dimension. On the contrary, memory occupies a peripheral position, which can be similar to the symbol of the island, when compared to the continent. Fiction, the third element identified by Hartog, occupies an ambivalent position: when subordinated to politic ideology, fiction becomes oppressive, domineering. In contrast, the autonomy of literary fiction implies a liberating, critical function, that I equally identify in the analysis of the novels by Michel Tournier and Marguerite Yourcenar. Hartog argues that:

[There is] the history of winners and not of victims, of forgotten, of dominated, of minorities, of colonized. A history confined in the nation, with historians basically serving an *official* history. This is why we address, now and then, memory, such as a *therapeutic alternative* face to a historical discourse who, to sum it up, was never more than an *oppressive fiction*.
(Hartog, 2013, p. 53, my translation from the French)

These postwar literary palimpsests and the discipline of history seem to relate to common narratives; the rewritings of this literary island myth often constitute an act of ‘remembering’ a colonial past, or a revision of individualist narratives. Hence, the novels of this study can be read in relation to collective memories: according to my interpretation, a “weak memory” in the case of *An Obscure Man*, and a “strong memory”, taking into consideration the direct rewriting of the myth of Robinson Crusoe in *Friday, or, the Other Island*. Thus, it becomes possible to argue that European postwar island literature, assuming a historical consciousness, equally participates to the model of complex memorial project (Schaeffer, 1999) through the solitary stories of the hero and his island.

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