

The Man without Others:
Deleuze's Structure-Other

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For those of us who take an interest in literary theory, the notion of the constitutive other continues to play an important role. Indeed, the writing of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Edward Said ensures that the contemporary literary critic must at the very least keep in mind the conceptual figure of “the Other” as she engages the social, political, and psychological fields of a text. However, this kind of ubiquity in the critical literary landscape means that the concept of the Other falls easy prey to those who are quick to elide its intrinsic complexity. For many, the inauguration of a simple dialectic between the self and other is enough to make the concept behave as wished. Take for example Hélène Cixous's assertion,

There has to be some “other” – no master without a slave, no economic-political power without exploration, no dominant class without cattle under the yoke, no “Frenchmen” without wogs, no Nazis without Jews, no property without exclusion – an exclusion that has its limits and is part of the dialectic. (70-71)

Cixous goes on to add definition to this conceptualization, but for more than a few literary critics this is where the interrogation of the Other ceases. As such, it becomes regarded as little more than the site by which the self guarantees its own presence.

One area of literary studies that can never be so casual in its treatment of the Other is that dedicated to postcolonial literature and theory. Indeed, at its very core stands the premise that Europe “consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as ‘Others,’ even as it constituted them, for purposes of administration and the expansion of markets, into programmed near-images of that very sovereign self” (Spivak 128). In one way or another, the vast majority of postcolonial theory emerges from this model in order to understand better the effects and affects of the colonial encounter – the colonial endeavor traced through the institutionalization of the Other. But, that is not to imply that the theorization of the Other in postcolonial thought is complete. Indeed, one lacuna in the literature is that which concerns the absence of others. Few have asked the important question, If the Other guarantees the self then what happens in its absence? Is it in fact possible *not* to conceive of the Other? It is by answering such questions that I hope to add further texture to this important concept. In order to do so I turn to the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze gives one of the most intriguing and productive accounts of the Other. His is an Other that is not reducible to either an alternative subject or particular object, but is rather that which announces the structure that makes possible a coherent account of the world. Given this intimate relationship, one is invited to contemplate further the parallels that emerge between Deleuze's and Levinas's image of the Other – the intersubjective life of the Other; the kind of ethics that are made possible; but this is matter for another paper. The purpose of this paper is simply to elucidate the structure that Deleuze sees the Other make manifest – something that I think is best rendered by bringing Deleuze into conversation with two literary texts that rely heavily on the idea of the absence of others: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and its celebrated re-writing, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

(1986). My rather simple claim is that although both novels embrace the thesis of the man without others, they nonetheless give very different accounts of Cruso(e) and his time on the island.¹ They do so because for Defoe's Crusoe the structure-other remains intact, while in Coetzee's novel the reader is introduced to a Cruso who suffers from its complete collapse.

From the very first moment that Crusoe realizes he is safe from the ravages of the sea, one sees that his actions are determined by the idea of the Other. In what threatens to be a paralyzing appreciation of his situation, Crusoe's is caught between a desire for the Other – the simple wish to be with others – and the fear of what such an encounter might bring. In the first instance, it is his fear that wins out. As such, Crusoe immediately turns his attention to how he might best defend himself against that which may lurk with mal-intent upon this unknown island. It is in this spirit of survival, then, that he spends his first night on the island in “a thick bushy tree like a fir” (35), which sports thorns as a natural defense against the world. It is also in this spirit that he quickly fashions a truncheon from a piece of wood, a weapon that is soon to be replaced by a musket which he manages to retrieve from his stricken ship. Through these actions the reader is made aware that for Crusoe the Other is first of all that which carries the threat of harm, and the shield and weapon – the defensive homestead and the truncheon/musket – the most immediate means of warding it off.

However, as the days pass Crusoe begins to realize that the island upon which he finds himself is uninhabited. This revelation eases the fear that has until this moment conditioned all of his actions upon the island. Yet, as his sense of fear recedes, Crusoe experiences a growing anxiety over his isolation – about what it truly means to be alone, resident in a land without others. It is this anxiety, something that seems to be the expression of an almost primal need to be with others, which sees him try to affirm the existence of the Other in any way possible – even if that existence belongs to a people “over there,” beyond the sight and immediate experience of the new castaway. Indeed, it is as if Crusoe finds the absence of others a more frightening prospect than a world populated by those who have the ability to take as their own the very things that one holds dear (including life). As such, the reader is made privy to the moment in which Crusoe's anticipation of a physical Other gives way to the seemingly fundamental need to maintain an *idea* of the Other. It is a subtle turn in the text but one that has a dramatic consequence on Crusoe's subsequent behavior, for his unabated toil proves to be the means by which he effectively “populates” the island and in so doing affirms the existence of the Other.

In order to understand this point one must first recognize that Crusoe is made in the image of eighteenth century English society. As Louis Althusser knew well, we are all “called forth” by the ideological machinery of our society (1970). Because the family unit, the media, religion, and our educational institutions teach us how to form our desires, utter intentions, and make judgments, it is certain that the individual is always pressed in a certain image of the State. Crusoe is no different. His is a society that was comfortable striking out into “unknown” areas of the world in order to claim dominion over them; one that through the Protestant work ethic and principle of economic individualism, eventually constructed an empire that some have estimated brought nigh on one quarter of the world's total land mass and a similar fraction of the world's total population under the control of the British Crown (Ferguson 301). It is unsurprising, then, that Crusoe should feel so comfortable in “taming”

¹ Coetzee chooses to alter the spelling of the castaway's name in his novel. So, while Defoe writes of the adventures of “Robinson Crusoe,” Coetzee has the narrator of his story talk of “Cruso.” It is for this reason that when I am able to talk about both figures simultaneously, I write of “Cruso(e).”

the wilderness of the island. However, it is upon the manner of the taming that we should concentrate. For the fact is that Crusoe brings the weight of eighteenth century English *society* to bear on the island. That is to say, he deploys an integrated set of theories, assertions, and aims concerning the world in order to figure out how best to make it bend to his will. In this sense, Crusoe is not one man struggling against the world on his own; he is a product and representative of a community of thought that has proven itself to be ruthlessly successful.

For this reason, Crusoe's commitment to the Protestant work ethic is extremely important, not (just) because it keeps him busy but because it implicitly affirms the existence of others "elsewhere" – of a society that has crafted his mind. Indeed, his work ethic links Crusoe, however finely, to both England and God. From his first moments on the island Crusoe puts himself to work. Noting the way in which he set about transporting articles from the wrecked ship to the island, Crusoe writes, "I had been now thirteen days on shore, and had been eleven times on board the ship, in which time I had brought away all that one pair of hands could well be supposed capable to bring" (47). The novel pays tribute to toil in this way because it responds to the idea that God put people on this world to work. Thus, to work as we see Crusoe work is regarded as both Godly and just. Re-thought in a way that was used to justify British imperialism, to direct human energy to the transformation of the world around her – to shape it to human will – is in fact the will of God. One can take as evidence of this the very beginning of the Old Testament:

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (*King James Bible*, Gen. 2: 15 – 17)

To "dress and keep" the Garden is not only to have stewardship over the land, but "every beast of the earth [...] every fowl of the air, and [...] every thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Gen. 1: 30). Here, God directs man to tend to the earth – to cultivate it, to ensure that it does not lapse into wilderness. Now, given that nature tends towards what we think of as disorder, God's decree becomes an invitation to engage in endless toil – to combat the ceaseless march of nature with ceaseless endeavor. Such is the core to the Protestant work ethic. In hard work, in endless toil, one will not only find worldly success (which is not necessarily financial) but personal salvation. This is why Crusoe's successes on the island, however minor, are victories of the soul and thereby guarantors of the conceptual figure of the Other.

It is unsurprising, then, that "infinite labor" becomes a refrain of the novel; but it does so at the expense of self-reflexivity and philosophical enquiry. Other than considering how best to conduct a particular work project, Crusoe spares little time thinking. For Crusoe, "doing" trumps "thinking." He comes close at times – for example, when he is first cast ashore, he questions the significance of money – but his thought is rarely sustained. Again raiding his stricken ship for valuable supplies, Crusoe stumbles across a not inconsiderable sum of money. He writes,

I smiled to myself at the sight of this money: "O drug!" said I, aloud, "What art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me – no, not the taking off the ground; one of those knives is worth all this heap; I have no manner of use for thee" (48)

However, it is interesting to recall how the passage concludes: “upon second thoughts,” Crusoe says, “I took it anyway” (48). If the irony is lost on Crusoe, it is not lost on the reader. Where has his philosophical musings on the true value of money got him? Nowhere. Yet, to question his choice in this way is to miss its significance. The fact that Crusoe takes the money, even though he knows it can have no value on the island, is truly noteworthy because it shows that on this island without others he has nonetheless retained a sense of the Other. That is to say, even in his condition of solitude he still has a sense of another place, another time, an other society in which these coins will prove to be valuable once again. Put another way, Crusoe’s experience of isolation has not compromised his vision of a world of others that is at work beyond his visual horizon. Importantly, his notion of such a functioning world is maintained by those things which “prove” the idea of the other – the shield and the weapon he manufactures, the coins he cannot leave behind, the work ethic that he cannot abandon, and the God who has not abandoned him.

For French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, this is a perfect example of the operation of the “structure-other” (Deleuze 308). Even in the absence of its physical, corporeal, concrete form, the Other makes itself felt as a necessary coordinate in the constitution of a coherent account of the world – Crusoe’s coherent account of the world. Deleuze explains the mechanics of this in *The Logic of Sense*. For Deleuze, it is the conceptual figure of the Other who gives “depth” to the world, a depth that is formed by a recognition of the fundamental role played by the marginal and the background in the transition of objects and ideas. Explaining the process by which thought and objects emerge into our consciousness from an unmediated space, Deleuze writes, “I regard an object, then I divert my attention, letting it fall into the background. At the same time, there comes forth from the background a new object of my attention” (305). Our image of the world is constructed in this manner – of thoughts and objects emerging from, and then receding into, unregarded spaces. Of those thoughts and objects that transition into our consciousness, Deleuze claims, we can only ever be partially aware. The reason for this is that our gaze is never total; we can never apprehend every dimension of a thought or object. That is to say, there will always be some part of the world that is facing away from us – the back of an object that is facing us; the far-side of a car that passes us by; an unanticipated quality of a thought. Again, the observer will always remain blind to a certain aspect of an object or thought.

It is in this context that Deleuze notes,

The part of the object I do not see I posit as visible to Others, so that when I will have walked around to reach its hidden part, I will have joined the Others behind the object, and I will have totalized it in the way that I had already anticipated. As for the objects behind my back, I sense them coming together and forming a world, precisely because they are visible to, and are seen by, Others. (305)

In this way, Deleuze thinks of the Other as a vital element of our perception and understanding of the world. Here, the Other makes manifest a structure, one that describes a triadic relation-function of subject to object, and in so doing ensures a coherency to the world for the fact that it guarantees the existence of those dimensions that are forever unseen to the observer. In a very real sense, then, the Other “completes” our perception of the world, and from this arises the unrivalled comfort that one detects in Crusoe’s narrative. It is the comfort found in the “benevolent murmuring” (Deleuze 305) of the Other – a murmuring which intimates a world that must exist even if it cannot be immediately apprehended. It is a murmuring, Deleuze says, that guards the margins of one’s perception, ensuring an

“anticipated” coherency of the world, and thereby also stands sentry to prevent assaults from the aspect that remains perpetually unseen by the observer: “behind my back” (305).

However, a certain amount of care is required here, for this characterization of the Other does not rely upon it being reducible to either a specific object or alternative subject within our perception of the world. Indeed, Deleuze is quite adamant about this point. He writes, “the Other is neither an object in the field of my perception nor a subject who perceives me: the Other is initially a structure of the perceptual field, without which the entire field could not function as it does” (307). Perhaps the case is made a little too forcefully here. We certainly can think of the Other as a corporeal reality, as a “someone” who can become the subject of another perceptual field, or the someone who can gaze at an Other as object; but we can only do so because it first inaugurates the fundamental structure of our perceptual field that gives us a coherent account of the world. This, I think, is Deleuze’s point. In sharp distinction to the corporeal reality of the Other, it is the *a priori* Other, our belief in the existence of others, which makes possible the productive relationship between subject and object.

Here, then, is how we can account for the significance of the Bible to Defoe’s Crusoe – it is a means by which he can feel the continuing operation of the structure-other on an island without others. From his state of isolation, the Bible allows Crusoe the chance to initiate a dialogue that opens up a private relationship with God. Indeed, it is a dialogue that Crusoe uses to try to understand why the divine hand has guided him to what he regards as his current unsavory situation:

And what am I, and all the other creatures, wild and tame, human and brutal, whence are we? Sure we are all made by some secret Power, who formed the earth and sea, the air and sky. And who is that? Then it followed most naturally, It is God that has made it all [...] if God has made all these things, He guides and governs them all, and all things that concern them [...] If so, nothing can happen in the great circuit of His works, either without His knowledge or appointment. And if nothing happens without His knowledge, He knows I am here, and am in this general condition [...] Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be used thus? (70-71)

One may object that this is hardly the “benevolent murmuring” of the Other that Deleuze describes. Yet, we see here Crusoe’s reflection on his current condition necessarily position him within a divine scheme; and that positioning ultimately means that he is no longer a solitary being upon a deserted island. With the Bible in hand, regardless of whether he is only a passive passenger of divine will, Crusoe thinks of himself as enveloped by a relationship with God. It is this that reinstates a sense of the benevolent murmuring of the Other or, put another way, restores a “hope founded on the encouragement of the Word of God” (74). It is a hope which ensures that possibility (of being rescued), chance (of the growth of the discarded barley), and order (of the divine will) remain constant elements of Crusoe’s time upon the island.

If Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is a thesis on the man without Others explored through the absence of the corporeal Other, then Coetzee’s *Foe* is an exploration of solitude in perhaps its most profound state – the collapse of the structure-other. Coetzee’s Cruso lives without the hope enjoyed by Defoe’s Crusoe. As such, his is a world without possibility, good fortune, or order. The reader is told by Susan Barton that Cruso had “slain the monster of solitude” (Coetzee 38), but one is necessarily drawn to consider whether the cost of victory was too great.

Our suspicion that Coetzee's *Cruso* is suffering in a way that is fundamentally different to Defoe's is raised from the first moments Susan Barton is washed ashore. Her arrival is greeted without the slightest register of excitement, interest, or fright by *Cruso*, so that the reader immediately seeks to understand the genesis of such apathy. Of course, it stands in stark contrast to the footprint of the Other that leaves Defoe's *Crusoe* "thunderstruck."

It happened one day, about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition. I listened, I looked round me, I could hear nothing, nor see anything. I went up to a rising ground, to look farther. I went up the shore, and down the shore, but it was all one; I could see no other impression but that one. (117-118)

The passage continues, tracing *Crusoe's* reaction to the depression:

How it came thither I knew not, nor could in the least imagine. But after innumerable fluttering thoughts, like a man perfectly confused and out of myself, I came home to my fortification, not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on, but terrified to the last degree, looking behind me at every two or three steps, mistaking every bush and tree, and fancying every stump at a distance to be a man; nor is it possible to describe how many various shapes affrighted imagination represented things to me in, how many wild ideas were found every moment in my fancy, and what strange, unaccountable whimsies came into my thoughts by the way. (118)

Here, then, is our clue to understanding *Cruso's* apathy. For Defoe, the Other is clearly an expression of a possible world. Indeed, the footprint acts in this way – filling the void between the possibility of a frightening world and the "not yet" frightened *Crusoe*. To all intents and purposes, this depression in the sand sends him back to his first moments on the island and reignites the fear that conditions the possibility of a physical encounter with a corporeal Other. To this extent, *Crusoe* exemplifies Deleuze's claims that "the self is the development and the explication of what is possible, the process of its realization in the actual" (307). From the moment *Crusoe* regards the footprint his way of living on the island changes.

However, what happens when the structure-other collapses – when the aura of such possibility as described above ceases to function? The collapse of the structure-other necessarily takes with it the engine of possibility; and in this environment all emotions are laid to waste. As such, *Cruso* can neither be excited, amazed, or fearful of Susan Barton's presence on the island. Where hope, possibility, chance, and order once resided there is now a profound exhaustion. Barton writes, "I had exhausted my questions to *Cruso* about the terraces, and the boat he would not build, and the journal he would not keep, and the tools he would not save from the wreck" (34). But this is not to be mistaken for a description of a lazy *Cruso*. After all, *Cruso* is seen to work restlessly on the construction and readying of terraces for the planting. It is, rather, a description of the exhaustion brought about by the collapse of the structure-other.

If tiredness announces the inability to realize a possibility, then exhaustion announces the nullification of the very possibility that precedes realization. The reader sees this at play when Susan Barton asks *Cruso* what he will be planting in the terraces following its

completion. Clearly, the question she asks assumes that the terraces are being constructed for a purpose – that Cruso has a plan to which he is working. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that Barton expected Cruso to reply in the manner of Defoe's Crusoe, "I will plant barley, more specifically English barley" (as grows by chance on Defoe's island). Yet, the condition of exhaustion makes statements like this impossible. For Cruso, it seems as though there is a memory which intimates that endless toil is good and Godly, but he has long ago forgotten the connection between these things. He responds to Barton's question: "The planting is not for us [...] we have nothing to plant" (33). In this way, Cruso's work is devoid of all meaning because it is conducted without any purpose. Ultimately, there is no possibility that the terraces will provide any function (a purpose) or that the construction will ever be completed (a realization). Put simply, for Cruso there is simply no possibility.

As such, the preferences, needs and goals that predicate the act of realizing the possible are renounced through the condition of exhaustion. Susan Barton asks Cruso about the possibility of fashioning candles but this need is dismissed, not because of Cruso's inability to fashion candles, but because of the condition of exhaustion that prevents him from realizing such a possibility. Cruso will mark this moment with a turn to the absurd, "which is easier: to learn to see in the dark, or to kill a whale and seethe it down for the sake of a candle?" (27). Indeed, the refrain of request and failure of realization appears throughout the first section of *Foe* – Susan Barton's request for shoes, which she will eventually fashion herself; her request to retrieve tools from the sunken wreck of the ship, which will also never be realized. Similarly, the exchange between Susan Barton and Cruso concerning the goal of escaping the island highlights the difference between the exhausted and the merely tired: "'Why in all these years have you not built a boat and made your escape from this island?' 'And where should I escape to?' he replied, smiling to himself as though no answer were possible" (13). Indeed, for Cruso, no answer is possible for the notion of possibility upon which an answer to such a question must rest had long ago deserted him.

The result of Cruso's exhaustion – of the collapse of the structure-other – is felt everywhere in the novel. Another significant casualty of the failure of possibility is the notion of the past and the future. An inability to think of the future in light of the demise of possibility is easy enough to understand. Put simply, without possibility the world can have nothing into which to move. The result is a still world, a still-born world, in which nothing changes and, more importantly, in which nothing can change – hence, the death of a future. However, thinking about how the failure of possibility accounts for a lost sense of history requires a slightly more nuanced appreciation of Cruso's actions.

"I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso," Susan Barton explains at the beginning of the novel, "but the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile with one another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory" (11-12). Barton's comment is insightful, not because of the connotation of intellectual decrepitude that accompanies her observation but because she fingers memory as the cause of Cruso's contradictory accounts of his history. With his inability to conceive of the future, history loses its conceptual value and so Cruso draws it into the realm of his memory. As such, when Cruso announces that "Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering" (17), the reader begins to understand why he chooses not to record the passing of time – either by noting the passage of cycles of the moon or by maintaining a journal. For Cruso, history is a mere matter of memory, and memory nothing more than a means of being able to function on the island – where to find drinking water, where to find food, and so on.

However, that is not to say that Cruso's memory is infallible. Indeed, its function is compromised by the failure of the structure-other. Just like history, in order to function correctly memory must create the distinction between subject and object; but this is only possible through the structure made manifest by the *a priori* Other. For this reason, Cruso's incoherent recollections, which confuse more than elucidate, only intimate what Deleuze calls "the snares of memory" (313) – a memory that cannot determine the necessary relationship between Cruso and his past. Indeed, since the collapse of the structure-other necessarily leads to an incoherent account of the world, Cruso's memory can only draw from the most immediate of his experiences; and that is his time on the island. Therefore, it is not that Cruso "*wished* his story to begin with his arrival on the island" (Coetzee 34 – my italics) as Susan Barton suspects, but rather that he cannot even conceive of a history before his arrival on the island.

It is in this sense, then, that Cruso seemingly lives an eternal present – without the possibility of either a history or a future. His days coalesce into an indistinguishable moment of repetitive existence, perhaps in sympathy with the cycle of the island's weather: "wind, rain, wind, rain: such was the pattern of the days in that place, and had been, for all I knew, since the beginning of time" (14-15). Such repetition is only broken by episodes of Cruso's "old fever." While one might be keen to think of these bouts of fever as history trying to reassert itself, of the structure-other trying to re-establish itself, it seems that such episodes are never anything more than mere hallucinations of memory. Barton tells the reader how Cruso "beat with his fists and shouted in Portuguese at figures he saw in the shadows" (27). But this is nothing more than a demonstration of the way in which his inability to access the structure-other ensures an end to the transgression of an individuating consciousness, from past to future, and equally ensures an end to a secure separation between consciousness and the world. Thus, Cruso's hallucinations of memory designate an "end of history" and condition his consciousness so that it cannot be meaningfully divided between the temporalities to which we are all naturalized – the past, present, and future. The loss of the structure-other instructs a debilitating slip into solipsism where the objectively "real" immediately becomes a matter of subjectivity. History, truth, and reality lose all coherence as the referee to judgements of truth or falsity is nowhere to be found.

By way of brief conclusion, I would like to return to the question with which I began this paper – If the Other guarantees the self then what happens in its absence? Defoe and Coetzee give us very different answers. Defoe's Crusoe suffers no ill effects from his solitude because he retains a strong appreciation of the *a priori* Other. Coetzee's Cruso, on the other hand, suffers a profound ontological re-working. The others that he meets do nothing to stop the slow erosion of the structure-other. With the withering away of this structure that makes possible a coherent account of the world, goes the vital energies of life. Because of this Coetzee's Cruso is left a profoundly isolated figure – exhausted and incapable of working his way out of a solipsistic mire. Here, then, is the true threat of a world without others – a still-born world that lacks the very possibility of the new.

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