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Robinson Crusoe and the Fear of Being Eaten

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One of Robinson Crusoe's chief anxieties is about being eaten. The earliest revelation of this fear comes when Crusoe says, recounting his first sea storm, "I expected every wave would have swallowed us up." There would be little warrant for taking this common metaphor seriously if the sequel did not concern itself so much with cannibals and Crusoe's dread of them. Or if even after the desert island/cannibal section had ended, the horror of a creature devouring another were not treated twice more: when wolves eat a horse, and when a man is eaten by wolves (pp. 292–93).

But what does it express that an author imagines a situation in which his hero can reasonably be afraid of being eaten? First, that being eaten ought to be considered a possibility of the human condition, and, therefore, is qualified to serve as the problem of an adventure plot, and, second, that cannibals and cannibalism in the novel can serve a metaphorical function. Crusoe's dread of the cannibals and their custom brings forth an anxiety basic to all modes of power and accumulation, i.e., not just the danger of being dispossessed, overpowered, or devoured, but the strong and guilt-tainted desire to accumulate and consume acquisitions. Acquisitions in such an instance can include people.

Such a desire is precisely the impetus for Crusoe's actions in the novel. Throughout the novel, however, Crusoe is also in conflict with this very desire. The source of his ambivalence lies in his father's attitude, as it is expressed early in Robinson Crusoe, about his son's longing for enterprising adventure. Crusoe's father had given him an education which had, in Crusoe's words,

designed me for the law; but I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea, and my inclination to this led me so strongly against the will, nay, the commands of my father, and against all the entreaties and persuasions of my mother and other friends, that there seemed to be something fatal in that propension of nature tending directly to the life of misery which was to befall me. (p. 27)

And he instructs his son in the knowledge of his proper sphere:

He told me [going to sea] was for men of desperate fortunes on one hand, or aspiring, superior fortune on the other, who went abroad upon adventures, to rise by enterprise,
and make themselves famous in undertakings of a nature out of the common road; that these things were either too far above me, or too far below me; that mine was the middle state, or what might be called the upper station of low life, which he had found by long experience was the best state in the world, and most suited to human happiness. (p. 28)

Despite these warnings (and, perhaps, because of them) *Robinson Crusoe* is the story of a man who set out (guiltily because, as the passage shows, defiantly) to satisfy an appetite for accumulation which he is forbidden to acknowledge or to express, and which his father condemns. He becomes, therefore, the victim of its expression, since the desire to appropriate can only express itself now by projection onto others ("they desire to appropriate"), whence it returns to him as a threat of being captured and devoured. Moreover, his "misfortune," being cast away on a desert island, in danger of being eaten by cannibals, allows Crusoe to realize his overpowering desire for a life of "enterprize," if only because that misfortune necessitates the accumulation, consumption, and parsimonious government that Crusoe manages, and gives it a reason for being. The fear of being eaten (p. 173) coupled with a biological revulsion to cannibalism (p. 173) underpin and justify Robinson Crusoe's life of appropriation, exploitation and accumulation.

And as an appropriator and accumulator, Crusoe is an economic Everyman, realizing a myth of the present age. His appropriation or expropriation is a domestic form of devouring—"enterprize"—justified by the conditions for survival imposed by the plot, ordered by his European political economy, and tamed by Christianity. In this regard, the significance of Crusoe's weaning Friday from human flesh with animal flesh can be seen as a metaphoric restatement of the civilizing of a fundamental characteristic. Displacement, *Robinson Crusoe* suggests, is the way to deal with the anti-social, and rules are more effective than transcendence. As an appropriator, Crusoe is haunted (in the form of the cannibals) by primitive and fundamental appropriation: the aggressive conquest and incorporation expressed in eating. Thus, in order to stand without guilt in relation to his father, Crusoe must actively stand for the annihilation of that primitive style, even as he appropriates and incorporates more of the external world, as if to say, pointing to their fiercer practice, "The cannibals capture and devour, not I."

In *Robinson Crusoe*, however, the need to project fundamental aggressive appropriation extends beyond the personal to the cultural. At first the novel appears to be tending towards being an even-handed condemnation of savages and Europeans. Crusoe makes a savagery similar to that of the cannibals adhere to the Europeans with several observations on the similarity of some Christians to the cannibals. Whites, with prisoners, for example, arrive on Crusoe's island and reenact in their own way the past landing of the cannibals with the prisoners they were

about to eat. Indeed, Friday, a good cultural anthropologist, having been both a cannibal and the intended victim of cannibals, "called out to me in English, as well as he could, 'O master! you see English mans eat prisoners as well as savage mans'" (p. 250).

Crusoe responds without a trace of irony, "I am afraid they will murther them, indeed, but you may be sure they will not eat them," but we, with Defoe, may find at least a trace of irony in the entire episode. Is Crusoe's distinction significant? Another such ironic conflation comes when Crusoe presents the reader, after an account of a battle with the cannibals, with a body count of the dead (p. 237). And yet another overt comparison between Christians and cannibals is invited when Crusoe, thinking of the risk of falling into Spanish hands, dreads "to be made a sacrifice" (emphasis added) to the Inquisition (p. 243).

Thus the European savagery is admitted, but only after it has been effectively projected onto the cannibals. Then the narrator can accuse the Europeans of acting like the savages. But the fundamental savagery itself has been alienated from them. The laugh that all the civilized Europeans enjoy in a later episode when they watch the still savage Friday fight a bear (pp. 290-91) shows how successfully Robinson Crusoe has, in fact, accomplished that alienation. The plot of Robinson Crusoe attempts both to express figuratively and to deny Crusoe's own, and his culture's, desire for the power of appropriation and incorporation. The drama of this conflict is created and expressed by the drama of Crusoe's encounter with the cannibals.

The force of eating as a symbol for a mode of being is emphasized in two significant psychological/spiritual episodes of Robinson Crusoe. Crusoe's commemoration of his arrival upon the Island of Despair is marked yearly by a fast (pp. 117, 125). The fast is significant as a ritual denial imposed upon a fundamental biological impulse to eat, i.e., to incorporate something into oneself by possessing it and by destroying it in its own right in order to assimilate it.

The other episode involves the internal struggle Crusoe undergoes after his discovery of the presence of the cannibals. Remember that for a great many years the cannibals are unaware of his presence upon the island, indeed, until he interrupts one of their dinners. So strongly, however, do the cannibals impress Crusoe with their practice of eating captives that he indulges himself in orgies of imagined attacks upon them, fantasizing himself completely overpowering them and, thereby, annihilating them. He is prevented from executing any of his schemes not so much by his fear of the greater numbers of his foe and the surety of their vengeance, but by an awareness that these people were not murtherers in the sense that I had before condemned them in my thoughts; any more than those Christians were murtherers who often put to death the prisoners taken in battle; or more frequently, upon many occasions, put whole troops of
men to the sword, without giving quarter, though they threw down their arms and submitted. (pp. 177-78)

The linguistic denial of murder is a delicate and ironic confirmation of murder, especially because of the brutality revealed by the coda of the sentence. And, again, Christians and cannibals are equated. Furthermore, “it occurred” to him that “albeit the usage they thus gave one another . . . was thus brutish and inhumane, yet it was really nothing to me; these people had done me no injury,” that “it was not my business to meddle with them, unless they first attacked me, and this it was my business if possible to prevent.” He concludes, “I was perfectly out of my duty when I was laying all my bloody schemes for the destruction of innocent creatures” (pp. 178-79).

He makes a point after this to avoid the temptation of killing the cannibals by even avoiding looking to see if any are around. But it is impossible to avoid seeing the cannibals or the traces of cannibalism. Each subsequent encounter with the signs of cannibalism serves again to activate Crusoe’s fear of being eaten, his fantasy of attacking the cannibals, and his recoiling from his own plans of carnage. Nevertheless, he is brought into the kind of contact with the cannibals that he wishes for and dreads when he saves victims, one of whom is white (p. 233), from being devoured by them. But even this apparently realistic situation has symbolic significance if the reader recalls it is the event for which Crusoe has been waiting and longing, for it fulfills the wish he expressed after his first sighting of the cannibals: “I could think of nothing but how I might destroy some of these ministers in their cruel and bloody entertainment, and, if possible, save the victim they should bring hither to destroy” (p. 175). It is an ironic fact that the captives Crusoe saves from being eaten by the cannibals become completely subjected to him.

The confounding irony which reveals a serious identity between Crusoe and the cannibals, however, and accounts for the split the fable effects between them, and for his strong antagonism to them, is that Crusoe set out on the adventure that cast him upon the island for twenty-eight years in order to be a trafficker in Negro slaves. The savagery of this act of consuming and devouring, in order to be denied for the sake of the European conscience, was displaced onto the blacks themselves by inventing a fable that focuses on the more blatant savagery of a simpler cannibalism attributed to them. In Robinson Crusoe, the intended victims become the victimizers, and the original victimizers, the Europeans, can feel righteous and justified in their course of “enterprise.” Through its fable, Robinson Crusoe shows the justifying fantasy of the Europeans for their brutal consumption of human lives.

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