

Differance in Signifying Robinson Crusoe

DEFOE, TOURNIER, COETZEE
AND DECONSTRUCTIVE RE-VISIONS
OF A MYTH



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Introduction

In the introduction to the 1999 World's Classic edition of *Robinson Crusoe* published by Oxford University Press, John Maxwell Coetzee writes:

Robinson Crusoe was Defoe's first attempt at a long prose fiction. It is not his best book: *Moll Flanders* is more consistent in its execution; *Roxana*, though uneven, rises to greater heights. *Robinson Crusoe* suffers as a result of hasty composition and lack of revision. Its moral is confused. The last quarter of the book, as well as Crusoe's early adventures, could have been carried off by any capable writer [...]. Nevertheless, the core of *Robinson Crusoe*—Crusoe alone on the island—is Defoe at his best [...]. Defoe is a great writer, one of the purest writers we have. (SS 20)

Coetzee's mixed response is typical of the criticism on *Robinson Crusoe*, which points to the unique paradox of its unforgivable demerits and its enchanting effects. For centuries, the image of a single man surviving alone on a desert island has remained an inspiration to writers, so much so that even a subgenre in literature emerged: the Robinsonade. This word was first coined in 1731 by a German writer Johann Gottfried Schnabel, in the preface to *Die Insel Felsenburg*. Since then, it is used to refer to novels with a subject similar to that of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Responding to the multifarious forces of desire and motivations as a way to interpret Defoe's text, the rewritings of the Robinson Crusoe story take on an impressive scope of diversity. Some of them are part of the endeavor to problematize the original text so as to deconstruct what Jacques Derrida terms the violent hierarchy in *Robinson Crusoe*. Rewritings in this nature are re-visions.

Re-vision and Deconstructive Freeplay

Re-vision as a concept is best explained in Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." In this feminist essay that has much resonance of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Rich briefs her personal life experience as a woman who writes in a male dominated society to illustrate the awakening of a woman's consciousness of standing as the equal of man. Crucial to the awakening, as Rich asserts, is re-vision, which is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 90). Rich's usage of the term is based upon the belief that history helps the reader of a text gain a vantage point in reflection and hindsight endows one with the ability to view previous works from a new perspective. This is an active examination or reading because the reader must enter into a previous text equipped with critical thinking so as to provide an interactive and intertextual reading that in effect, re-writes the "old text." Used in the feminist context, re-vision is regarded as a means to understand and critique patriarchal assumptions and thus "an act of survival" (90) that marks a rupture with the tradition established by male writers. "We need to know the writing of the past," Rich explains, "and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (91). With all these connotations, re-vision as a critical idiom has gone beyond the feminist context and is now used in discussions of different kinds of rewriting. The term refers to an act of retelling a story for reasons of subverting certain truths and values in the old text.

Re-vision is now synonymous with deconstruction in the broad sense. More than forty years ago, Derrida initiated deconstruction in his 1966 essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." After all these years of what Derrida calls "mis" (mis-understanding and mis-interpretation), the power of deconstruction as a philosophical project and a strategy to critique and re-creation is so much better appreciated and grasped today.

The historical and political seriousness of deconstruction, as exemplified by Derrida's writings, lies in how it reveals the "structurality of structure" as a way to critique the "history of the concept of structure" (Derrida, *Writing* 351–352, 351). To be more specific, Derridean deconstruction perceives the history of Western science and philosophy as a sequence of structures similarly structured. Elements within a structure evolve around a center which is a repressive organizing principle consisting of a binary opposition that arbitrarily privileges one and excludes the other. The history of Western science and philosophy can be seen, says Derrida, as the process in which one center substitutes for another metaphorically. The privileged side of the binary opposition supposedly has full presence or is a transcendental signified which, in the contradictory logic of classic thought, is both "*within* the structure and *outside* it" (Derrida, *Writing* 352, emphasis in the original). The center allows a certain kind of freeplay of the structure as long as such freeplay does not cause any permutation of the center. This kind of freeplay, restricted by the center, is not deconstructive freeplay. Deconstructive freeplay begins with the realization that "The center is not the center" (Derrida, *Writing* 352), which is to say that the traditional belief that the transcendental signified is both within the structure and outside of it is a contradiction. Thus, the coherence of the structure is only contradictorily coherent. Besides, politically speaking, those who experience the repressive power of the structure also defy and rebel against the center. In this sense, the center is not the center. On this basis, deconstructive freeplay is the kind of freeplay of elements in a structure so as to cause the permutation and transformation of the center into something else.

As a critical strategy, deconstruction is opposed to dialectical reasoning, which, started with Socrates and Plato, is a form of logic based upon binary oppositions. Yet it does not rely on negation. The perception that deconstruction means destroying or undoing something is not quite accurate. This is because any effort to dismantle or undo something is already caught up in the terms of the thing one is trying to undo. Rather, deconstruction is "simultaneously a critique of

the categories proffered by a text, and an exposé of the text's unacknowledged challenges to its own premises" (Caplan 267). It seeks to read a closed structure or a logocentric structure in such a way that the center of the structure is decentered and the elements within the structure are re-appropriated for new purposes. The result of a deconstructive reading is that the structure is transformed into an open-ended discourse or, to use Derridean terms, into a chain of *différance*. Deconstructive reading, sophisticatedly playful and always political, is often demonstrated in the form of writing. In that sense, deconstructive freeplay is both reading and writing or rather, rewriting, with the desire of the deconstructive reader inscribed onto the original text.

Deconstructive freeplay is performed in different styles and employs different strategies or methods. But whatever the style, deconstructive freeplay is based on the desire and ability to release the superabundance of signifiers, or to put it in another way, to produce *différance*. Equally important to freeplay is the idea of "sign." Drawing inspirations from Ferdinand de Saussure, poststructuralist theories place emphasis on the insight that a signifier does not correspond to an absolute signified. The belief in classical thought that a word corresponds to a thing was refuted by Friedrich Nietzsche in "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," and is completely rejected by contemporary theories characterized by deconstruction. In freeplay, there is "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Lacan 419). To freeplay is to release and realize the potentials of the metaphorical signifiers.

Deconstruction, insofar as it is the freeplay with a logocentric structure so as to produce *différance*, certainly means the re-vision of that structure. Yet, as a specific practice of deconstructive freeplay, re-vision does not mean the mere negation of the original text. Instead, re-vision must use or play with the elements of the original text to expose the self-contradictions and problems of its centered structure and to transform this repressive structure into an open-ended discourse. Re-vision is thus a serious and earnest play, a kind of rewriting

inseparably linked with the original text or what Rich calls the “old text.”

In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida calls the event of deconstruction both a “rupture” and a “redoubling.” “Redoubling” or rather, redoublement in French denotes going back to something so as to do it again. Derrida’s deconstructive readings of classic writers as Plato, Rousseau and Saussure are good exemplifications of this redoublement.

The re-visions or examples of redoublement as studied in this book include Michel Tournier’s *Friday, or the Other Island* (1967) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986). Both are twentieth century responses towards *Robinson Crusoe*. And both are powerful examples of problematizing the master narrative as represented in *Robinson Crusoe*.

Michel Tournier and *Friday*

Michel Tournier (1924–) is a French writer who never saw himself as a writer before the publication of *Friday*, his first novel. Before turning to literary creation, he aspired to start a career in philosophy in the academy. Having failed to pass the French agrégation, a competitive national qualification examination that is blamed by Tournier as “dishonest and nefarious” (*WS* 134), he bade farewell to the long cherished dream of a philosophy teacher. After a couple of attempts at different occupations such as journalist and translator, Tournier eventually settled down for literary creation, which opens for him the window to worldwide fame.

Tournier’s success as a novelist continues after *Friday*. His second novel *Le Roi des aulnes* (1970; translated into English as *The Erl-King* in 1972, a.k.a. *The Ogre*) is awarded the Goncourt Prize. Generally reputed as the one of the most internationally influential French writers in the twentieth century, his works have been translated