

“My man Friday”: Economizing Encirclement, the Other Phantasm, Derrida’s Debt

Zelia Gregoriou

University of Cyprus

INTRODUCTION

This response applies Noroozi’s quest for decolonial pedagogies to the rest of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, and problematizes Derrida’s bracketing of raciolgies in his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*’s deployment in modernist thinking.¹ We have to rush. Unlike Derrida and Heidegger, we do not have much time. Awakening phantasms and facilitating their entry into the house of philosophy is the hauntological potential of Derrida’s reading. But burying Friday is the phantasm of a racial injustice that delimits Derrida’s reading.

ISLANDS

After his return to England, Robinson Crusoe’s “inclination to go abroad” prevails (again!). If to be shipwrecked on an island operates as the paradigmatic condition of becoming a sovereign, shipwrecking the island itself serves for Derrida as a deconstructive strategy. In encircling Heidegger and Defoe, Derrida traces the interconnectedness of modernity’s political, metaphysical, and spatial concepts. Central to encirclement is the unpacking of the island *topos*, the island to be discovered, inhabited, measured, mapped. Another island *topos*, however, the island of departure, remains intact. And so does Empire’s raciology of the home island. The idea that being born on an island constitutes Empire’s white subject as an adventurous seaman, and authorizes his sailing off to conquer other lands, is inscribed in many geography readers, i.e. textbooks, of the 1900s:

The British Empire, obviously the creation of a seafaring race, is indeed a striking monument to the influence of the sea, to which also in no small degree may be attributed the characteristic courage, enterprise, endurance, resource and love of freedom of the British people. The sea, which serves to divide as well as to unite the scattered units of the Empire, has made the British people the greatest shipbuilders and shipowners of the world.²

ENCIRCLEMENT

The learning of the colonized world was epistemically and geopolitically mapped from “here”:³ from the “zero point”⁴ of an imperial educational project that taught its subjects about “our Empire.” “Our” as in Robinson Crusoe’s “my Island”; “our” as in what became ennobled in geography readers’ headings as “our world.” Island stories have entertained and exonerated conquest. Robinson Crusoe’s return to the island is mediated through a bracketed commemoration of his original story on the island, “... a history, if it were entered into, as full of variety and wonderful accident as my own part ...”⁵ Crusoe’s “accidents” would not have been “wonderful” had they not been temporalized through fictional narration; they would have plainly been invading, plundering, enslaving, exploiting. But even though wonder[ful]ized through temporalization, Friday’s coming into the world of Crusoe is fashioned like a premeditated crime of abduction rather than a wonderful accident. There is nothing immanently noble in encirclement; unhurriedness can be calculative:

I fancied myself able to manage one, nay, two or three savages, if I had them, so as to make them entirely slaves to me, to do whatever I should direct them, and to prevent their being able at any time to do me any hurt. It was a great while that I pleased myself with this affair; but nothing *still* presented itself; all my fancies and schemes came to nothing, for no savages came near me for a great while. About a year and a half *after* I entertained these notions, it came very warmly upon my thoughts, and indeed irresistibly, that *now* was the *time* to get me a servant, and, perhaps, a companion or assistant; and that I was plainly called by Providence to save this poor creature's life.⁶

ENCIRCLING THE ISLAND

For Crusoe, this comes down to encircling the management of a slave; for Derrida, sabotaging the sovereignty of Defoe's and Heidegger's texts. Encirclement alone, however, without the leap, cannot undo the colonial imaginary. It is the intersectional, inter-disruptive and inter-poisonous reading of the two texts that enables the decolonial event of the leap: "a certain number of leaps, certain new perspectives from a turn in the text, from a stretch of path that gives you another view of the whole."⁷ Crusoe is encircling the idea of catching and managing a slave; Derrida is encircling *Robinson Crusoe*. Derrida's encircling, however, remains eclectic when it comes to the leap. Derrida never disrupts the operationalization of encirclement, conquest's modality of temporalization, as enslaving. He has his reservations about what Heidegger calls, in the general singular, "*the animal*,"⁸ but has no pedagogical reservations about animalizing his explication of Heidegger. In talking to his students of "the circle of the hermeneutic approach or of the methodological path that retraces its steps or presupposes what it must seek," Derrida finds Heidegger's "*Benommenheit*, the benumbment or captivation of the animal poor in world" helpful.⁹ The image of the encircled animal comes up again when Derrida is encircling Heidegger's conceptualization of the animal as "alone in the world": "the circle of an animal encirclement (*Umring*), the "self-encircling (*das Sichumringen*)" that characterizes the animal in the benumbment of its captivation (*Benommenheit*) (H, 369 / 253)."¹⁰

The animal is poor in the world because it is poor of the experience of death. But the animal does not only die. The animal is also killed (by humans). And the Heideggerian distinction between *Umwelt* and *Dasein* (being *surrounded* by the elements as opposed to *being in* the world) participates in the raciology that authorizes the animal's killing. The raciology of *Umwelt vs Dasein* is also what authorizes the continuous and repetitive enslavement of Friday even after they leave the Island. Neither servant nor slave, neither white nor savage, Friday is repeatedly and consistently referred to by Crusoe as "Friday my man." Let us encircle this other Robinsonade, the Robinsonade of Friday's encirclement: "I took my man Friday with me"; "I fell to work for my man Friday"; "I had begun to eat some I gave some to my man"; "I understood that my man Friday had formerly been among the savages"; "to see with what dexterity and how swift my man Friday could manage her [a boat]"; "I marched as above, my man Friday at a good distance behind me"; "you will carry me and my man to England passage free."

Encirclement can produce new meanings but can also cement appearances of silence; appearances of *Umring and Umwelt*. Toni Morrison points out how Hemingway, the super master of writing, risks what is improbable in syntax, sense, and

tense “to avoid a speaking black.”¹¹ Morrison also teaches us that behind the dream we should be looking for the dreamer. Friday appears to be encircled in the environment only because Defoe stages a syntax and tense of *Umring* for him.

In the “SEVENTH SESSION: February 13th, 2002,” Derrida finally questions Heidegger’s rigidity on the ontological difference between animal and human: “I wonder whether this supposed statement of essence (“the animal is poor in world”) does not belong, precisely, and only, to the world, to the limits of the world, or more narrowly to the limits of *this* world that Dasein has formed or configured for itself.”¹² If Derrida contests the essence of what is cast and captivated in the category of the species and the syntax of/for human *Dasein*, why doesn’t he also contest the enclosure of Friday in and by an island story that renders Crusoe the paradigmatic example of Dasein? Why doesn’t Derrida, the master of deconstruction, also deconstruct the racial *weltbildend* (world-forming) of Friday’s enclosure in *Umwelt*?

DEBT

Friday is not poor in the world (*weltarm*); Friday is in debt. The first transatlantic economy in modernity was the selling and buying of black people. It was the *oikonomia* of women and slaves that produced time for thinking. Debt produces time. Time for Crusoe not to hurry: to reflect, to encircle. Friday does not encircle: Friday obeys; Friday works. Friday is in debt from day one on the Island of Despair: with his life saved, because his life is saved, Friday comes to be already in debt. Being in debt is the condition for his becoming a student. Friday is economized. Crusoe economizes. The first economy inaugurated on the island is the temporalization of life. Crusoe economizes the saving of Friday:

I hallooed again to him, and made signs to come forward, which he easily understood, and came a little way; then stopped again, and then a little farther, and stopped again; and I could then perceive that he stood trembling . . . I beckoned to him again to come to me, and gave him all the signs of encouragement that I could think of; and he came nearer and nearer, kneeling down every ten or twelve steps, in token of acknowledgment for saving his life. I smiled at him, and looked pleasantly, and beckoned to him to come still nearer; at length he came close to me; and then he kneeled down again, kissed the ground, and laid his head upon the ground, and taking me by the foot, set my foot upon his head; this, it seems, was in token of swearing to be my slave for ever.¹³

Economizing space and time - not too close, not too fast; step by step, stage by stage - underlies the logic of colonial teaching. The first teaching we observe in *Robinson Crusoe* is an economizing of white man’s time in setting up a strategy of teaching dark skin man for enslavement: teaching him to speak yet teaching him also to be a slave. Teaching, that is, temporalizing, is intimately related to economizing savage life: “In a little time I began to speak to him; and teach him to speak to me: and first, I let him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life: I called him so for the memory of the time. I likewise taught him to say Master; and then let him know that was to be my name.”¹⁴

One of the many leaps Derrida makes from Heidegger to Defoe concerns the consideration of loss, melancholy, and mourning:

Why this leap? Because I wanted to situate the question of life and death between the animal and the human *Dasein*, because melancholy is also the affect of irreparable mourning, and

because I should like to come back via this route, both toward the question of the circle and toward the phantasm - let's call it the Robinsonian phantasm - of being "bury'd alive" or "swallow'd up alive."¹⁵

To this Robinsonian phantasm, Derrida responds by examining competing arguments in France at the time of the Seminar about inhumation and cremation. There remains in *Robinson Crusoe*, however, another phantasm, that of Friday trembling under *Dasein's* rule. Between the two phantasms, modernity and Friday, Derrida responds only to the former. He inherits it, remains affected by it. The phantasm of Friday remains muted. Insulated in the original textual crypt; diverted rather than encircled. "And here there intervene not only each person's reading - idioms, with their history, their way of driving," writes Derrida with regards to the leap. Is it then a question of idioms or histories what phantasms we leave behind? Or is this projected contingency of choice another perverse modality of modernity's racilogies?

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1. "Racilogies" is a term used by Paul Gilroy in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) to expose Europe's refusal to think how the imperial system of race thinking has transformed into modernist rationalities.
 2. Charles B. Thurston, *An Economic Geography of the British Empire* (London: University of London Press, Ltd., 1916), 9.
 3. John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
 4. Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La Poscolonialidad Explicada a los Niños* (Popayán: Universidad del Cauca, 2005).
 5. Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe [1719]* (London: Seeley, Service & Co., 1919), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/521/521-h/521-h.htm>.
 6. Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.
 7. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Volume II, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 206.
 8. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 142.
 9. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 91.
 10. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 94.
 11. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1992), 72.
 12. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 198.
 13. Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, 99.
 14. Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, 100.
 15. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 113.