

Dialogues with/and Great Books: With Some Serious Reflections on *Robinson Crusoe*

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I. Dialogues Are Everywhere

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I WAS PREPARING A COURSE titled “Dialogues with Great Books” in which I planned to read a series of works inspired by some great books. The reading list would include pairs like Genesis 22 and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, More’s *Utopia* and the fourth book of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, among others. At the first meeting I intended to present briefly the two notions of the title: dialogue and great books.

First, I explained why I prefer the term dialogues to intertextuality, a term that has gained prominence in critical discourse during the past few decades. The term is not only notoriously vague, covering every possible relation between texts (or “texts”),¹ but also because it does not accept certain assumptions associated with the notion of a great book—the existence of hierarchy between literary works, the central role played by the master who produces the “literary *masterpiece*,”² and the uniqueness of “a great work.”³ One does not, however, have to assume that there is necessarily a contradiction between the concepts of intertextuality and great books: the writings of Genette on intertext, metatext, and hypertext illustrate how aspects of intertextuality can be discussed without denying the fact that certain works stand out in literary history.⁴

Thus, by introducing the term dialogue, I wanted to avoid certain connotations associated with intertextuality, and, what is even more important, to shed light on some structural and functional similarities between everyday, ordinary dialogues and literary and artistic dialogues. By examining the way people conduct dialogues in day-to-day situations, we may gain some insights into the more complex dynamics of literary dialogues. These similarities should not, of course, hide the obvious differences, the most conspicuous one being that real-life dialogues are *continuous*, ongoing series of *répliques* (retorts) among the discussants, and end either because of technical constraints (“Sorry, I have to go.

We'll continue tomorrow") or because the dialogical dynamics lead to a happy conclusion ("Thank you, you've answered my question," "OK, you've convinced me on that point"). Literary dialogues, on the other hand, take the form of only two *répliques*: the inspiring, source text and the inspired, responding text. In that sense, they are more closed and finite, at least on the technical, outer level than their real-life counterparts. Needless to say, literary dialogues may still be open and indeterminate on the interpretative level—like any other literary phenomenon.

Every dialogue, even a simple and short exchange of words, can be analyzed (like any linguistic act) on at least two levels: the formal, technical, or outer level ("a conversation between two or more persons"—*Merriam Webster Dictionary*) and the semantic or substantive one, focusing on the nature of the exchange that takes place. While the outer level is a *sine qua non* for every dialogue, its mere existence does not guarantee that a *meaningful* dialogue will emerge on the second level. Only the will of the two participants to engage in a dialectics of give-and-take can ensure a meaningful, genuine dialogue. As we know too often from personal experience, genuine dialogues are not, alas, the only option in real life. The two participants usually listen to each other, but sometimes they are too self-absorbed (not to mention cases where an interlocutor is daydreaming); at times, they respond to the conversational demand, at other times they ignore it;⁵ now and then one participant contributes something new to the conversation, but often one of them is simply nodding or repeating (either verbatim or with some other words) what the other has just said in what can be described as an *echo-dialogue*, and the opposite of such echo-dialogues emerges when the two interlocutors maintain the outer form or appearance of a dialogue but, in fact, conduct two parallel monologues in what can be called a *dialogue-of-the-deaf*. Such dialogues-of-the-deaf may cause frustration for the participants ("You're not listening to me!") and, for an outside listener, may exemplify human existential disconnectedness or may become a source of comic effect.

By examining the dynamics of real-life dialogues, we can offer the distinction between two basic types of dialogues: *genuine-dialogues* and *pseudo-dialogues*.⁶ In the former, the two interlocutors are involved in an exchange of words *and* a meaningful exchange of ideas and sentiments. In the latter, they exchange words but without the dialectics of give-and-take, either because they totally share thought and sentiment and hence fall into an echo-dialogue or because they experience an unbridgeable ideological and mental gap that leads them to a dialogue-of-the-deaf.⁷ Thus, a true, meaningful dialogue requires (a) some common ground among participants (to escape dialogue-of-the-deaf), (b) some significant differences (to avoid echo-dialogue), and (c) a willingness of both to be open to "the other."

By pointing out the dual layers involved in any verbal interaction (outer and inner, form and content) and proposing the distinction between two major types of dialogue (genuine and pseudo), I do not mean to resolve the philosophical question whether human speech is fundamentally based on dialogue (as Bakhtin suggested⁸) or monologue, nor to recommend one mode over the other (although we can agree that genuine-dialogues should be practiced more often in social interaction), but simply to call attention to the multilayered, complex nature of human communication.

The distinction between genuine- and pseudo-dialogues is not only useful for describing and explaining verbal interactions in real life; it can also help us to understand the complex nature of literary and artistic dialogues. Whereas some texts react to other texts in meaningful, dialectical ways (for example, parody, allusion, original adaptation), other texts, while referring to or evoking other texts, do not produce such dialectical interactions. And, as in real life, these pseudo-dialogues may take the form of either echo-dialogues, where the inspiring text is merely reheard in the inspired one (as in a simple translation) or in a dialogue-of-the-deaf, where an author does not pay attention to the original text and evokes it only on an outer, superficial level (an epigraph that shows the writer's learnedness but has no semantic significance).

Note that by detecting such literary pseudo-dialogues, I neither wish to bury, nor to praise them: literary pseudo-dialogues, unlike their everyday counterparts, which are commonly considered flawed or counterproductive, may play an important and constructive role in literary life. Translations, for example, even simple ones, bring literary works to a new audience, expanding the horizons of literary communities, opening new ways of creativity for the target culture. And, in the case of a literary dialogue-of-the-deaf, an author may not be truly attentive to the cited text, but the outcome may be a valuable work, promoting her/his own imaginative world. In fact, part of what Harold Bloom describes as the hallmark of literary creativity, at least that of "strong poets" (based on "misreading" of other poets), may be described as a kind of dialogue-of-the-deaf.⁹ The problem with Bloom's model, however, is that the emphasis he puts on dialectical strife does not leave room for the more congenial dialectical relations that characterize many literary genuine-dialogues. Not every dialectical coping with an inspiring text/poet has to be seen as expressing an urge to annihilate the parent figure. Strife, negation, combat, is but one side of the dialectical coin; listening, internalizing, containing, is the other. And there is no reason to restrict the model to literary relations that can be described in terms of Freudian "family romance" and patricide; literary dialogues are richer and more heterogeneous.¹⁰

II. The Battle of the (Great) Books

After suggesting in the introductory meeting the complex nature of dialogue in real life and in literature, it was time for me to expound the concept of great book, a concept that has become a major battlefield in literary history and theory during the past few decades. Three centuries ago, literary critics were waging “The Battle of the Books,” arguing about the criteria for determining literary eminence. The focus of the debate at that time was whether the list of great books should be restricted to the ancients or be open to the moderns. Today, literary critics are again arguing the question of literary greatness, but with two important differences. First, since the time of the old debate, the boundaries of the canon have been dramatically changed and challenged: back then, the radicals tried to introduce into the canon some modern authors, thus shaking the first attribute in the notorious triad of dead white males. Today, conservatives and radicals disagree on the proportion and the pace by which the canon should embrace marginalized voices, but nobody, not even the most rigid old guard, defends the above-mentioned outdated, racist, and chauvinistic triad. Furthermore, in addition to arguments concerning the sanctioning of specific works or set of aesthetic values, some contemporary radicals try to undermine the very assumption that a book’s greatness is built upon its intrinsic aesthetic qualities.

What are these aesthetic qualities? History of criticism provides many different answers to that question from Aristotle’s unity in variety¹¹ to various modern descriptions—the New Critics’ emphasis on semantic paradox, ambiguity and tension,¹² Monroe Beardsley’s dual principle of congruence and plenitude,¹³ Victor Shklovsky’s notion of “making strange,”¹⁴ and Jan Mukarovsky’s stress on deviating from established aesthetic norms.¹⁵ What all these insightful suggestions have in common is the belief that the relevant aesthetic qualities inherent in a literary work are the source of its consensual greatness.

Contemporary radicals are thus challenging certain presuppositions of centuries-long critical discourse. What aspects were portrayed by followers of different schools of aesthetics as *objective* qualities of the artistic text are regarded by followers of the new approach as qualities agreed upon by a specific cultural elite;¹⁶ what was presented as qualities *inherent* to the literary work are unmasked as an outcome of institutionalized modes of interpretation;¹⁷ what were advocated as *universal*, not only objective, aesthetic qualities are laid bare as representing the concrete interests of historical hegemonies.

The challenges hurled at the different schools of aesthetics come from an approach that takes *social power and interests* to be the source of a work’s reputation (and not its alleged inherent aesthetic qualities).¹⁸

As with the school of aesthetics, so with the school of social power there are different variations and emphases: orthodox Marxism, emphasizing the role of social and economic infrastructure in determining cultural value; neo-Marxist thinkers, accepting the existence of dialectical relations between social and semiautonomous cultural and artistic systems;¹⁹ Foucault and his followers, describing the power system underlying cultural values;²⁰ Bourdieu and his concept of the cultural field.²¹ Despite different emphases, representatives of the schools of social power argue that advocates of the school of aesthetics who assign greatness to some books serve (either innocently or in *mauvaise foi*s) the interests of ruling hegemonies.

While these two schools shed light on the complex question of “How and why does a literary work become a great book?” they also have their limitations. First, both schools are too much entangled in ideological agendas: representatives of the school of aesthetics are usually associated with a conservative approach, supposedly committed to protecting the accepted canon, while those of the school of social power advocate a critical, radical outlook, in an attempt to reshape the existing canon, through introducing silenced, marginalized voices and by exposing it as depending on relativistic grounds and as contaminated by vested interests. But even if we try to neutralize their ideological motivations and semihidden political agendas (an impossible task, of course, according to the school of social power), these two schools also possess built-in shortcomings, limiting our understanding of the complex process by which a literary work becomes and maintains its status as a great book. The school of aesthetics fails to explain why the canon keeps changing despite the fact that the aesthetic qualities of the literary works are inherent, universal, and objective. The school of social power, on the other hand, fails to explain why so many literary works (for example, Homer, Shakespeare, and many others) have kept their unwavering reputation despite the changing of social hegemonies.

III. Dialogues with/and Great Books

Each of us, I told my students, can see some valid arguments made by the school of aesthetics as well as by the school of social power. The problem with advocates of both schools is that they tend to reiterate their *partial and ideologically charged arguments*, without being able to produce constructive, meaningful dialogue among themselves; in other words, they seem to be locked into perpetuating a typical dialogue-of-the-deaf. To bypass their built-in ideological biases and conceptual limitations, I felt that a new approach was needed. While I was thinking of ways to

break this conceptual deadlock, it occurred to me that one conspicuous trait of the great books I planned to teach in my “Dialogues with Great Books” course is that they have inspired *many and diverse* literary, artistic, and critical dialogues (both genuine and pseudo) throughout the ages. This phenomenon, which does not seem accidental, led me to offer the following hypothesis, tying together the two terms of the course’s title: The way for a book to build its reputation as a great book is by inspiring many and diverse types of literary, artistic, and critical dialogues (in the form of local allusions, epigraphs, parodies, translations, adaptations, pictorial representations, scholarly interpretations, and so forth). Whereas most of these literary and artistic dialogues function mainly as sound boxes for the inspiring work, some of these inspired texts have gained reputation as independent, great artistic achievements in their own right (for example, Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the rich tradition of dialogues with Homer’s *Odyssey*). Even more than sheer quantity, the factor of *diversity* appears to be crucial in the process by which a work acquires greatness. When a novel received favorable critical reviews *and* was translated into various languages *and* was adapted to the movies *and* its characters inspired painters and other artists *and* it evoked a series of critical discussions, coming from different schools of criticism—the work’s chances of gaining a reputation and consensual status seem much higher, compared to a situation where it had inspired only one kind of dialogue.

To examine this hypothesis, I took lists of works considered great books by three independent sources.²² Then I searched for references to these works in four different databases, representing different cultural strata and artistic media: the Google, all-inclusive Internet search engine, the Google Image database, the library of Columbia University in New York City, and the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), in which one can find movie productions and adaptations of literary works.²³ Results obtained in this preliminary examination pointed to a high degree of correlation between the number and diversity of references a book gets in all databases and its consensual status as a great book, indicated by its listing in all three independent sources. One can challenge these results and argue that they tell us nothing new; after all, it is expected to find many references to works enjoying the reputation of great books. This reputation, according to this challenge, is precisely the reason why the work enjoys a high profile on various databases.

My argument, however, is that although these two issues—the reputation of a work and the dialogues this work inspires—are closely connected, the former is, in fact, the product of the latter and not the other way around. A work’s reputation can be seen as a favorable starting point, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for authors, translators, adapters, artists, commentators, and scholars to become engaged

with the work. It would be more accurate to assert that a work's varied propagation (or dissemination) is what explains how it establishes, and maintains, its reputation.²⁴ To disentangle the seemingly Gordian knot presented by the high correlation between a work's consensual reputation and the fact that it has inspired many and diverse dialogues, one can (a) think of cases where a work's reputation has declined because it stopped inspiring many and diverse dialogues; while such a work could still appear on some great books lists, the piling dust on its cover is the first indication that its reputation is in fact declining.²⁵ In a complementary manner, one can (b) think of a work that forced its way into the canon thanks to an impressive number and variety of dialogues it inspired.

In the following sections, I would like to focus on one particular case of (b): Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The vast body of diverse dialogues this work has inspired during the past three centuries can illustrate my basic contention that propagation explains canonization (and not the other way around). These dialogues can also tell us that a work's way to greatness is more complicated than the one assumed by the two prevailing schools.

IV. *Robinson Crusoe*: A Test Case for the Dialogic Approach

Today, *Robinson Crusoe's* status as a great book seems unshakable, but this was not always the case. If one examines the literary reactions to the work when it was first published or looks at Defoe's literary reputation in his lifetime, it would have been difficult to predict the work's bright future. To say that Defoe did not enjoy the support of his contemporary literary elite would be a mild understatement. In fact, Defoe never belonged to those circles and his works were most times not even considered as serious literary achievements (that is, when they were acknowledged to be Defoe's). To his contemporaries, Defoe's reputation was first and foremost that of a political pamphleteer, and he was more than once criticized and ridiculed.²⁶ Alexander Pope's satirical reference to Defoe in *The Dunciad*, lumped together with other unworthy writers, is symptomatic of the attitude of highly educated literary circles to Defoe's oeuvre.²⁷

The first lesson one can draw from this is that a marginal position in the literary system does not thwart a writer from achieving fame and glory. The second lesson is that advocates of the school of social power are in trouble, at least as long as they emphasize top-down processes for explaining a work's way to fame. Note, however, that simply substituting a top-down with a bottom-up explanation (the vox populi factor) will be equally erroneous. A bestseller's success has its impact, but if it is not accompanied by many and diverse dialogues, it will prove ephemeral.²⁸

The difficulties experienced by advocates of the school of social power may blow wind into the sails of advocates of the school of aesthetics. But their joy is premature. As long as their arguments rely on traditional aesthetic qualities, they face difficulties of their own. *Robinson Crusoe* did not become a classic thanks to stylistic beauty and sophisticated composition. Defoe was a natural storyteller, gifted with inventive imagination and an eye for details. Above all, he was a master in artfully entwining history and fiction. As a storyteller, he was able to create and sustain complex narrative effects like curiosity, suspense, and surprise.²⁹ All this, however, does not make *Robinson Crusoe* an exquisite, well-formed aesthetic object. Compared to other authors of narrative fiction of the eighteenth century—Henry Fielding comes naturally to mind in this context—Defoe's narrative art seems quite crude.

The fact that *Robinson Crusoe* was not sanctioned by contemporary literary elite and the fact that it has no memorable aesthetic qualities pose serious difficulties to advocates of both prevailing schools. But the dialogic approach does not stipulate top-down processes nor does it demand conspicuous aesthetic qualities. Instead, it directs our attention to the number and diversity of dialogues a work inspires. And on that front, *Robinson Crusoe* has an abundance of supporting evidence. Whereas some of these dialogues may seem strange and others may look surprising, their multitude and heterogeneity are precisely what explain the work's reputation.

V. Some Versions of Pseudo-Dialogues

First, we should mention that within four months of its publication in April 1719, *Robinson Crusoe* had six printings. Perhaps the book was not a true bestseller, with an estimate of a sale of not much more than 5000, but these repeated printings were undoubtedly a clear indication of readers' interest.³⁰ This initial success among readers was followed by numerous editions and printings during the past three centuries. The Library of Congress, for example, holds 352 different editions of the book (compared to only 92 of Fielding's *Tom Jones* and 101 of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*). From the dialogic perspective, the act of reading can be described as the most *passive* form of echo-dialogue, like the nodding of an interlocutor in a real-life conversation. Reader-response criticism has taught us that the act of reading involves highly complicated cognitive processes.³¹ But, as Pierre Bayard has recently reminded us, in reality reading is an umbrella term covering a wide spectrum of phenomena moving from attentive close-reading to superficial skimming (not to mention reading and then, alas, forgetting).³² Moreover, the fact

that Robinson Crusoe has become, like Don Quixote and Hamlet, a true modern myth and an inevitable part of our “cultural baggage,” means that most of those who know of the book and its story have never read it in its original, unabridged form.³³

Still, even if only a small fraction of those who know of the book have actually read it, we would be left with a huge number of young and adult readers. Alongside wide and diversified readership—the most passive form of echo-dialogue—one can find numerous examples of *active* forms of echo-dialogue. We can start by recalling that to capitalize on *Robinson Crusoe*'s success, Defoe wrote, in the same year of its publication, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and the next year, he recycled some essays as *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe*. Perhaps sequels are not typical cases of echo-dialogues because they express a wish for a story never to end as opposed to the wish to retell (and rehear) the same story (in adaptations, abridgements, translation), but they are, nevertheless, not only an important indication of a work's impact and success but also a sure way to accommodate readers' desire for repetition (thus, a kind of an echo).³⁴ Success can breed sequels but also envy and disapproval. One important form of a critical echo-dialogue is *parody*: the same year the book was published, Charles Gildon, a minor playwright and political pamphleteer, wrote a parody entitled “The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Mr. D— De F—,” in which he satirizes Defoe's style and character.³⁵ Literary history has its sense of irony: parody, instead of ruining a work's reputation and sending it into oblivion, can sometimes enhance its visibility and fame.

Because of its commercial success, *Robinson Crusoe* was pirated, abridged, imitated, translated, and adapted for the stage as pantomime and as drama—and all these are typical forms of echo-dialogue. By the end of the nineteenth century, 196 editions of *Robinson Crusoe* had been published, 114 revisions, 277 imitations, and 110 translations, including Hebrew, Armenian, Bengali, Persian, and even Eskimo.³⁶ The enormous body of translations indicates, among other things, the book's ability to transcend its specific time and place. While being deeply rooted in the England of its time, it evokes perennial dreams, nightmares, and questions that haunt human beings: Who am I apart from society? What is the right path to choose in life? Where can I find strength and solace? What makes man-in-culture different from man-in-nature? How should I relate to “the other”?

A translator usually tries to accommodate two conflicting demands—to reproduce faithfully the source text, thus bending the target language and culture toward the foreign text, and at the same time to domesticate the source text to the target system. And every concrete translation comes up with its own specific compromise between these two simultane-

ous, conflicting demands. Contemporary theories of literary translation emphasize the target system's ideology in determining the outcome of the translation process.³⁷ One should not forget, however, that the translation process always involves a crucial *dialogic dimension*, creating a middle zone between the two languages/cultures.³⁸ As far as the case of *Robinson Crusoe* is concerned, it is especially significant to note not only quality but also diversity: in addition to being translated into many European languages, the book reached out to cultures like China and Japan, bringing up unexpected local issues and dilemmas.³⁹

Robinson Crusoe has also been widely and continuously illustrated and sometimes even packaged as a picture book with little or no text.⁴⁰ This last phenomenon is closely related to the fact that the book was widely read and perceived as a children's book. For most people (unless they are English majors), the only encounter with *Robinson Crusoe* is in the form of an abridged adaptation for children. Abridgements and adaptations for children are typical cases of echo-dialogue where the original text is transformed according to some fixed rules—focusing only on the major part of the story, namely Crusoe on the desert island and his encounter with Friday, trimming both what preceded and what followed (what Gerard Genette aptly called the “twice-amputated” model⁴¹), and skipping all complex religious, theological, and moral reflections pervading the book. The huge body of translations and adaptations also provides some peculiar cases, such as the German translation of Joachim Campe titled *Robinson der Jüngere* (1779–80)—adapting the work to suit romantic notions inspired by Rousseau—which was in its turn translated back into English.⁴²

As long as adaptations follow a relatively predictable set of rules (trimming, simplifying), they exemplify the category of echo-dialogue. When an adaptation opts for a more creative and unpredictable angle, it moves towards the category of genuine-dialogue. Thus adaptations (and also translations) oscillate between the categories of pseudo- and genuine-dialogue, depending on the author's creativity and the predictability of the outcome.⁴³

So far, I have illustrated some versions of echo-dialogue inspired by *Robinson Crusoe*: parodies, abridgements, illustrations, translations, and adaptations (provided they do not involve too much creativity). Can we also find cases of the other version of pseudo-dialogue, namely dialogue-of-the-deaf, in which a text evokes another text but without creating a true give-and-take dialogue? Such cases, though far less common, do exist. The case of *The Swiss Family Robinson* might perhaps illustrate this category. By naming the book and its major characters “Robinson” and telling a story of survivors of a shipwreck on an uninhabited island, the author, Johann Rudolf Wyss, was clearly evoking Defoe's famous work when he

published his novel in 1812. It is highly questionable, however, whether this novel (which gained its own popularity, a sequel, and adaptations) was conducting a true, dialectical dialogue with *Robinson Crusoe*. The constant tension between a moralistic tone (advocating moderation) and the love of rebellious adventures (central in Defoe's book) has disappeared from the moralistic *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Whereas Defoe's work explores in depth the question, "What is man without society?" (suggesting that society dwells within man), the *Swiss* novel brings an entire family onto the island, thus bypassing the question altogether. And while Crusoe's encounter with Friday holds an extremely important place in Defoe's work, Wyss does not seem to be interested in an encounter between Europeans and "the other."

Moving from the realm of fiction to critical discourse, I would like to argue that at least one influential philosophical discussion of Defoe's work, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*, can be described as a typical dialogue-of-the-deaf. According to Rousseau, Crusoe (the character) should serve as a model for young people and the reading of *Robinson Crusoe* (the book) is deemed more important in educating young souls than the reading of great philosophers.⁴⁴ In these comments, Rousseau seems to use *Robinson Crusoe* to promote his own ideas without paying real attention to Defoe's work. True, Crusoe lives in nature but he survives thanks to many technological tools and cultural modes of thinking (which Rousseau, actually, detests). Defoe's book is more an encomium for Western civilization and the ethics of growing capitalist society (hard work, investment, profits, and luxuries) than it is a tribute to the idea of "man living-in-nature."⁴⁵

VI. Versions of Genuine-Dialogues

Unlike the numerous cases of echo-dialogue, which try to reproduce *Robinson Crusoe* according to a relatively fixed set of rules (for example, simple, noncreative translations and adaptations) and unlike some cases of dialogue-of-the-deaf, where a text evokes Defoe's work without engaging in a true dialogue (as in *The Swiss Family Robinson* and *Émile*), *Robinson Crusoe* has also inspired authors, artists, and critics to create a multidimensional, dialectical process of give-and-take, hence to engage in genuine-dialogues.

Historically, genuine-dialogues with *Robinson Crusoe* emerged—alongside continual flourishing of echo-dialogues—during the second half of the twentieth century. The reason for the emergence of this new form of dialogue is related to changing expectations concerning the role of the author/artist and the function of art in postromanticism and modernism.

The source text is no longer perceived as a revered object, and the artist is expected to exercise poetic license and to assert his/her individual perspective on the inspiring text. What Michel Tournier did in *Vendredi* and what J. M. Coetzee did in *Foe* with regard to *Robinson Crusoe* is similar to what James Joyce did in *Ulysses* with regard to *The Odyssey* (albeit on a much lower scale): creating a multidimensional, unpredictable genuine-dialogue with a classic.

Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) can illustrate some important characteristics of genuine-dialogues. It keeps intact a few important features of Defoe's plot and characters (a shipwreck, life on an deserted island, an encounter between Crusoe and Friday), but at the same time it alters significant details and adds others: The major character-narrator is no longer Crusoe but Suzan Barton, a woman who finds herself on Crusoe's island after she has survived a shipwreck of her own. Another unexpected "new" character Coetzee has added to his book is Defoe-the-writer, to whom Suzan tried to sell her (and/or Crusoe's?) story. Some central themes of Defoe's work receive new twists in Coetzee's book: Defoe's silenced Friday becomes, in *Foe*, an enigmatic character whose tongue has been literally cut out. Such changes not only resonate with contemporary, postcolonial sensibilities, but also make us reread and reinterpret Defoe's classic. And whereas in Defoe's work the questions of storytelling (and writing) are part of the technical level of the book (Crusoe as a narrator and Crusoe as a writer of a diary), in *Foe* Coetzee is exploring the complex, perplexing relationship between fiction and reality, rhetoric and truthfulness, and constantly frustrating the reader's attempts to determine what really happened. Suzan Barton and Defoe (the character in Coetzee's book) are presented as unreliable narrators and, by implication, every storyteller becomes a suspect. While reading Coetzee's book, the reader is invited to constantly compare the two works and to decide what has been changed and for what reasons.⁴⁶ Such complex, attentive, comparative reading is the hallmark of a genuine-dialogue.

Genuine-dialogues with literary works are not confined to literature. *Robinson Crusoe*'s popularity has attracted some filmmakers to produce cinematic adaptations. Some of these simply tailor the original story to the new medium, and thus can be labeled echo-dialogues. Others, however, create more complex films, characterized by intense tension between repetition and invention.

What makes a specific film an echo-dialogue and what makes another a genuine-dialogue? The answer seems to be rooted in the concept of *predictability*. If, after being told that a novel has been adapted (for children or for a Hollywood production), we can foresee, at least in broad strokes, the outcome, it means that we are in the territory of echo-dialogues. If, on the other hand, it is difficult to predict the outcome, then

we are in the realm of genuine-dialogue. Rod Hardy and George Miller's *Robinson Crusoe* (1997), starring Pierce Brosnan, adds some elements to Defoe's story, notably framing the story in a love story between Crusoe and a lovely young demoiselle. Despite this new dimension, I would still like to argue that the movie does not constitute a genuine-dialogue with Defoe's work. True, based on Defoe's work alone, the addition of a love story is unpredictable; one of *Robinson Crusoe's* marked characteristics is the absence of women and romance (the brief mentioning of a wife and children toward the end of the story only highlights their absence). But, with the tacit rules of a Hollywood production in mind, the addition of a melodramatic, sentimental love story to the movie becomes quite predictable.

Robert Zemeckis's *Castaway* (2000), starring Tom Hanks, on the other hand, can be described as a genuine-dialogue with *Robinson Crusoe*, despite the fact that it is not even presenting itself as an adaptation of Defoe's work. Like many genuine-dialogues, the reader-spectator constantly oscillates between the two works with the question, "What has been kept from the original story, what has been changed, and why?" The film attempts to retell a *Robinson Crusoe*-like story situated in the United States of today. This very decision opens up new veins for the creative imagination: Who and what today's Crusoe would look like? What will be his occupation? How can he find himself on a desert island in today's developed world? The fact that all these questions can be answered in many different ways makes the outcome less predictable than any simple adaptation. The idea to portray today's Crusoe in the character of Chuck Noland, an efficient Federal Express executive, suggests an interesting analogy between England's eighteenth-century capitalist ethics of work hard, save, and prosper (embedded in Defoe's book) and the contemporary American capitalist ethos of time is money.

And there are other details that make the comparison of the two works rewarding: the idea to make a basketball (Wilson) Chuck's humanlike companion recreates in an unexpected way Crusoe's "communication" with the parrot and, of course, his relationship with Friday, reminding us of *Robinson Crusoe's* theme of humans' desperate need for companionship. On a different level, the barely hidden reference to Chuck's attempted suicide can be seen as an intensified version of Crusoe's despair in Defoe's book. Zemeckis's film also frames the original story in an added love story. But unlike the version of Hardy and Miller, *Castaway* sticks to a realistic, nonsentimental tone: there is no happy reunion of the two lovers, only a painful recognition that life's demands and obligations prevail.⁴⁷ In that respect, the film can be seen as a tribute to Defoe's spirit rather than a predictable response to moviegoers' expectations. By calling attention to the special, unexpected mixture of recognized

and novel elements, I do not wish, of course, to offer an interpretation of *Castaway*, only to justify the claim that this film can be described as a genuine-dialogue with Defoe's classic.

As far as criticism and scholarly works are concerned, we should note the steady and fast growing stream of critical discussions of *Robinson Crusoe* during the past two and a half centuries.⁴⁸ In addition to some simple explications and commentaries (for example, *Cliff's Notes*)—critical versions of echo-dialogue—and some notable dialogues-of-the-deaf mentioned earlier (Rousseau's *Émile*), there still remains a large body of critical works engaged in different kinds of genuine-dialogues. Here, an important role was played not only by critics, biographers, and scholars, but also by some prominent writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, who wrote illuminating essays on Defoe's classic, thus making a major contribution to the work's reputation as a great book.⁴⁹

VII. Concluding Remarks

The rich and heterogeneous body of dialogues inspired by *Robinson Crusoe* seems to provide ample support for the hypothesis that this is, in fact, the source of its consensual greatness. Most of these dialogues, however, will be dismissed as irrelevant if we restrict ourselves to examining only social, top-down institutionalized processes (as prescribed by the school of social power) or focus on conspicuous aesthetic qualities alone (as recommended by the school of aesthetics). The dialogic approach does not deny that literary critics and other cultural institutions play an important role in the process by which a work assumes greatness. It reminds us, however, that this role is perhaps smaller than what critics would like to believe; the *arbiter elegantiae*, ancient and modern alike, is but *one* player in literary history, and status-giving institutions sometimes supply only formal recognition to processes taking place far from scholarly and institutionalized control.⁵⁰ And while the dialogic approach can embrace the assertion that some literary works exhibit more aesthetic qualities than others, it does not postulate a simple correlation (let alone causal relations) between these qualities and consensual greatness. This recognized greatness emerges as a result of the ways actual readers, authors, artists, and critics interpret, reinterpret, and misinterpret a literary work.

In some important ways, the dialogical approach can be seen as a corrective for both schools. Against a one-sided focus on the role of social power structures, it constantly reminds us of the *inspiring text* (presumably containing notable aesthetic and spiritual qualities). And as opposed to

a partial emphasis on inherent aesthetic qualities, it persistently calls attention to historical processes and contextual factors (readership, artistic and critical responses, and social power structures).

Do the above data and arguments succeed in *refuting* the underlying assumptions of the two prevailing schools and turn their followers into ardent supporters of the new school? As much as I would like to believe that this is the case, it is more likely that some counterarguments can be made in an attempt to save the basic positions of the two prevailing schools. Such a defense, however, would have to be accompanied by some needed modifications to the basic assumptions of the two schools. Advocates of the school of social power could modify their top-down emphasis and acknowledge the fact that bottom-up processes—voluntary, spontaneous reactions from readers, writers, artists, and critics—play an important role in the dynamics by which a work achieves greatness, as illustrated in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*. Advocates of the school of aesthetics can introduce significant modifications to their definition of an aesthetic quality so that it would include vague qualities such as a text's imaginative power or its ability to address perennial human dreams and nightmares—something *Robinson Crusoe* is clearly doing. At this point, the question is no longer whether my data and arguments can dramatically refute the assumptions of the two schools, but rather whether there is a compelling reason to adhere to a school that needs to modify significantly its basic assumptions. The only reason to stick to one of the prevailing schools instead of giving chance to the dialogic approach may be rooted more in ideology than in methodology. From a methodological point of view, the dialogical hypothesis seems to provide a more elegant (not necessarily simple) explanation of the accumulated data. As a bonus, it is less burdened with ideological commitments, neither to radical attempts to reshape the accepted canon, nor to a conservative attempt to hold fast to it. When we detect a work that has evoked many and varied dialogues, it deserves our serious attention as researchers of literary life and history—regardless of its purported status or its specific aesthetic qualities. These dialogues cease to be secondary, dispensable factors for understanding why a specific work IS great. Instead, they turn out to be the cornerstone for understanding the dynamics by which a work BECOMES great. The dialogic approach emphasizes ongoing processes rather than end-products; a work's greatness is no longer perceived as a static attribute (a medal given by a ruling hegemony or a by-product of objective aesthetic qualities), but is part of a dynamic relationship between text, readers, authors, artists, and critics. A work's consensual greatness can weaken when it ceases to inspire new dialogues (due to changing aesthetic sensibilities and/or institutional, ideologically motivated dictates). And thanks to a new surge of dialogues it can regain

high acclaim. The fate of classical literature in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance can illustrate these two processes, respectively.

We can see now how the dialogic approach enables us to overcome the two major shortcomings of the two prevailing schools. Whereas the school of social power struggles to cope with the relatively *stable* status of works within the canon ("Why do radical changes in political and ideological hegemonies not affect Homer, Shakespeare, and many others?"), the dialogic approach can easily explain this by virtue of the great and varied body of dialogues these works have already inspired throughout the ages. And while the school of aesthetics finds difficulties in explaining the changing status of works within the canon ("Why a work changes its status without changing its admirable aesthetic qualities?"), the dialogic approach can show these changes to be a function of diminishing or growing literary, artistic, and critical dialogues.

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NOTES

1 One can despair of attaining a clear definition of this chameleonlike term, but still, by tracing its historical emergence, contexts, and different critical uses, argue for its productivity for present and future critical discourse. See, for example, Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

2 The term "masterpiece" originates in art history and was later applied to literature. See Walter Cahn, *Masterpiece: Chapters on the History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979).

3 These contrasts are outlined and implied in the introductory chapter of Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, ed., *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3–36.

4 Gerard Genette's concepts are explained and illustrated in *Palimpsests*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1997). I do not introduce his "para-text" and "archi-text" because they are only indirectly relevant to the phenomena I discuss here. See also Ziva Ben-Porat's study of rhetorical intertextuality in her "Inter-textuality," *Hasifrut/Literature* 34 (Summer 1985): 170–78 (in Hebrew).

5 This can be a simple result of inattentiveness, but it can also be a conscious move to produce a conversational implicature. See Paul H. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, *Speech Acts*, ed. P. Cole and J. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 41–58.

6 The distinction between genuine- and pseudo-dialogue roughly parallels Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It relations, but without carrying the deep metaphysical meanings it has in this philosopher's discussion. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1970).

7 The difference between the outer and the semantic levels of verbal interaction can also be seen in monologues: a speaker may produce a genuine monologue, expressing one coherent and consistent stand, but at times he or she may give voice to two conflicting attitudes in what can be called dialogical monologue (for example, Hamlet's "To be or not to be").

- 8 See, for example, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981). See also Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London: Routledge, 1990), and Gary Saul Morson, "Dialogue, Monologue, and the Social: A Reply to Hen Hirschkop," in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, ed. Morson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 81–88.
- 9 In other respects, however, Bloom's description fits what I call here genuine-dialogue. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975).
- 10 For a summary of such critiques of Bloom's model, see Clayton and Rothstein, *Influence and Intertextuality*, 10–11.
- 11 See Aristotle's discussion of plot's ideal "magnitude" in the seventh chapter of the *Poetics* (especially 1451a10–11).
- 12 For paradox, see Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947); for ambiguity, see William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930); and for tension, see Allen Tate, "Tension in Poetry," in *Critiques and Essays in Criticism, 1920–1948*, ed. Robert W. Stallman (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1949).
- 13 Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958), 144–47.
- 14 See Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965).
- 15 See Jan Mukarovsky, *On Poetic Language*, trans. John Burbank and P. Steiner (Lisse, The Netherlands: Peter de Ridder Press, 1976).
- 16 There is, of course, another pertinent debate as to whether these qualities have objective, subjective, or intersubjective status. For a lucid argument advocating the objective nature of aesthetic qualities, see Eddy M. Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press., 1997).
- 17 See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).
- 18 Literary and artistic theory and the philosophy of science seem to have gone through similar processes during the past few decades—moving from *aesthetic* traits and the concept of *beauty* (in literature and art) and from *epistemic* considerations and the concept of *truth* (in science)—to *social* factors as the explanation of the fate and fame of a work of art or a scientific theory.
- 19 For different versions of Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches, see *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
- 20 See *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
- 21 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992).
- 22 Maynard Mac et al., eds., *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* (New York: Norton, 1997), David Denby, *Great Books* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), and Frank N. Magill, *Masterpieces of World Literature* (New York: Harper Collins, 1952).
- 23 Data from this initial research is presented in my "What Is, Empirically, A Great Book?" in *New Beginnings in Literary Studies*, ed. Willie Van Peer and Jan Auracher (forthcoming).
- 24 I deliberately use here a term borrowed from biological evolution to suggest some similarities between natural and cultural processes, especially the important role played by *variety* for enhancing "survival." For an attempt to apply biological evolutionary concepts to literary history, without forgetting the important differences between the two realms, see the second chapter in my *Metaphors of Genre* (University Park, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 1993) and my "The Strange Life and Adventures of Biological Concepts in Genre Periodization," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 21 (1994): 613–26. A recent important contribution to the biological analogy in literary studies can be found in Gary Bortolotti

and Linda Hutcheon, "On the Origin of Adaptation—Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and 'Success'—Biologically," *New Literary History* 38, no. 3 (2007): 443–58. For an important study of geographical patterns of literary dissemination (of the novel in Europe of the nineteenth century), see Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 141–97.

25 In my initial research I detected such a pattern in Frank N. Magill, *Masterpieces of World Literature*, favoring American works of the first half of the twentieth century that enjoyed some critical acclaim but without inspiring a significant body of dialogues.

26 See Pat Rogers, *Defoe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 9–14.

27 "Instructive work! whose wry-mouthed portraiture / Displayed the fates her confessors endure. / Earless on high, stood unabashed Defoe, / And Tutchin flagrant from the scourge below" (*Dunciad* 2.145–48), in Pope, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. William K. Wimsatt (New York: Rinehart, 1950), 400. For more demeaning reactions of the "Scriblerians" circle, see Rogers, *Defoe*, 38–40.

28 A recommendation from Oprah Winfrey can make the sales of *Anna Karenina* skyrocket, but if Tolstoy had to rely *only* on such a temporary rise on sales, his place in the literary pantheon would be quite shaky.

29 See my "Robinson Crusoe, 'The Other,' and the Poetics of Surprise," *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 14 (2004/2005): 1–18.

30 See Rogers, *Defoe*, 7.

31 For a systematic presentation of these processes, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

32 See Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

33 See the introductory chapters in Michael Seidel, "Robinson Crusoe": *Island Myths and the Novel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991) and Lieve Spaas and Brian Stimpson, "Robinson Crusoe": *Myth and Metamorphoses* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996).

34 See Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 134; Marjorie Garber, *Quotation Marks* (London: Routledge, 2003), 73–81; and Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

35 See Rogers, *Defoe*, 41–47.

36 These numbers are offered in: http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_18c/defoe/.

37 See, for example, André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992).

38 For an important study introducing the concept of dialogue into translation theory, see Douglas Robinson, *The Translator's Turn* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991).

39 See Lydia He Liu, "Robinson Crusoe and His Adventures in China: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Problem of Realism and Science Fiction" and Jonathan Zwicker, "'Robinson Crusoe Stories': Translation, the Novel, and the Literary Market in Nineteenth-Century Japan," *Abstracts of the 2000 AAS Annual Meeting* (San Diego, CA, March 9–12, 2000), <http://www.aasianst.org/absts/2000abst/Inter/i-toc.htm>.

40 For a study of the book's illustrations, tracing changing norms and artistic sensibilities and understanding of the work, see David Blewett, *The Illustration of "Robinson Crusoe" 1719–1920* (Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1995).

41 Genette, *Palimpsests*, 230.

42 For an interesting discussion of this case as representing the norms operative in children's literature and in translation, see Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1986), 126–27.

43 The multifaceted relations between literary works and movie productions, as well as the postmodern situation where the lines between the original and its disseminations

become blurred, have triggered a growing interest in adaptations and related phenomena. See Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* and Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

44 The relevant passage from Rousseau's *Émile* is quoted in Rogers, *Defoe*, 52–53.

45 Karl Marx's comments on *Robinson Crusoe* in *Das Capital* (quoted in Rogers, *Defoe*, 166–68) launched in their turn a rich series of discussions centering on Crusoe as *homo economicus*. These comments might be important for theory of economy, but it is difficult to see them as genuine-dialogue with Defoe's work.

46 For an interesting discussion of Coetzee's imaginative version of Defoe's classic, see Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 106–112.

47 A light sentimental and optimistic note is nonetheless introduced at the final scene, suggesting a new love story. It is, after all, a Hollywood production.

48 MLA International Bibliography lists fourteen entries for the years 1926 to 1975, compared to 392 (!) from 1976 to 2007. This impressive number might reflect, among other things, the renewed interest of different contemporary schools of criticism in Defoe's classic, especially postcolonial preoccupations with the role of Friday, "the other," in *Robinson Crusoe*.

49 See, for example, Rogers, *Defoe and Twentieth Century Interpretations of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Frank H. Ellis (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969). It is interesting to note the rapid growth in critical discussions of *Robinson Crusoe* during the past three decades.

50 David Damrosch calls attention to some changes in the canon as reflected in MLA bibliography entries devoted to some British romantics, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006), 43–53. His illuminating discussion, however, gives too much weight to the role of scholarly works in canon formation. Another pertinent work in this context is Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). The only problem with Murray's highly impressive work is its restriction to historiographies, encyclopedias, and dictionaries, thus ignoring other, equally important, dialogic dimensions involved in the process by which a literary and artistic work acquires greatness.