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Hollowing out a space for the subject to-be:

Robinson Crusoe's textual family romance

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*I want to run through the world
And live the life of a lost child.
(Jean-Joseph Surin)¹*

*Like all men, you are the offspring
of the novel, such is my obsession
and my defeat... (E. M. Cioran)²*

«Between Allegory and History »

When *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pirates. Written by himself* was published in 1719 in London – and received with enthusiasm: it ran through six editions in the first year –, Daniel Defoe's contemporaries (1659 or 1661-1731) would have recognized the book's organizational structure and ideology: a hybrid between the *Providence* tradition narrative, the youth guide and the spiritual biography. The preface reassured them by establishing such horizons of expectations:

¹ Original French text : «Je veux aller courir parmi le monde où je vivrai comme un enfant perdu » (« Cantique V », in *Cantiques spirituels de l'amour divin Cantiques spirituels*. ([Bordeaux 1662] ; Paris : 1731, p. 15): <http://books.google.fr/books?id=m0A9AAAACAAJ&vq=vivre%20la%20vie%20d'un%20enfant%20perdu&hl=f&pg=RA1-PT17#v=onepage&q=vivre%20la%20vie%20d'un%20enfant%20perdu&f=false>

² Quoted by Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel*. Trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, The Harvester Press Ltd, 1980, p. 21.

If ever the Story of any private Man's Adventures in the World were worth making Publick, and were acceptable when Publish'd, the Editor of this Account thinks this will be so.

The Wonders of this Man's Life exceed all that (he thinks) is to be found extant; the Life of one Man being scarce capable of a greater Variety.

The story is told with Modesty, with Seriousness, and with a religious Application of Events to the Uses to which wise Men always apply them (*viz.*) to the Instruction of others by this Example, and to justify and honour the Wisdom of Providence in all the Variety of our Circumstances, let them happen how they will.³

These “private man’s adventures” are worth making public it is proposed, because of their entertaining content (*wondrous* and *varied*) and their form (a *modest* and *serious* tone fit for pedagogical and religious instruction). In the ideology of the Puritan « Providence » tradition⁴, the “matter and manner” of which Defoe knew very well, the “wonders of a man’s life” have mostly the status of anecdotes within an overall “thematic unity” that the Hand of God, which remains “at the helm”, ultimately provides (Hunter). In « The Storm » (written in 1704), Defoe, then a popular pamphleteer, interprets the spectacular storm which destroyed London as God’s judgement on the sins of England. Like the hero, Christian, in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* written by John Bunyan, in 1678, characters are not yet fully humanized and individualized “private men”, but sinning creatures in God’s Game, in a world which is but the text of God.

In *The Family Instructor* (1715), Defoe had also tried his hand at the other genre popular at the time: the spiritual and educational biography. “Inspiring and productive of piety” (Hunter, 88), the “purposeful pattern of the subject hero’s life” follows the “rebellion – punishment – deliverance sequence” (*ibid*). It can only be “superimposed over the chronological record of events”, with the narrator’s commentary drawing the hero’s “adventures” to their predictable conclusion: the “ultimate spiritual victory of the subject” (*ibid*). In this traditional Christian

³ All quotations from Shinagel, Michael, ed. (1994), *Robinson Crusoe*. Norton Critical Edition, 1994 [1975], p. 3.

⁴ Cf. J. Paul Hunter. *The Reluctant Pilgrim*, The John Hopkins UP, 1966, pp. 73-75.

framework, “fallen men” are “accorded God’s grace” (*ibid*), and facts are selected to concur with the thesis. Truth resides outside of the text in a transcendental locus where the One, the “all-knowing” Other speaks a subject whose unity, *in-dividuality* (*i.e.* un-divisiveness) is mirrored in God’s image.

Such is the Self posited in Defoe’s preface: it pretends to be the obedient puppet of a higher order recognized as the ultimate horizon of the reading process, Providence, that which links author-narrator-hero and readers, that which holds the thread of human destinies. But as we read on, under the guise of “another Self”, a character who says “I”, Defoe will in fact create something completely new, “between allegory and history”, he writes, a year after *Robinson Crusoe* in the preface of his *Serious Reflections during the Life and surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: with his Vision of the angelick World*; 1720). Between the proto-journalistic *Storm* and the pious *Family instructor*, Defoe invents a new mode of discourse, a *private man’s* fictional (auto)biography: a novel.

The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of this solitary man would have also reminded his contemporaries of other travel adventures and particularly of the rescue of a sailor, Alexander Selkirk, who spent four years of solitude on an island off the coast of Chile. The indication “Written by himself” of the title page (which erases Defoe’s name), and binds together in the pronoun “I”, the fictional author, the narrator and the hero, serves as a guarantor of reliability and creates a false referential pact, the purpose of which is to render the *Adventures* as *wondrous* as the then-famous rescue narratives. Strangely then, the novel (as genre) seems to have appeared first as an *Auto-fiction*. A fake travel narrative yes, but with a purpose: to give the Self new names, a symbolic consistency which it lacks out there in the world⁵, and in Defoe’s times, to actually *conceive* of it. Crusoe’s *I* will indeed escape the Puritanical paradigm narratively and psychologically. It will create a new myth in the

⁵ The same (therapeutic) goals therefore as those of more contemporary writers of *auto-fictions*: George Perec, Serge Doubrovsky, Christine Angot, Chloé Delaume...

formidable figure of the solitary man, who is not the ridiculous “Governor” of an empty island, but the true master of his own terror when facing complete solitude, confronting the (always Cannibal) Other. The adventure of *Crusoe’s I* tells of the hardship and the necessity of building the consistency of a Self, an entity born out of an abyss, a wreckage: the failure of religious myths to encompass newly discovered worlds in their omniscient vision, to assimilate the radicality of otherness of exotic human creatures (all potential Cannibals), and to reassure Western Man.

Crusoe’s family romance: “a good family, though not of that country”

Like all sinner-heroes of Puritanical biographies or mystics’ confessions, Robinson is a rebellious son. And this stereotypical feature of the character seems to be posited and done away with on the very first pages. However when we read a little closer what we find is the following: unlike Bunyan’s Christian, Crusoe will prove to be a *Rebel without a cause*. And much like Nicholas Ray’s and James Dean’s Jimmy (born out of the American iconoclastic post-WWII period), Robinson’s revolt seems first directed against a “boring Dad”, a settled man who represents societal traditions but fails to “assign” his 3rd son a place in this legacy, the Bourgeois ideal he calls “the Common Road”, the “Middle State”. Hence neither Jim nor Robinson finds any “meaning” in the existence prepared for them. Nor do they find (phallic) “desire” in their indolent cultures which appear to be criss-crossed, moulded by customs which are to them but outmoded interpretations of the real; or in Bakhtine’s words, the real is polluted by the desires of others.

Let us just recount here how what will become an archetype, a mythical figure of a new selfhood, establishes a space for itself in “the world”, a text already saturated by the Other’s signifiers: God’s, fathers’. The written “I” will need to hollow out a place for a new ideal ego: that of the emancipated enlightened subject free to desire, limited only by its own anguish.

I was born in the Year 1632, in the city of *York*, of a good Family, though not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of *Bremen*, who settled first at *Hull*. He got a good Estate by Merchandise, and leaving off his Trade, lived afterwards at *York*, from whence he had married my Mother, whose Relations were named *Robinson*, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but, by the usual Corruption of Words in England, we are now called—*nay* we call ourselves and write our name *Crusoe*; and so my Companions always call'd me. (p. 4)⁶

The linguistic stage seems to be set for a traditional autobiography: dates, places and proper names anchor what Roland Barthes called the “effects of the real”, what Don Quixote, in his defence of “books”, had coined as the very markers of truth: “... above all [books] carry such an appearance of truth with them; for they tell us the father, mother, country, kindred. . .⁷”, he argued. If truth, like the subject, is born out of family and homeland, why then so much time spent here in *RC* on the question of the hero’s names? It seems that Crusoe is situated from the start at a crossing point:

1) The narrator is the offspring of two “good families”, we are told:

- a) “a good Family, *though not* of that Country” : KREUTZNAER
- b) and “a very good Family *in* that Country”: ROBINSON

What is foreign, the “*though not of that Country*” had to be erased through phonetic transposition, “corrupted”, says the enunciator, into the English CRUSOE”. The KREUZ (the cross), erased (repressed?) in the name of the father, allows for a new beginning: a self-baptism of sorts: “*we* are now called – *nay* we call *ourselves*”. This veiled sacrilege – for

⁶ Place and proper names underlined by author.

⁷ Full quotation: “Don Quixote[.]”Books that have been printed with the king's licence, and with the approbation of those to whom they have been submitted, and read with universal delight, and extolled by great and small, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, gentle and simple, in a word by people of every sort, of whatever rank or condition they may be--that these should be lies! *And above all when they carry such an appearance of truth with them; for they tell us the father, mother, country, kindred, age, place, and the achievements, step by step, and day by day, performed by such a knight or knights! Hush, sir; utter not such blasphemy; trust me I am advising you now to act as a sensible man should; only read them, and you will see the pleasure you will derive from them.* (Miguel de Cervantes, “Of the shrewd controversy which Don Quixote and the canon held, together with other incidents » Chapter L, *Don Quixote*. Translated by John Ormsby. (Gutenberg Project, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996.txt>; p. 311; underlined by us)

which we are not responsible for it is “the usual Corruption of Words in England” – is denied furthermore by the strangely redundant detail: “and so *my* companions always called me”; The *question* of the enunciator’s family names (the past) is closed off by the apparition of “companions”, the generation of the “sons” (the present), young men who will soon intervene in the text to help “our hero” become just that: someone who escapes his parents’ stronghold to pursue his quest, become himself, *i.e.* an orphan, a “lost child” (Surin’s epigraph). The I is also born out of another community than his family: his own generation who will entice him to forsake the law of the father.

The dose of *allegory* carried by Defoe’s discourse in this incipit reveals a deeper layer of signification: the private mythology that Marthe Robert, after Freud, has identified as *the family romance* which, she shows (in *Origins of the Novel*), is the very core of the invention of the novel as genre, as a new *episteme* for Modern subjecthood⁸.

Let us continue:

I had two elder Brothers, one of whom was Lieutenant Collonel to an English Regiment of Foot in *Flanders*, . . . and was killed at the Battle near Dunkirk against the *Spaniards*. What became of my second brother I never knew, any more than my Father or Mother knew what became of me. (p. 4)

The family romance is fully revealed. No one like him – *pas de semblable, pas de frère* –, no rival remains for ‘our hero’ on this textual earth. No sooner is the family unit composed in its Bourgeois ternary purity (father / mother / me) than, and this in the same breath, the final “me” of the paragraph is projected into a void, a blank space: a prophesized death. No sooner has the “I” told us of its names, than it makes the “me” disappear. *What became of me?* The narrating “I” warns his companions, the readers: the *adventure* of the subject set in motion originates from this “*unknown*”: “any more than my father or mother knew what became of me.”

The *I* opens up a potential space : its mark will be possible after an *aphanisis* of its essence, its being,

⁸ Let us note that for both the novel and the family romance, the same word is used in German and in French: *Roman*.

after a deletion of the *known*: the belonging to a family unit, a safe place for identity. *My two brothers disappeared, I as son will too...* but only narratively. For *I* will find another surface unto which I will inscribe my singularity, I will manage to *ex-ist*. Isn't Robinson Crusoe's twenty-eight year survival on this far away island but the allegory of this *ex-istence* of a new subject? Far from father and mother, lost to them but present in the text, in his very own text.

The cataleptic (prophetic) pronouncement (*I will become unknown to my very father and mother*) announces the spatial and paradigmatic displacement that the story will tell: the psychological necessity for the Modern Hero to *aller voir ailleurs si j'y suis* (to get lost!), and the epistemological cut with the past, with the familial, the familiar, the *fatherland*. This is the foundational feature of the novelistic subject, its desire: to become a lost child (*l'enfant trouvé* – the foundling - or *le bâtard* –the bastard), so that a new genealogy can be fantasized, a self-begetting.

NOT IN THAT COUNTRY are Robinson's master signifiers, already in the name of his symbolic father. UNKNOWN TO MY VERY PARENTS, the negative marker of a dangerous wishful thinking and the motive for his search. NOT IN THAT COUNTRY, UNKNOWN TO MY VERY PARENTS: what opens up here is the space of an erasure, the space where a negative identity – not assigned a place by God, homeland or father – may found, invent the Modern secular subject, born out of its own enunciation, its own textual world.

Hence, the first paragraphs of Defoe's "History and allegory" narrate a linguistic baptism, a textual begetting where, like in the mystics' writings described by Michel de Certeau, "the *"I"* replaces *the world as speaker* (and the institution that is supposed to make it speak)". "This, he continues, accounts for the success enjoyed in the sixteenth century by

autobiographies of spiritual leaders (but also of poets and memorialists), a trend continued with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Rousseau's *Confessions*"⁹.

The opening of *Robinson Crusoe* functions as a speech act: it empties the traditional (auto)biographical Puritanical discourse of its reference to God as ultimate enunciator and reader, addressee. The self-naming transforms the function of the *I*; *I* will not be spoken by my Christian creed; as a creature in the world designed by God; *I* will speak of *a* world, the world of a "private man": this text. The known world – and the unknown part, the dark side of the human subject as we will not have time to show – can be *reconstructed* through language, played out as an inscription of the Self on the very soil of the island as text (an "architecture" and an "agriculture"). This *I* did alone. Will you follow me in this "wondrous" adventure of civilization: the writing of the Self? For you, readers, are to accompany me. We too are invited, in the incipit, to call him Robinson CRUSOE – we will never learn of his Christian name, his first name. For "I" is its name, Robinson Crusoe's only name: who will ever call him again on his lonely island? This is the pact we, readers, his only companions, really, have to adhere to at the threshold of the book we are about to read. It is not a referential contract but a co-textual one: the story of this *I* is the text happening in front of our eyes.

Crusoe, we are told, is situated from the start at a **cross** road: between the German signifier (*not of that country*) and the English one (*from that country*); between mother (Robinson) and father (Crusoe), a space needed to be invented for the subject to-be, carved out: for *I*, enunciator, creator of text, appears viable (as we say of a foetus) only after the narrative deletes the "me" as a son. The inscription of the *I* is possible only after a crime, a suicide of the son in man. It opens up a gaping, a place for a subject imagined through and by a new

⁹ "The autobiographical I is the (empty) space in which the discourse of subjectivity and in-dividuality is constructed. It is defined on the basis of a signifier as a (proper) name, ab-solute, un-bound from the world which no longer supports it, and as the reciprocal term of God, ab-solute, un-bound from the world He not longer supported as His language. This, the mythos (that which founds speech) our civilization substitutes for the discourse of the cosmos; it is a "full" discourse spoken/produced by its speaker." (M. de Certeau, "Mystic Speech," *Heterologies, Discourse on the Other*, U. of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 94).

discourse, a new paradigm: the novel, whose epistemology, metapsychology will lead Freud to call it: “the story of the I.”¹⁰ In and with the novel, the *I* is made enunciator of the world, and the son only of language, of a language that is inevitably a *corruption* (*ie.* a failed translation, a missed representation); with it, the subject comes to desire... and alienation, or as Crusoe says himself: to a “life of misery”.¹¹

¹⁰ “...Seine Majestät das Ich, den Helden aller Tagträume wie aller Romane” (unfortunately translated in English as “story”: “...His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story”; Freud, S. (1908). “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen's ‘Gradiva’ and Other Works, 141-154. In the original German as in its French translation, the same word is used for *novel* and for *romance* (Cf. “Der Familienroman Der Neurotiker »): *Roman*. Cf. «... sa majesté le moi, héros de tous les rêves diurnes comme de tous les romans » (“La création littéraire et le rêve éveillé”. Transl. Marie Bonaparte & E. Marty. *Essais de psychanalyse appliquée*. Paris: Gallimard, [1933], 1971, NRF, p. 69-81).

¹¹ “Being the third Son of the family and not bred to any Trade, my Head began to be fill’d very early with rambling Thoughts. My Father, who was very ancient, had given me a competent Share of Learning, . . . and design’d 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 Perswasions 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.4)