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TRAVELLING BETWEEN CULTURES IN THE CLASSIC MODERNITY

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Abstract: *A number of titles published along the eighteenth century, or what, in my own critical vocabulary, I call Classic Modernity, point to a sustained symbolic travel between cultures, whether they be linguistically, geographically or religiously different(iated) from one another. Issues such as acculturation, natural history in relation to history proper, otherness vs. identity along the self-same lines, barbarity vs. civilization could and at times did result in confusion of ontological status. This was put to the use of public debates (in the press, in literary societies and at the royal Court) and entailed interest in the exotic. Under this aegis featured such names as the Tahitian young man Omai, Francis Williams, the first recorded black writer in the British Empire, or Senegal-Gambia born Phillis Wheatley, one of the most prominent poets in the America of her time. These actual identities circulated in parallel with fictitious or quasi-invented names like Robinson Crusoe and Daniel Defoe in an overall text of ample and variegated cultural exchange.*

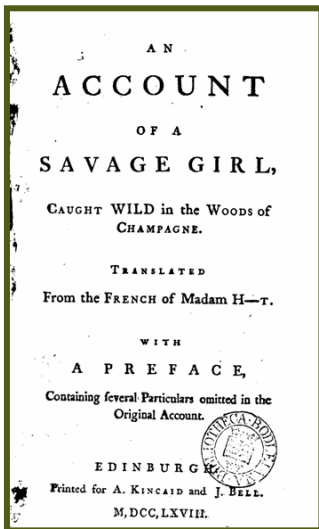
This paper looks at the strategies underlying this process and sheds new light on the exciting cases of the day: *Robinson Crusoe* and *Peter the Wild Boy*, while it also considers Catholic and American reconfigurations of the civilizatory myth embodied by the two.

When in 1768 James Burnett, Lord Monboddo (1714-1799), signed the Preface to the English rendition of Madame Hecquet's *Histoire d'une jeune fille sauvage, trouvée dans les Bois à l'âge de dix ans*, the Scottish aristocrat was only starting to elaborate his linguistic theory focusing on evolution. In a typically Edinburgh Enlightenment manner, the deist scholar made of progress the unconditional law of existence. Part and parcel of his vision, natural history was the obvious extension of history, with orangutans merely another species of humans. Linnaeus had defined the *Anthropomorpha* in his 1735 *Systema Naturae* as a taxon soon replaced by *Primates*. The Swedish scholar devised our modern taxonomy allowing of *homo sapiens ferus* featuring within its bounds. Thus the wild girl of Champagne: she was a feral child, at once an immature individual and a savage creature, an entity belonging to the 'market of curiosities', a sample of the 'epistemological shift in the concept of wild/civilized, criminal/sociable, and bestial/human' (Douthwaite 164, 185). Her otherness had also been measured in ethnic terms, Norway, the West Indies or Eskimo land being deemed her origin on occasion. Still, her savage underage was the main and double reason for her to be turned into a subject of education. Circulated further into the mid- and late century,

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Linnean taxonomy currently placed superior apes by the side of humans, the 'monorchid' Hottentot serving as an exception proving the rule: an imperfect human such as a savage, closer to the natural state of animals, could nonetheless claim the right to humanity and consequently be depicted in a state of meditation. He had reason!

Almost half a century before Defoe's *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, of York, Mariner had come out preaching the lesson of material progress and spiritual salvation via hard work and perseverance. What was later to be defined as homo oeconomicus and a modern myth of Western civilization was couched in the well-weighed observations by Lord Monboddo, the philosopher-judge, involved in a crucial debate of the day: the evolution of species and, in the first place, of the species: 'The vulgar will be entertained with this relation much in the same manner as they are with the history of Robinson Crusoe; but to the philosopher it will appear a matter of curious speculation, and he will draw from it consequences not so obvious to the generality of readers', for, he went on, '[h]e will observe with amazement the progression of our species from an animal so wild, to men such as we.' (Fig.1. *An Account of a Savage Girl, Caught Wild in the Woods of Champagne*, 1768)



Likewise, *An Account of a Savage Girl, Caught Wild in the Woods of Champagne*, published in 1768, showed the beastly female child brandishing a tree branch at a set of neatly dressed ladies from which she appeared symbolically separated as she stood on the opposite side of the road, barefoot, dress hanging in rags round her body, hair disheveled, face casting ominous glances at the representatives of civilization.

Histoire d'une jeune Filles sauvage, the original dated 1755, advertised a Romantic(ized) rambler, her uncovered head directing her look away from human settlements, a bunch of flowers in her right hand suggesting clear preference for nature, a light shawl waving indifferently behind as she as indifferently leaves behind a servant-like man carrying a lantern in his left hand, the walking stick in his right hand rather useless, or at least unable to show the right way. This stirring history had been penciled by Mme Hecquet in tandem with Charles-Marie de la Condamine, explorer, geographer and traveller who had come in touch with still undisclosed forms of civilization especially in the Central and South American area. He had been among the first Europeans to become aware of the virtues of such exotic vegetal substances as rubber and quinine, both founding materials of full-fledged modernity, at least in British terms.

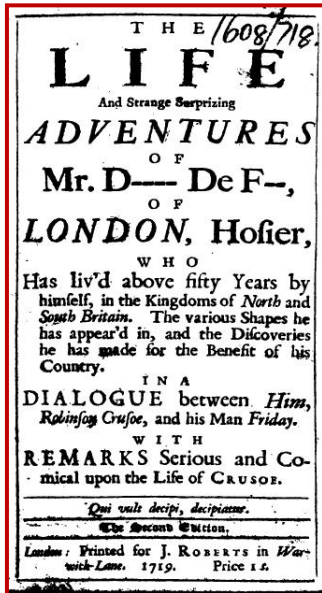


Fig. 1. *The Life and strange surprising Adventures of Mr. D --- DeF--- of London, Hosier, 1719*

The one book though that had settled firmly down in the collective conscious and unconscious of a national readership of varying ages remained *Robinson Crusoe*, itself an educational story. Lord Monboddoo was a boy of five in 1719, when *Crusoe* became an offer on the book market. Robinson was hard-working and persevering, in a word, a stoic. He was – crucially – an unabated reader of the *Bible*. Like a colonist in a colony of one master and one servant, he knew how to preserve and promote his enduring character, how to pluck up courage and never desist. He fitted the English character so well that Robinson *Crusoe* was circulated in the self-same year 1719 both in novel and in newspaper form, with the *London Post* publishing the text in installments (Fig. 2). Robinson was so very English that he had cannibalized the real Alexander

Selkirk into a fictitious hero, while Defoe himself had been transmogrified into a fictitious hero who did preserve though his actual social status: in 1719 *The Life and strange surprising Adventures of Mr. D--- DeF--- of London, Hosier* came out signed by Charles Gildon (1665-1724). It brought to the fore the character ‘D--- DeF---’ in a sui generis competition with the Defoesque hero.

Turned French and Catholic, the 1785 edition of *Le Nouveau Robinson* was meant to be ‘à l’usage des deux nations’ and combined the classic utile dulci precept (pour servir à l’amusement et à l’instruction des enfants) with engravings making the didactic purpose the more efficient. The development of children’s book trade ‘was influenced by evolving views on the family and social class, the place of religion in daily life, the interest in science, the rise of consumerism, the growth in literacy and, perhaps most importantly, the debate about education.’ (Brown 31) All through the 1800s the *Histoire de Robinson Crusoe* circulated in ‘image d’Épinal’ guise. *The Suite de l’Histoire de Robinson Crusoe* made the educational aim the more visible as it kicked off with the marooned mariner identifying a place in wild nature to raise his abode, carried on with his domestication of the fauna and flora of the place and ended up with kneeling Friday being vowed into servitude by his determined master. Not unimportantly the former’s skin was dark.

Telling confusion of ontological validity there was in the figure of Omai, the Pacific islander brought to Paris by Bougainville to then touch the banks of the Thames. His exotic appearance in the chic aristocratic and royal circles of the day snowballed into a mythical presence by which the vintage of British highlife tried to project their public stature. Omai underwent a minute protocol of cultural assimilation winding up in the physically imposing and intellectually charming Tahitian turning into a Western-style officer returning to his native island with a profusion of Old World presents. The very discovery of Tahiti had been ‘associated with Paradise’ (Brosse 40) and it somehow seemed normal that offering-looking

presents be carried back to Omai's prelapsarian space. These ranged from fashionable attires and footwear to tools, instruments and weapons. The savage nature of the place, or else, nature as such, was being pushed aside and out of being by the Other's military skill of fire guns: culture turned destruction.

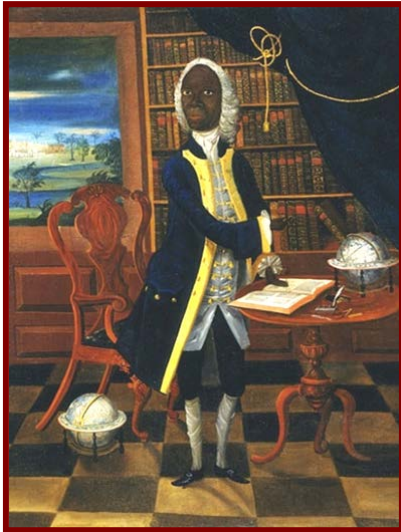
In the London of the 1770s it had soon become the thing to have Omai as guest, whether one was the famous naturalist Joseph Banks, Lord Sandwich, Dr. Samuel Johnson or downright His Majesty George III. Civilizing a Jamaican slave into a favourite of the elite of the day had been mediated by savants dealing with the secrets and potential of nature: Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist held in utmost esteem by King George III, and Dr. Daniel Solander, the Swedish naturalist and apostle of Carl Linnaeus. From this to worship and mythification it was just one step. Reputedly a sitter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Omai was to be depicted in the Apollo Belvedere posture – an insignium of classic perfection. He was barefoot, like the wild girl, wore his native costume and appeared in a turban, indeed, yet his gait, his confident look, his demonstrative hands and palms, and especially the background ordering nature into cultural rigour in a taming of Pacific vegetation according to English landscape gardening rules made all the difference. Here was the conquest of the New World by the Old World as supreme recognition of the latter's universal(ist) requirements of beauty, discipline and progress.

The Old World – New World cultural dialogue attained its apex: Captain James Cook, the first European to visit the Hawaiian Islands, and Omai, the first Polynesian to tread on European soil, held a paradigmatic relationship. Omai's fateful life was full to the brim with exciting episodes, part of which real-life scenes, others narrativized into meaningful tales: the noble savage described in words and images in the newspapers of the day, the pagan male awing refined gentlemen and even more distinguished ladies with his purported feral sexuality, the brave hunter invited to fox-hunting sessions by aristocrats of courtly elegance, the musically-minded Other sharing lodge seats at London oratorios, the polite Other observing the best eating manners. In search of 'a pure specimen of the noble savage uncontaminated by European civilization' the Georgian elite ironically 'admired most of his possession of civilized amenities cherished in their own refined aristocratic society.' (McCormick 120)

At the conjunction of rampant mythologization and balanced anthropological observation, the literature about and 'by' Omai in print in the 1770s-1780s stands proof to how Omai turned 'Omai' and how the cult of Omai could no longer be split from Englishness. *An Historic epistle*, from Omiah, to the Queen of Otaheite, being his remarks on the English nation of 1775 rose on the foreign observer's narrative tradition contrasting the exotic visitor's perspective with European values, practices and concepts. There was then Omiah's farewell inscribed to the ladies of London (1776) comprising the Tahitian's gallant, if sad adieu from the seat of Western prosperity. And then, the real Omai was replaced by the fictitious one in John O'Keeffe's *Short Account of the New Pantomime Called Omai, or A Trip round the World* (1785). A confection of spectacle, music and dance – like any panto – the Irish writer's production excelled in eccentricities. It was basically a love story, like so many novelistic texts of the day, but the celebration of life-preserving union touched national mythology heights: Omai, heir to the throne

of his native Tahiti, was to marry Londinia, daughter of mythical Britannia. Omai and Londinia appositely fled England and travelled to Antarctica, New Zealand and eventually Hawaii, all places that had been Captain Cook's real expedition points, now raised to legendary power (Fig. 3 – Anonymous, *Portrait of Francis Williams*, ca 1745).

The issue of actual or potential slaves promoted as writers of the day cannot be separated from the Rousseauistic project of civilizing the noble savage. Two



cases will serve the cause. The one is that of Francis Williams (1702-1770), the first recorded black writer in the British Empire. He came from a wealthy black family, a sheer rarity at the time of an expanding sugar industry. As the 'white death' spread out, the Jamaican sugar plantations and processing technology benefited from more and more black slave labour. Williams was a happy exception: not only could he financially afford choice education; the Williamses were so wealthy as to afford white slaves on their plantations!

Here he is, clad in aristocratic attire, with white stockings ending in silver-buckled shoes, adorned by the white powdered periwig. Everything around shouts out opulence, from the checkered black and white slab floor to the

richly ornamented furniture and the heavy curtains disclosing a copious book collection. These are all leather-bound volumes and the poet's left hand rests on Newton's *Philosophy*, while his right hand points to the gap left in his library, after he has chosen such a dignified title for his own legitimation. His scientific proclivity also reads in the terrestrial and celestial globe on the floor and the table respectively, as well as in the instruments of astronomic use by the open treatise. Here is the accomplished lesson of education across racial, social and cultural origins – a discourse of modernity before our times.

The other is the case of Phillis Wheatley, one of the most prominent poets in the America of her time. Senegal-Gambia born, she seems to have been under slave age in the West Indies and escaped the horrible fate by being taken to Boston, where she was purchased by one Wheatley as attendant to his wife. Of undeniable natural intelligence, Phillis soon learned to read and write and became conversant with passages from the Greco-Latin classics, the Bible, geography, history and English literature. Her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, the first ever by an African-American poet, confirm her distinction in matters spiritual and aesthetic.

In the same first third of the century, the French wild girl had a male English counterpart found outside the German city of Hamelin. The settlement's medieval fame is related to the Pied Piper who lured the local children away with his magic pipe in revenge for not having been let to spare the town of spreading rats. There must have been quite some intelligence of children's involvement in weird matters in Hamelin when, in 1725, a feral child was spotted in the woods nearby. Referred to

as Peter the Wild Boy, he was taken to the court of George, Duke of Hanover, to later settle down in London, where, in 1727, the German Duke became King George I and first Hanoverian monarch of England.

Peter was warmly welcomed by a bored royalty and started being a focus of fashionable interest in the newspapers and periodicals of the day. And for one thing, he grew fairly fond of gin! Illustrations in the press of the time showing Peter the Wild Boy's sitting and sleeping positions are amazingly mirrored by Gulliver's observations upon seeing 'several Animals in a field (...) one or two of the same Kind sitting in Trees.' He goes on to admit that their shape 'was very singular, and deformed', that their skins were darker than humanity's, that they 'had no Tails (...) [and] sat on the Ground; for this Posture they used, as well as lying down, and often stood on their hind Feet. They climbed high Trees, as nimbly as a Squirrel.' All these associations tempt him to place these creature closer to animals than humans, and to conclude that '[u]pon the whole, I never beheld in all my Travels so disagreeable an Animal, or one against which I naturally conceived so strong an Antipathy.' (Ch. I)

More sophisticated persons with an interest in human nature identified in Peter the Wild Boy a subject worth investigation from the perspective of what we now call anthropology and which, in the 1700s passed for psychology. Defoe readily sent to the print *Mere nature Delineated: or, A Body without a Soul*, an acid pamphlet deploring the state in which Peter had been found, but concluding that the story of his rescue was a fib, that the boy was a mere idiot, 'mere Nature... a Ship without a Rudder'. He also doubted that the miserable being taken from forest strife to live in domestic peace was endowed with a soul! The Rousseauistic noble savage or blank slate theories that were to give distinction to the philosophical debates of the whole century on either side of the English Channel were simply dismissed with this simple case, or, indeed, with Peter the Wild Boy's. The idiot boy type later made into a poetic character by Wordsworth, was no more than foolish humanity escaping the efforts of Reason. Defoe opposed the Wilderness to the World, or else 'Mere nature' or 'vegetative Life' to 'Conversation' or the 'rational side'. Peter had become the talk of the town and highlife society delighted in raising the case to the special power of learned debates. This particular portrait of the fully assimilated Peter graced the walls of Kensington Palace showing him in the select company of the Hanoverian royalty, sharing the front row with a princess royal and a royal pet dog, all three protected by mature figures of utmost distinction nationally. The enthusiasm of the early days when he had just been acclaimed as an outstanding piece of curiosity has prevailed in a poem by D. Lewis, one of the Miscellaneous Poems he published in 1726. In a typically English and Protestant manner, the gentlemanly poet addressed his readership with an encouraging pedagogical urge:

Receive this Youth unform'd, untaught,
From solitary Desarts brought,
To brutish Converse long confin'd,
Wild, and a Stranger to his Kind:
Receive him, and with tender Care
For Reason's Use his Mind prepare;
Shew him in Words his Thoughts to dress,

To think, and what he thinks express;
His Manners form, his Conduct plan,
And civilize him into Man.

Peter is depicted as a special guest, to be received and looked after ‘with tender Care’. His recuperation from savagery (in)to civilization is a matter of integration through socialization and what more English than a tea party, to which he is more than welcome? Unformed and untaught, straight from ‘the solitary Desarts’, he is expected to enjoy the coziness of highlife salons, where taking tea is a sensibly ordered rite of passage in its own right: his mind will be shaped into thinking and, by way of consequence, his conversation will become articulate, elegant, sociable. An art. His manners will be given appropriate form, his conduct planned so that, at the end of the day, his social educators, society as such, will be able to assert their crucial slogan: ‘Civilize him into Man’. Welcoming the wild man to tea was paramount to annihilating ‘those forces not within any plan, an anti-universe (...) whose intimate reality undermines the solidity of those structures by which man seeks to live’ (Novak, in Dudley 309). The values of the West were perceived as ‘a cultural more than a geographic entity’, so that ‘strange terrains [were] mapped, bizarre species classified, weird customs interpreted, order imposed.’ (Rousseau 1)

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