

Derrida's Theory of the Novel

Firsts

In the first volume of Derrida's The Beast and the Sovereign, there is a highly entertaining session in which Derrida challenges one of Giorgio Agamben's signature gestures, namely the way in which Agamben often singles out this or that thinker as having been "the first" to have "really thought through" this or that issue. In what may be his wittiest reading since Limited Inc.,<sup>1</sup> Derrida shows not only that some of Agamben's "firsts" weren't really "the first," but also that Agamben's use of the adverb "really" to qualify the first time this or that issue has been thought through seriously destabilizes his very positing of a "first": for the value of the "first" comes to depend entirely on what is meant by the "really."<sup>2</sup> One can hear an echo of this discussion when early on in the second volume of The Beast and the Sovereign, Derrida announces that one of his key texts for the seminar will be Daniel Defoe's novel Robinson Crusoe, "ce livre qui fut souvent tenu pour le premier roman de la language anglaise" (14<sup>3</sup>). Note, in addition to Derrida's use of "the first," his use of the passive construction: "this book that is often taken to be the first novel in English." "Taken to be"--by thinkers such as Agamben,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Derrida, Jacques. Limited Inc. Trans. Alan Bass, Jeffrey Mehlman, and Samuel Weber. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Derrida, Jacques. Séminaire: La bête et le souverain. Vol. I (2001-2002). Paris: Galilée, 2008. 97-140.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical page references are to the edited French manuscript of the first five sessions of the seminar.

perhaps, but not by Derrida, presumably, if we can take Derrida's critique of Agamben seriously.

The fact remains, however, that Derrida's second seminar on The Beast and the Sovereign takes on the book that is often taken to be the first novel in English. It is that gesture--that turn towards the paradigmatic instance of a literary genre that is often associated with the emancipation of the modern subject--that I would like to have a closer look at here. My suggestion will be that Derrida's seminar can in part be read as a seminar on the novel as a genre, and more specifically that the seminar thus makes an intervention in a domain from which Derrida's work has so far remained largely absent, namely novel theory. This is one of the reasons why this seminar, which also turned out to be Derrida's last, constitutes a unique site in Derrida's oeuvre, a place where the philosopher reflects on a literary form that is inseparable from many of the concerns that are central not only to this seminar but also to his work as a whole.

I will situate my discussion of Derrida's novel theory within the horizon of my earlier discussion of biopolitics in The Beast and the Sovereign, a problematic from which Derrida himself would probably have preferred to steer clear.<sup>4</sup> Last year, I suggested that a reflection on biopolitics traverses the first volume of The Beast and the Sovereign. This reflection intensifies, however, in the last three sessions of that seminar, in which Derrida takes on the opposition between "bios" and "zoe" that underlies all of Agamben's work on sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> The first seminar thus ends on an emphatically

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<sup>4</sup> See my "Biopolitics in Deconstruction," as published on this site.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Agamben, Giorgio. Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. 1-3.

biopolitical note that resonates throughout the second one, where it becomes most explicit in the fifth session.

### The Apparatus of the Novel

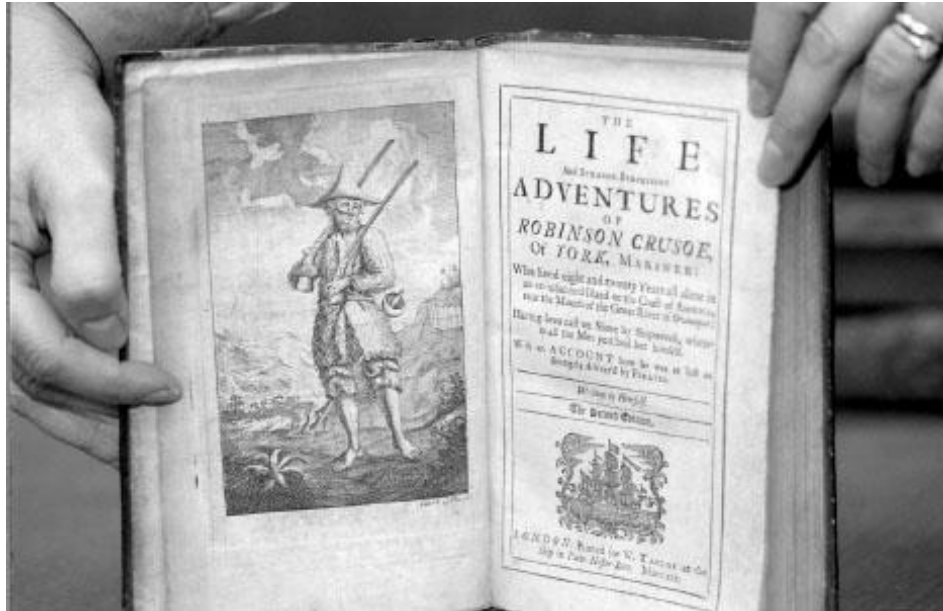
After a substantial section on Heidegger and on Heidegger's thought on "the thing," the fifth session of The Beast and the Sovereign unexpectedly breaks into a dialogue between Derrida and an imaginary "student," who challenges the "professor" on his reading of Robinson Crusoe (127). The student questions the professor specifically about his statement that Robinson, in Robinson Crusoe, is "buried alive." The student argues that although Robinson is indeed afraid of being buried alive after a part of his fortress collapses, Robinson is not really buried alive in the novel. The modality of his being buried alive is that of the conditional, not of the indicative.

Although the professor--Derrida--acknowledges that the student is correct to point out this difference, he nevertheless maintains that Robinson is buried alive in Robinson Crusoe. At first sight, the trick that Derrida needs to pull in order to win the argument sounds like a bad parody of deconstruction: it is true that Robinson is not really buried alive in Robinson Crusoe, Derrida says, but it is nevertheless also true that Robinson is really buried alive in Robinson Crusoe, for he is buried alive in the text of Defoe's novel.<sup>6</sup> Robinson's life is buried alive in Defoe's fiction which--let us not forget--was

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<sup>6</sup> This argument recalls the often misinterpreted line from Derrida's Of Grammatology, where Derrida writes that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," "there is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside text]" (Derrida 1997, 158). Agamben also seems to have misread this line, as he subtly associates it with the logic of sovereignty in the opening chapter of Homo Sacer. Alluding to Derrida's Of Grammatology, he writes there that the paradox of

originally entitled The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner.



Title page of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, 1719 edition.<sup>7</sup>

In Derrida's reading, Defoe's novel thus emerges as a literary kind of "thing" (a "Ding," to recall Heidegger's text that is also under discussion in the session) that somehow contains "life," in which "life" is somehow "buried alive" (while also "not" being "buried alive"). Defoe's novel emerges as a literary kind of technique (a "technè," to recall Heidegger once again) that enables one to capture "life." Defoe's novel is, in

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sovereignty "can also be formulated in this way: 'the law is outside itself,' or 'I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law [che non c'è un fuori legge; the Italian construction is identical to Derrida's French construction]" (Agamben, Homo Sacer, 15). Derrida is figured here as the sovereign, capturing human life in the text's state of exception. This couldn't be further from Derrida's theory of text, as will become clear below.

<sup>7</sup> Image available at [http://www.ur.umich.edu/9899/Feb01\\_99/crusoe.htm](http://www.ur.umich.edu/9899/Feb01_99/crusoe.htm). Note the predominance of the word "life" on the novel's title page. I chose this image because it presents the novel as a hand-held object, similar to a technical object, a tool, or even an apparatus. The relevance of this for my argument will become clear later on.

Derrida's reading, a form of "life-writing," of "bio-" or "zoe-graphy." Noting the novel's concern with Crusoe's self-destruction and -reconstruction, with the ways in which the castaway Crusoe becomes the sovereign master of his own life, Derrida refers to Defoe's fiction as a form of auto-bio-graphy, of self- and life-writing. In this particular sense, all fiction is arguably auto-bio-graphical (88), Derrida suggests, while all autobiography is also--and this is just as important for Derrida--fictional (90). In other words: there ultimately is no real technique of life- and self-writing; rather, any attempt to capture life and the self is always interrupted by the technical object facilitating the capture.

I am not forcing the language of the technical object, of "technè" and of the "Ding," onto Derrida's seminar. Heidegger is, next to the Defoe, the second author around which the second seminar on The Beast and the Sovereign revolves. The seminar's fifth session begins, indeed, with the Heideggerian question "What is a thing?" Grafting together Derrida's concern with the "thing" in this seminar on the novel, with the biopolitical problematic that is continued from seminar one, it seems that Derrida is thinking about the novel as a kind of biopolitical thing, a technique of bringing life within the literary object of the novel. The novel emerges in Derrida's reading as a biopolitical "dispositif" or "apparatus." This word comes to us, of course, from the work of Louis Althusser, but I would argue that Derrida invites us to reconsider it here within the biopolitical tradition, which is represented in the first volume of The Beast and the Sovereign by Agamben and Foucault.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The word "dispositif" is used seven times in the first volume of The Beast and the Sovereign, three times by Derrida himself and four times in quotations. It is used eleven times in the second volume, but in this case none of the uses are quoted. Finally, the word "dispositif" is used twice in the session under discussion here.

It is worth recalling at this point that the notion of the *dispositif* or apparatus is indeed central to Foucault's writings. As Agamben in a short essay on the apparatus has remarked, Foucault attempts to define this enigmatic notion as:

a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions. (Foucault qtd. Agamben 2)  
 Agamben for his part adds to this already extensive list even more:

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confessions, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and--why not--language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses--one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face. (Agamben 14)  
 As definitions, these two lists--and especially the second one--count, precisely because they push the notion of the apparatus towards the uncountable, turning it into a name for "everything" that is "not life," as Agamben sums it up. The apparatus is ultimately defined here in opposition to life; and life in opposition to the apparatus.

Before I move on to a discussion of how Derrida's understanding of the novel as an apparatus differs from this, it is worthwhile considering some of the valuable insights that Foucault and Agamben's discussions of the apparatus (however problematic they may be) also yield. First of all, Agamben's definition of the apparatus--which includes the pen, writing, literature, and even language itself--clearly invites a reading of the novel as an apparatus, in other words as a member of the category of "everything" that is "not life." This is a valuable insight, in the sense that it undermines any and all naïve understandings of the novel as a literary form that realized the modern subject's emancipation within and through the literary text. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power

has proved extraordinarily productive in Victorian studies for discussions of how the novel was also a site where the modern subject was captured, oriented, or, in Foucault's famous term: disciplined. However, it is worth noting that while a Foucauldian and specifically Agambenian reading of the novel might undermine naïve understandings of the novel as solely a form of emancipation, Agamben's theory of the apparatus as "everything" that is "not life" is at least equally naïve, because it maintains in force a category of "life" that would somehow exist "outside" of all apparatuses.

Derrida intervenes within such a theory of the apparatus of the novel, as well as within such a theory of life, by reading Robinson Crusoe as a literary thing in which Robinson was "buried alive." If Agamben reads the novel as a biopolitical thing that comes close to being a thanatopolitical thing, in that as an apparatus it is "not life" (and as such a thing that exists in close proximity to death), Derrida deconstructs the distinction between biopolitics and thanatopolitics and theorizes the novel instead as an apparatus of "survival": a thing in which, granted, Robinson is buried--but buried "alive"; or, alternatively, a thing in which Robinson continues to live--but as "buried." It is this deconstruction of the opposition of life and death that exposes the naivety of both a theory of the novel as a literary form liberating the life of the modern subject, and of Agamben's theory of the novel as a form of death to which some "pure" notion of life would be opposed.<sup>9</sup>

For Derrida, the novel-apparatus is neither on the side of life nor on the side of death. It operates, instead, according to the much more spectral logic of survival. This

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<sup>9</sup> One could read this as Derrida's critique of Agamben's theory of writing, a critique that recalls his earlier discussion of Lévi-Strauss' "A Writing Lesson" in Of Grammatology (Derrida 1997, 101-140).

leads Derrida in session seven (which discusses the work of Maurice Blanchot) to this conclusion:

C'est pourquoi sur tous les themes dont nous traitons ici, la souveraineté, l'animal, le mort vivant, l'enterré vif, etc. le spectral et le posthume, eh bien, le rêve, l'onirique, la fiction, la fiction dite littéraire, la littérature dite fantastique seront toujours moins inappropriés, plus pertinents, si vous préférez, que l'autorité de la veille, que le vigilance de l'ego, que la conscience du discours dit philosophique.<sup>10</sup>

Derrida, Novelist

By reading Robinson Crusoe within the context of Heidegger's reflections on "technics" and the "thing," and in the broader context of his reflection on Foucault and Agamben's biopolitics, Derrida is making at least two important interventions. First of all, he is thinking of the novel and its emergence in modern times as a "birth" that is complicit with what Foucault calls the "birth of biopolitics." Although Derrida would disagree that biopolitics is typically modern and new, he thinks it is evident that biopolitics went through significant transformations in modern times, and his suggestion seems to be that the novel can be understood within the context of these transformations. There may be a complicity, he seems to suggest, between the ethics and politics of modern biopolitics, and the aesthetics, ethics, and politics of the novel. Derrida invites his audience to think a biopolitical theory of the novel that might be different from Foucauldian theories of the novel's disciplinary power.

Indeed, with a biopolitical theory of the novel, the focus does not seem to be on the disciplining of the individual's soul and body, but on the saturation of the individual's

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<sup>10</sup> These lines are quoted from the unedited, "raw version" manuscript of the seventh session of the seminar.



very life (understood in a more than biological way) with power. For Agamben, this might lead to a theory of the novel (which, along very Benjaminian lines, Agamben tends to oppose to poetry and the story) as a biopolitical apparatus in which the negative potentiality of life becomes positively actualized in literary form. Life, which Agamben associates with the unwritten, becomes entirely written, and enters into a close proximity with death.<sup>11</sup>

This is, however, not Derrida's position. The stakes of his thought-experiment--to think of the novel as a biopolitical thing--seem to be, precisely, to deconstruct such a bio/thanatopolitical theory of the novel. Derrida offers instead a theory of the novel as an apparatus of survival: the novel's relation to life cannot be captured by the opposition between life and death; it operates instead according to a logic of spectrality. In this way, Derrida undermines both naïve theories of the novel as a form of liberation and naïve theories of life as something pure that would exist outside of all apparatuses.

Given the way in which this position is developed, i.e. through a dialogue between "the professor" and "the student," such a theory of the novel might also be a reflection on the second question with which the fifth session of the seminar begins, namely "What is the other?" For by rewriting the novel's relation to life as a spectral relation, Derrida is arguably also rewriting the relation of author to character as relation that is much more haunting than is often assumed. Turning the usual argument that the

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<sup>11</sup> On all of these points, see: De la Durantaye, Leland. Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009, especially the chapter entitled "The Pure Potentiality of Representation: Idea of Prose" (121-144) and its three scholia (145-155). I have discussed Agamben's relation to storytelling in "Politics and Poetics of Divine Violence: On a Figure in Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin" (Clemens, Justin, Nick Heron, and Alex Murray, eds. The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Life, Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008. 82-96).

relation between Robinson and Friday is an allegory for the relation between author and character around, it could be argued that Derrida's theorization of the relation between author and character as a spectral relation also affects the relation between Robinson and Friday, turning Friday--the slave, the other--into a much more spectral being than any overly simplistic conception of the master/slave relation or the self/other relation might otherwise assume. Friday is not merely the perfect disciplinary subject described in Defoe's novel. As Crusoe writes in his journal:

I was greatly delighted with him [Friday], and made it my Business to teach him every Thing, that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spake, and he was the aptest Schollar that ever was [...]. (Defoe 194)

Instead, Friday becomes a much more spectral and haunting presence, reminiscent of the Friday imagined by J.M. Coetzee in his rewriting of the Robinson Crusoe-story, *Foe*.<sup>12</sup> When Derrida refers to Coetzee early on in his seminar (46), I take this as a reference to someone who writes novels differently, whose novels operate according to the spectral logic of survival.<sup>13</sup>

In closing, one might also consider Derrida himself to be such a novelist. With this, we arrive at the third question with which the fifth session opens: Derrida's concern with what the other will make of him after he has died. Let's turn Derrida into a novelist for a moment. Once again, I am not forcing this reading upon the seminar. In the same way that Derrida suggested, in the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, that the textuality of the seminar was similar to that of the fable that was central to his teaching,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Coetzee, J.M. *Foe*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> Coetzee has also addressed some of the points I raise here in his Nobel Prize Lecture entitled "He and His Man," which was given after Derrida delivered his seminar. Coetzee's lecture is available at <  
[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.html)>.

namely Jean de la Fontaine's "The Wolf and the Lamb," Derrida suggests in this second seminar, which revolves around Robinson Crusoe, that the textuality of the seminar is similar to that of a novel (6).<sup>14</sup> It is a striking move, one that turns Derrida from a fabulist into a novelist and thus bridges the limit between the pre-modern and the modern that structures Agamben's Benjaminian reflections on the novel. It is also a polemical move that seems intended to provoke conservative understandings of the novel as a paradigmatic genre that was established by the text "that is often taken to be the first novel in English," namely Robinson Crusoe.

And yet, returning to Defoe's novel (as Derrida repeatedly invites his audience to do), one realizes that the textuality of Defoe's text is at least as radical as that of Derrida's seminar: it presents, supposedly, the diary that Crusoe kept on the island, a diary that is interrupted by various "Notes to Self" and that has clearly also been reworked afterwards for publication (the voice of the diarist merges with that of the survivor looking back at his experiences on the island). In addition, the story of the island is framed by two narratives that relate both Crusoe's adventures before he arrived on the island, and after he was saved and is trying to make his way back home.

Rereading Crusoe's novel, one realizes that it is no less strange of a text than Derrida's seminar, in other words that the very text that instituted the genre of the novel, the very paradigm or example of a novel, is in fact much more unstable than it is often made out to be. By calling his own seminar a novel, by figuring himself as a novelist, it is perhaps ultimately this fiction, this fictional construction of the novel as a typically

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<sup>14</sup> I am pursuing the question of the textuality of Derrida's seminars in part after hearing Michael Naas' presentations on this topic at the Summer 2008 and 2009 workshops on the translation of Derrida's seminars at L'Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine.

modern genre associated with the life and death of the subject, that Derrida's theory of the novel as a form of survival deconstructs.

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