

Article

“Nothing Exists Except an Earthenware Pot”: Resisting Sovereignty on Robinson’s Island

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Abstract: In this essay I would like to focus on “The Beast and the Sovereign”—and especially the Second Volume—as being something of an exception to Derrida’s usual hesitations about sovereignty. In other works, such as “Rogues”, Derrida displays a deep ambivalence about sovereignty insofar as for all of his condemnation of sovereign authority, he fears that what might replace it could be even worse (and, to be fair, he also sees positive aspects of sovereignty as well). In “The Beast and the Sovereign,” we find evidence of this ambivalence as well but here, Derrida comes a bit closer to the kind of position advocated by Walter Benjamin wherein sovereignty is an idolatrous practice of politics one which must not be eliminated so much as subverted. In particular, I focus on Derrida’s reading in Volume II of “Robinson Crusoe” as a text that both founds the sovereign subject and subverts it (by revealing its vulnerability, its fictional nature). In looking at how the book disappoints as much as it answers sovereign phantasms of authority and unity, I argue that Derrida transfers his own ambivalence about sovereignty to sovereignty itself, subverting and rupturing its central tenets in the process.

Keywords: Derrida; Benjamin; Defoe; sovereignty; subversion; authority; fiction; subjectivity; idolatry; Woolf

1. Introduction

In this essay, I want to focus on what I see as an ongoing and often problematical ambivalence on Derrida’s part when it comes to the subject of sovereignty. Derrida is largely against sovereignty but he holds back from fully condemning it in part because he fears what it might be replaced by more than he fears what it is and does. This ambivalence can be seen virtually whenever Derrida treats the

subject. Yet there is one interesting, near exception to this ambivalence, a place where Derrida assembles the tools to turn that ambivalence into a proper, subversive weapon against sovereignty: *The Beast and the Sovereign* (and, in particular, the second volume). In the two volumes that were produced out of his lecture series between December 2001 and March 2003, Derrida lays out a description of sovereignty as a kind of fiction. More specifically, in the second volume, he connects sovereignty explicitly to a particular work of fiction, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and, in the process, explores (and problematizes) the ideological underbelly of sovereignty. Combining that reading with a close reading of one of Heidegger's own lecture series, Derrida comes as close as he will to subverting sovereignty, to revealing its own ambivalence and turning that ambivalence into a means by which to undermine sovereignty's claim to be absolute.

In making this argument, I wish to read Derrida in constellation with one of his own greatest influences, Walter Benjamin. The two thinkers share a view of sovereignty as being a fetish, an idol of godlike authority that has no basis in reality but which nonetheless produces a form of rule that appears (and here the appearance is everything) formidable, unimpeachable, and eternal. Benjamin's own opposition to political forms of idolatry is much stronger and more central than Derrida's and so, by reading them together, we can see a way for Derrida's resistance to be enhanced. By reading Derrida in this way, we can not only see Derrida through his own ambivalence and compromise, but also examine his own positive contributions to a Benjaminian critique of sovereignty, his careful study of the basic phantasms upon which sovereignty is based and, accordingly, a sense of how better to resist and subvert such phantasms.

A short note on nomenclature: In the discussions that are to follow, I will engage with the term sovereignty to mean principally political sovereignty, that is, the form of rule based on exclusivity and non interference that has served—at least in theory—as the basis for the modern day nation state system. Sovereignty has many other meanings and usages including the notion of personal sovereignty, the power of the individual over her own person. Derrida sometimes uses these concepts interchangeably and so, it is impossible to entirely exclude personal and non political (or not quite political) aspects of sovereignty in the discussion that will follow but political sovereignty is always the prime referent both for Derrida and, as a result, my own usage of the term.

2. Derridean Ambivalence: *Rogues*

In *Rogues*, one of his best-known texts that directly addresses the question of political sovereignty, Derrida's ambivalence is highly legible [1]. *Rogues* is a remarkable text insofar as Derrida shows himself to be highly critical of sovereignty even as he ultimately seeks to compromise with it.¹ In that book, Derrida speaks of sovereignty as “ipsocentric”, a self-reflecting cycle of seemingly increasing openness (as sovereignty goes from its monarchical to its popular, democratic forms) that disguises a constant assertion of its own authority (and for its own sake) ([1], p. 17; See Balke [3]; Mansfield [4]; de Ville [5]; Honig [6]; Kellogg [7]). Derrida tells us that:

¹ I make this argument at much greater length in *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* [2]. In that book I am mainly critical of Derrida's ambivalence although I try to think about Derrida in a way that's complementary to Walter Benjamin (the main focus of that text), to read them in constellation with each other.

As soon as there is sovereignty, there is abuse of power and a rogue state. Abuse is the law of use; it is the law itself... There are thus only rogue states. Potentially or actually ([1], p. 102).

Thus, for Derrida, sovereignty is never legitimate; given that its authority comes from itself to itself, it is a usurpation of political power from “the people” to rule over them in their own name (in whatever form such rule takes). In this way, Derrida’s view conforms with Benjamin’s own understanding of the fetishistic nature of sovereignty.

For all of this, Derrida proves curiously reluctant to break with sovereignty. He writes:

[I]t would be imprudent and hasty, in truth hardly *reasonable*, to oppose unconditionally, that is, head-on, a sovereignty that is itself unconditional and indivisible. One cannot combat, *head-on, all*, sovereignty *in general*, without threatening at the same time, beyond the nation-state figure of sovereignty, the classical principles of freedom and self-determination ([1], p. 158).

Here, Derrida has a classic “baby and bathwater” problem. He doesn’t like the bathwater, the patriarchy, the hierarchy, the appropriation of power and authority, the randomness of sovereignty, but he worries about the “baby” that comes along with this: “the classical principles of freedom and self-determination.” Reflecting his position as a post 9/11 subject, Derrida fears what would happen if the safety net of sovereign nationhood were removed. He speaks of “the undeniable fear or apprehension of a threat that is *worse* and still *to come*” ([1], p. 104). We see here a terrible echo of his notion of democracy “to come.” Accordingly, forced to choose a form of politics that undermines all that he stands and hopes for, Derrida ends the first essay of *Rogues* rather mournfully, writing:

[t]here are thus no longer anything but rogue states, and there are no longer any rogue states. The concept will have reached its limit and the end—more terrifying than ever—of its epoch. This end was always close, indeed, already from the beginning ([1], p. 104).

We see a similar (although decreased) ambivalence even in *the Beast and the Sovereign*, especially in Volume I. In that volume, Derrida speaks of a sovereign “prosthesis”, one that “amplif[ies] the power of the living” and which can “extend, mime, imitate, even reproduce down to the details the living creature that produces it” ([8], p. 28). He also calls sovereignty “a fetish” and a “substitute for the being of the thing itself” ([8], p. 219).

Yet, here too, there is a notion of the inevitability of sovereignty, of its ability to adapt and alter itself to fit the times (the very sense of which is part of how sovereignty seems to defeat even the most ardent attempts to uproot it). Derrida writes:

In a certain sense, there is no contrary of sovereignty, even if there are things other than sovereignty...[E]ven in politics, the choice is not between sovereignty and non sovereignty, but among several forms of partings, partitions, divisions, conditions that come along to broach a sovereignty that is always supposed to be indivisible and unconditional ([8], p. 76).

Derrida further speaks of the “trap of sovereignty” ([8], p. 290). But this trap is not purely a matter of force and of fear. Here too, as in *Rogues* (and there is a great deal of interaction between the book and the lectures that produced *The Beast and the Sovereign*), Derrida speaks of the benefits of sovereignty:

[W]e must not hide from ourselves that our most and best accredited concept of “liberty”, autonomy, self-determination, emancipation, freeing, is indissociable from this concept of sovereignty, its limitless “I

can,” and thus from its all-powerfulness... [W]e can’t take on the concept of sovereignty without also threatening the value of liberty. So the game is a hard one ([8], p. 301).

Derrida seems to be in a bind, stuck as he is between the kind of open-endedness and lack of foreclosure that are part of his political agenda—and which, it would appear, require sovereignty to exist at all—and the fact that sovereignty itself is an agent of closedness, of foreclosure almost by definition.

3. “Nothing Exists except an Earthenware Pot”

For all of this, *The Beast and the Sovereign* does not quite abandon the possibility of a fuller subversion of sovereignty (or, put more positively, it better resists the ambivalence towards sovereignty that Derrida demonstrates in *Rogues*, among other places). This subversion takes place largely in the second volume which deals intensely with two sources: Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and an engagement with Heidegger’s lecture series entitled *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* [*Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit*].

Derrida’s reading of *Robinson Crusoe* may be especially relevant; aligning himself with this text enables him to better combat and expose the phantasms of sovereignty. Rather than take on sovereignty head on (which seems to always defeat him, returning him again and again to the same bind of foreclosure vs. openness), in his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, Derrida drops his ambivalence and gets down to the business of textual exegesis, an art in which he hardly has any equals. As opposed to a direct, head on attack on sovereignty, Derrida’s method of reading here undermines sovereignty indirectly, through textual actions and subversions.

Derrida introduces his discussion of *Robinson Crusoe* by citing a few key British authors on the significance of the book. He cites James Joyce as arguing for the way this book prefigured British nationalism (and, by extension, imperialism). Virginia Woolf praises the book for almost the opposite reason: her view is that the book succeeds (is a “masterpiece” in her words) because of the way it both raises and flouts our expectations as readers ([9], p. 17). Citing her, Derrida writes:

She [*i.e.*, Woolf] describes the way our expectation is disappointed: we expect and experience of solitude, of isolation far from humans, on a remote island with only sunrises and sunsets. But everything we are shown is anything but states of mind and solitude. There is no sunrise or sunset, no soul or solitude, only “a large earthenware pot.” And Virginia Woolf tells us in two pages everything there is not, everything that does not exist on this island and in this book: God, nature and death: “God does not exist,” and a little later, “Nature does not exist,” and further on “Death does not exist. Nothing exists except an earthenware pot. Finally, that is to say, we are forced to drop our own preconceptions and to accept what Defoe himself wishes to give us” ([9], p. 17).

Such a statement turns out to be a central insight into what Derrida is doing in his own analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*. Insofar as he takes the book to be a “fiction”, and, in particular, a fiction about sovereignty (as we will see further), for Derrida, the book’s real power lies not only in the way it predicts and describes the future of British sovereignty, nationalism and imperialism but even more so in the way that it defies and undermines those same tendencies by creating a series of absences, disappointments and failures.

In this way, we can see that it takes a writer of fiction like Woolf—not just any fiction writer but one who is particularly attune to the powers and limits of fiction as a genre—to best offer Derrida an understanding of sovereignty that he can work with. When Woolf writes that: “Nothing exists except an earthenware pot,” she is referencing the way Defoe’s text both raises and dashes expectations. We seem to know the book before we read it; we think it is a book about an individual in splendid isolation, a tale of human transcendence over nature. In fact, the book is far more mundane with detailed accounts of how everything is made (how he makes his clothes, his hut, *etc....*), what Robinson ate and did.² The “earthenware pot” Woolf references can be read as a stand in for the disappointment itself, what we are left with in the wake of the failure of our expectations for a very different textual experience to appear.

And this disappointment does not have to be a purely negative or sad experience; it has a subversive possibility as well. When Woolf writes “God does not exist,” “Nature does not exist,” and “Death does not exist,” she is potentially reading into *Robinson Crusoe* a kind of textual iconoclasm where phantasms of power and authority (phantasms, as we will see further, that have an explicitly political valence) are unmade on Robinson’s island. In this sense, even as *Robinson Crusoe* can be read as a text that authorizes or produces British sovereignty and imperialism, it can also be read (as Woolf does, as Derrida does too) as a text that undermines that same authority. When “nothing exists except an earthenware pot,” on Robinson’s island, we see that the very act of producing authority can, at the same time be its unmaking. The other elements we read into the text, the power of God, the encounter with (and conquest of) nature—a concept which presumably includes the other people that Robinson encounters—even the finality and ultimate mystery of death, do not “exist”. We encounter these ideas only as myths, as shadows and projections. The earthenware pot’s banal and prosaic existence remains as a counter, an object whose persistence and tangibility reflects on—and distinguishes itself from—the illusory nature of our own projections as readers of this text. It is in this spirit that I would like to analyze Derrida’s engagement with sovereignty in his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*.

4. Reading with Benjamin

To read Woolf—and, by extension, Derrida—in this way is to read them in constellation with Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s own work is replete with the kinds of struggles with political idols that we see with Woolf as well. For Benjamin, such idols collectively form what he calls, following Marx, the “phantasmagoria”. This is an entire network of phantasms, and projections that collectively constitute what passes for reality in our world. For Marx, the phantasmagoria is an effect of commodity fetishism, of the false projections of value that we place onto the objects of the world. This is the case for Benjamin as well but in his own view, the phantasmagoria has much deeper roots. In his theologically inflected political theory, Benjamin tells us that he phantasmagoria is a product of the fall; it comes from Adam’s choice to seek (at the serpent’s suggestion) knowledge at the expense of an immediate relationship with God’s creation. Thus, in his essay “On the Language of Man and Language as Such,” Benjamin tells us:

² I will follow Derrida’s own habit of referring to this figure by his first name.

the knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense...Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word ([10], p. 72).

Here, in choosing knowledge, Adam has “abandon[ed] name,” that is, he gives up his original role in paradise of giving a spoken name to the objects of the world (which corresponded to the true but mute name given by God). Knowledge is an “uncreated imitation of the creative world,” it produces a false projection onto material reality, substituting our imitation of divine truth for that truth itself. With the fall, human beings have no choice but to engage in representation, in the exercise of producing false (“uncreated”) images. Accordingly we “f[a]ll into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as mean, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle” ([10], p. 72). In this way we all become idolators; language, rather than leading us truth (as it did for Adam in paradise) now leads us away from it. Our vain efforts to reproduce the authority of God lead us to make idols of God, nature and the state. Such concepts become false projections that perpetuate our alienation from the divine.

Under conditions of capitalism, for Benjamin, this tendency reaches its full perniciousness. With the introduction of the commodity, the objects of the world retreat even further from our grasp. Everything is screened via price, a medium of idolatrous value that becomes, effectively, what passes for reality. Yet even in this ultimate idolatrous setting, for Benjamin there is a way to fight and subvert phantasm. For Benjamin the phantasmagoria is never totalizing because it is not real, not true (we can say, with Woolf, that it does not “exist”.) Accordingly, our attempts at representation are all, in fact, failures and the more we make that failure legible to ourselves the more we avoid being completely dominated by phantasm. Thus, for example, he tells us that even price itself, that ultimate marker of phantasm is also a marker of the failure to set a true value on any object. In the *Arcades Project*, he writes:

the price of goods in each case is arrived at never quite be foreseen, neither in the course of their production nor later when they enter the market. It is exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence. At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorist’s profundity will lead it to one meaning rather than another...The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. In fact, the meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as commodity no other meaning. Hence the allegorist is in his element with commercial wares ([11], pp. 368–369).

Price is always a moving target and so, its very transitoriness, its failure to be true, we see that simultaneously, price unmakes value even as it claims to “be” value. There is a doubleness to phantasm that for Benjamin is always available to protect us from the idolatry that it otherwise foments. Any object, any image, any representation at all can be seen as being in a constant state of rebellion against the projections we foist onto it (as when Benjamin tells us, speaking of his study of German Baroque dramatists: “The language of the baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up” ([12], p. 207).) Any object can turn from a fetish into a weapon against idolatry if only we learn to read it in this light. For Benjamin, although we will never have recourse to truth, and although we never can do away with representation altogether, we do have a way to resist from within the system that otherwise binds us.

Taken in this light, the earthenware pot that Woolf speaks of on Robinson’s island becomes something other than a marker of true reality vs. the phantasms of authority that we readers bring to the

text. The earthenware pot, we should remind ourselves, is not actually real; it too is a fiction. Instead of seeking its “reality”, we should see the pot’s existence as being of a textual sort, a form of weapon that serves to unmake—and disappoint—our projections. Here, we fight the fire of phantasm with the fire of further phantasm but this is a phantasm that is turned against itself, leaving the reader relatively undetermined by false projections. In this way, Robinson’s Island, which is, as we have seen, a founding fiction of sovereign authority, is also, and at the very same time, a source of opposition to that foundation, an antidote of sorts against the idolatrous effects it otherwise would have on the reader.

5. Sovereign Fictions

With this basis in Benjamin (and Woolf), we can turn to the ways that Derrida himself can be read as more subversive to, and less ambivalent about, sovereignty than we usually find him to be, especially in terms of Volume II of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. In that volume, in addition to his citations from James Joyce, Derrida directly connects the book *Robinson Crusoe* to the question of sovereignty via his reading of Rousseau’s own interest in the character of Robinson Crusoe. Derrida writes of this:

This absolute sovereignty, “Adam sovereign of the world like Robinson of his island,” this absolute sovereignty of man over the entire world, *i.e.*, a sovereignty without obstacle and therefore without enemy—and therefore, Schmitt would say, without politics—this sovereignty which is absolute because it is pre-political, the hyperbolical, pre-political or ultra-political sovereignty that is the prize of solitude or isolation, of loneliness or of absolute insularity (all of this before Friday), is sovereignty before the nation-state, the sovereignty of the free and self-determined, self-determining individual, that of the citizen without a state or of the citizen before citizenship, or again of a citizen who is, all alone and immediately, the state itself, the sovereignty of the state-of-citizen, of the citizen-state ([9], p. 21).

In this way, *Robinson Crusoe* is not just any story about sovereignty but in some sense *the* story. It perfectly evokes the idea, articulated by political thinkers ranging from Locke to Rousseau (the latter himself being a very subversive source for this narrative, as Derrida shows,) of sovereignty being an extension of the idea of a single subject alone in the world. That subject’s will is effectively the sovereign will (insofar as there is nobody else to object or who would have a different view). From Robinson’s island the ideal of sovereignty comes into being, an ideal that is then projected onto all sovereign systems (here too we see the conflation that can occur between personal and political conceptions of sovereignty and how it is not only Derrida who does this). This literalizing view of sovereign oneness helps to unite diverse theories of sovereignty that range from Hobbes’ view where the sovereign acts as if it were alone (as if the citizen’s own opinions and values didn’t exist or—in what amounts to the same thing—as if the sovereign speaks on their “behalf”) to Rousseau’s understanding of the general will that serves to produce an image of sovereignty (in this case adhering to all the people) as if they had only one view.³ The image of sovereignty produced in *Robinson*

³ At least this is the view most generally attributed to Hobbes. I argue for a divergent view of Hobbes’ reading of sovereignty that is much more along the lines of Benjamin in *Subverting The Leviathan: Reading Thomas Hobbes as a Radical Democrat* [13].

Crusoe serves to simplify the notion of sovereignty down to its representational pith; in the image of Robinson, we see the heart of the operation of sovereign power and authority.

At the same time, Derrida is highly aware of the fact that this production is, in fact (quite literally in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*) a fiction. That singular fact is the central animating feature of his analysis of the book. He reminds us of this fictional state constantly, referring, for example to Marx's comment that the book (or this kind of book) is an "insipid fiction" ([9], p. 24). He speaks of various "fiction[s] and phantasm[s]" ([9], p. 183) in the text and he calls the book itself a "fiction of an autobiography" ([9], p. 88).

For Derrida, however, the fact that this is fiction does not reduce its power or value. On that contrary, he tells us that its fictional status is precisely what gives the book its power, what makes it an authoritative phantasm, a hallmark of the larger fiction(s) of sovereignty. He tells us:

This is why all the things we're dealing with here, sovereignty, the animal, the living dead, the buried alive, etc. the spectral and the posthumous—well the dream, the oneiric, fiction, so-called literary fiction, so-called fantastical literature will always be less inappropriate, more relevant, if you prefer, than the authority of wakefulness, and the vigilance of the ego, and the consciousness of so-called philosophical discourse ([9], p. 185).

Here we see that it is fiction, as opposed to "the authority of wakefulness"—the legibly false, as opposed to the purportedly true—that best captures (is "less inappropriate, more relevant") and produces political authority.

In this way, calling our attention to the fact that *Robinson Crusoe* is a work of fiction attests, for Derrida, both to the intense power this text commands over our imagination, over our authorization of a sovereign power that we submit to, even as it is at the same time "exposed" as such, revealed as false and vulnerable. The phantasmic power of *Robinson Crusoe* connects our individuality as readers and citizens (each of us is or wishes to be a sovereign in some sense, a Robinson on our own island) with sovereign authority itself. As Derrida tells us "whoever says *I* is Robinson" ([9], p. 199). Such a connection is both the basis by which sovereignty is propagated and the source of its weakness; without this all-important buy-in by the reader/citizen, the sovereign is nothing at all.

6. The Terror and Desire of Being Buried Alive

For Derrida perhaps the most revealing of the many phantasms that characterize the book *Robinson Crusoe* involves Robinson's fear of being buried alive (the immediate cause of this fear in the book is an earthquake that strikes the island, terrifying Robinson in the process). Derrida calls this:

Robinson Crusoe's fundamental fear, the fundamental, foundational fear, the basic fear [*peur du fond*] from which all other fears are derived and around which everything is organized...He is afraid of dying a living death [*mourir vivant*]...That is the great phantasm ([9], p. 77).

Here again, for Derrida, a fictional element best explains a complicated political and philosophical dilemma. In Derrida's view, the fundamental fear of being buried alive is indicative of a larger struggle in the text between Robinson's own agency and the overwhelming sense of nature that threatens to swallow or overwhelm him. This, by extension, is the struggle at the basis of sovereignty as well, a struggle, Derrida tells us with *physis* (nature) and all of its threats and promises.

Thus, for Derrida, Robinson's fundamental phantasm is critical because it speaks to a kind of "living death" that we all experience, the experience, in effect of being a sovereign subject, at the receiving end of the power of ruling and law. Derrida writes:

As dying a living death, in the present, can never really present itself, as one cannot presently be dead, die, and see oneself die, die alive, as one cannot be both dead and alive, dying a living death can only be a fantasmatic virtuality, a fiction, if you like, but this fictive or fantasmatic virtuality in no way diminishes the real almightiness of what thus presents itself to fantasy, an almightiness that never leaves it again, never leaves it, and organizes and rules over everything we call life and death, life death. This power of almightiness belongs to a beyond of the opposition between being or not being, life and death, reality and fiction or fantasmatic virtuality ([9], p. 130).

Here again, we see the power of this "fantasmatic virtuality" which "organizes and rules over everything we call life and death". As subjects of sovereignty, we are alive but at the same time we are dead, captured and dominated (eaten or devoured) by a phantasmic force that is no less overwhelming than the imagined *physis* Robinson struggles with.

But this struggle is not just a matter of fear, a need to dominate. There is something deeper and more complicated going on here. For Derrida, this "strange terror" also reveals a "singular desire" ([9], p. 77). This desire constitutes a wish to join and to surrender ourselves, part of what animates our participation in sovereignty in the first place. Indeed, for Derrida this desire is a quest for survival through transcendence, a way to survive the death of the individual body:

Now this survival, thanks to which the book bearing this title has come down to us, has been read and will be read, interpreted, taught, saved, translated, reprinted, illustrated, filmed, kept alive by millions of inheritors—this survival is indeed that of the living dead. As is indeed any trace, in the sense I give this word and concept, a book is living dead, buried alive and swallowed up alive...The book lives its beautiful death. That's also finitude, the chance and the threat of finitude, this alliance of the dead and the living. I shall say that this finitude is *survivance* ([9], p. 130).

Just as a character in a book can come back to life whenever someone reads it (Derrida tells us that a book is a "dead thing that resuscitates every time a breath of living reading" occurs), so too can sovereignty be seen as a way for the individual to "come back" as well in a larger than life (and also larger than death) form ([9], p. 131). Giving up our individual life in a sense gives us a chance at a kind of immortality, an existence in which we are neither alive nor dead but fixed at the border between these states.

Ultimately, for Derrida, Robinson is a stand in for that border existence, a character marked by a near perfect ambivalence:

If Robinson Crusoe is...prey to these phantasms (being buried or swallowed alive, being afraid of the phantomatic trace of a footprint in the sand, *etc.*), he is nonetheless, as a realistic man and as an avowed Christian, someone who would like to situate himself firmly in good common sense, in stubborn denial of the spectral and the phantomatic. But also someone who cannot do this and must therefore leave it hanging at the moment of his confession. He is someone who stands between belief and non-belief, belief in ghosts going against his Christian belief, paradoxically, and his belief (itself suspended, unbelieving) in phantoms

and fantasies (in *phantasmata*, a word that in Greek means both product of the imagination and fantasy or revenant) ([9], p. 136).

As we see here, there is both power and weakness in such a position. Robinson is “a realistic man”, he would like to deny the phantasms and be truly independent, truly anchored in (and over) reality (“in good common sense”) but he requires those phantasms, in a sense, to have this very same “independence”. Robinson thus exposes, even as he makes possible the sovereign delusion, the way that sovereignty is both nothing and everything, the way it is hopelessly contradictory and the way that it nonetheless manages to operate, to continue, to become ever more powerful.

Exposing the complex ways that sovereignty is both present and absent for us, Derrida writes that Robinson is like the person who says:

“don’t go thinking, above all, that *I* believe in...” then you can believe that, very probably, this person believes and really hopes you will believe that they believe in what they say they would not like to believe in, but in which they do believe, at the very moment of suspending judgment in a “really I don’t know.”...What is one doing when one says “I don’t know” in the face of a phantasm or a revenant? ([9], p. 136).

Such are the verbal and mental gyrations required for sovereignty to continue itself, the source of its greatest strength and its singular vulnerability.

7. The Sign of the Self

We see further evidence about the dual nature of sovereignty as powerful and vulnerable in Derrida’s discussion of Robinson’s response to seeing a footprint on one of his walks. Of his response to this footprint (which Robinson thinks/hopes might be his own), Derrida writes (in Robinson’s voice):

When I discover this path and this track, have I not already been this way, already without knowing or wanting to, decided to go this way? I really don’t know [*Je n’en sais trop rien.*]...That’s the question that this bare footprint is asking me, as the trace of a man. The other man, the step of the other man—is it not me again, me alone who, returning like a revenant on the circular path of the island, become an apparition for myself, a specular phantom, a specular specter (the other man as myself, myself as another, I who am an other), but a specular phantom who cannot, who does not know if he is himself, *ipse*, who really doesn’t know [*qui n’en sait trop rien*]—nor whether he can still look at himself in the mirror... [Robinson] scares himself [*il se fait peur*: literally “he makes himself fear”] ([9], pp. 48–49).

In a way, Robinson’s fearful response to seeing this footprint could be read (it seems as if Derrida does read it this way) as the fear of his own ephemeral nature, of the weak basis on which he rests his own subjectivity. Robinson’s trace, his claim over the island, is manifested as a sign of his physical presence but this sign is as delicate as it is significant. Derrida writes further of this that:

Coming back to haunt all the steps [*pas*]. Pleasure is the revenance of the *pas*—all the *pas*, all the past passages of *pas*. Terrifying or terrified pleasure, this could be the fright of a Robinson, the pleasure-terror (the one in the other, terror in pleasure and pleasure in terror)—the pleasure-terror that consists in not being able to do anything, not take a step [*pas un pas*], in not being anything other than the return of revenance over the track of its own steps, a revenance thenceforth the more fearful ([9], p. 53).

This pleasure-terror encapsulates the deep ambivalence of the sovereign subject; Robinson recognizes himself, feels a surge of joy in seeing, his own trace. But insofar as the sign is never quite “his”, he can never be sure if that is indeed “his” trace; the joy is also a fear of his own insignificance (meant in this case quite literally; his being without a sign). The sovereign power that comes along with that trace, and which is based upon such a subjectivity is similarly uncertain.

At the same time, there is a fear that this footprint might belong to someone else (Derrida writes that it never occurs to Robinson that this might be a woman’s print, only that of himself or another man’s) ([9], p. 55). Such a thought is the source of its own forms of terror and delight; terror, because the presence of another automatically threatens the supreme isolation that makes this a perfect sovereign phantasm and delight because the other may indeed—as becomes the case with Friday—become a kind of extension of that sovereignty, a broadening of the boundaries of the self that does not threaten the privileged subject’s position (a deeper fear, one that Robinson does experience when he sees signs of what he takes to be cannibals, is that his sovereign phantasm may be interrupted and terminated quite literally. In that case it would be his subjectivity that was incorporated into another, not the other way around).⁴

8. Perhaps...

All of these comments about desires and fears, about ephemeral prints and vulnerable power constitute Derrida’s effective comments about sovereign phantasms, their source, their structure and their weaknesses. The weakness that he points to and exposes is, however, purely speculative; Derrida does not directly draw our attention to it. Instead he consistently reminds us of the vulnerabilities of sovereignty by virtue of the same negating exercise we saw with Woolf. As with her notion that “nothing exists [on Robinson’s island] except an earthenware pot”, we can see that the weakness of sovereignty is demonstrated by contrast, by subtracting from our expectations. As we already saw, Woolf tells us that when we come to the text of *Robinson Crusoe*, we expect a sense of splendid autonomy, of an individual triumphing over his environment but the book disappoints us. Under Derrida’s careful reading, this disappointed is highlighted, repeated, reinforced. The disappointment at the failure of sovereign phantasms to be true reveals its vulnerability but Derrida leaves us to draw this conclusion for ourselves.

There are however some points where Derrida makes this weakness almost unavoidable, maximally exposed as such. These moments come not from his engagement with *Robinson Crusoe* directly but with the parallel text that Derrida considers throughout Volume II, with the aforementioned lecture series by Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Derrida interweaves these two texts in a way that could be considered itself constellative, evoking (although not citing) Benjamin’s own method of reading texts. As might be expected, the force of the points Derrida makes in regards to Heidegger bear their full fruition when applied to his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* (and the reverse is true as well).

⁴ Derrida also discusses Lacan’s treatment of a footprint on the island, one that Lacan ascribes to Friday. Derrida cautions that Lacan may be over-reading the text. In this case, he cites Lacan as saying that the footprint is not a signifier until it is erased ([9], pp. 235–236).

Derrida's discussion of Heidegger focuses in part on the distinction between humans and animals insofar as for Heidegger, only humans can tell lies. While this seems like a bad thing, for Heidegger:

the fact of deceit belongs to the essence of *logos*. The *logos* is what can bring about deceit, and therefore lying, the power to have something pass (*vorgeben*) (given as, advance giving as, in substituting). in the power to make believe, to pretend, to have pass for (*vorgeben*). This *Täuschen* [deception] is the power to have a being pass for another, what is *thus*, what is such, for what *is not thus*, for what is not such, and reciprocally, and thus, concludes Heidegger, the power...to hide, to withdraw...*Verborgenheit*, dissimulation, belongs to the possibility of speaking the truth, to the *aletheuein* which, for its part, is an unveiling that brings out from withdrawal ([9], p. 229).

This idea of “speaking the truth” by lying, by withdrawal from what passes for truth, is the basis for what I see as Derrida's most radical position on sovereignty; this is where he draws closest to Benjamin's position insofar as he affords us a more radically iconoclastic posture than we usually find with him.

Or rather, it could be more radically iconoclastic. It all depends on what is meant by “speaking the truth” (as opposed to lying or deception). For Heidegger this notion involves a movement towards authenticity but for Benjamin, such authenticity is impossible. The “truth” that we speak when we withdraw from what passes as reality—that is, when we struggle with representation, when we dissimulate as a way to avoid the stranglehold of the phantasmagoria—is only that there is no truth, nothing “real” or true but only more phantasm.

Let us read Derrida's engagement with Heidegger in that spirit. That is, let us insert Benjamin between Derrida and his reading of Heidegger (or read all three of them in constellation) to maximize Derrida's own iconoclasm. In that spirit, there are two passages in particular that I'd like to highlight. The first comes at a moment where Derrida considers Heidegger's theology (which, as we saw with Benjamin, is critical for his own approach to the phantasmagoria). Derrida quotes a passage from Heidegger wherein he (*i.e.*, Heidegger) writes:

The god-less thinking (*das gott-lose Denken*) which must abandon the God of philosophy, God as *cause sui*, is thus perhaps...closer to the Divine God (*dem göttlichen Gott vielleicht näher*). Here this means only god-less thinking is more open to Him...than onto-theo-logic would like to admit ([9], p. 215).

Derrida goes on to write about this passage, saying:

Should we conclude from this that the divinity of God that Heidegger seems to be able to say something about—namely that philosophical atheism is perhaps closer to it and more prepared for, open to and welcoming of it—is, as divinity of God, foreign to the attributes of power and sovereignty, of height and of causal and fundamental principality? Perhaps ([9], p. 215).

Here, Derrida is saying (along with Heidegger) that the sovereignty inherent in the idolatrous idea of God can be unmade, turned away from by an act of philosophy, of atheism even. Such a move toward the subjective is simultaneously (as Benjamin says as well) a move towards the divine.⁵ By turning our

⁵ Thus Benjamin writes: “If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of

back on what we imagine God to be, we allow God to remain an aporia. This is the equivalent once again of Woolf's point that "nothing exists except an earthenware pot". It is a subtractive principle whereby the undoing of concepts (of God, of nature, of death) also undoes the hold such ideas have on our most fundamental notions of reality.

Derrida's "perhaps" (taken directly from Heidegger's use of the term in his own quote above) is, in my view, the summit of Derrida's subversive tendencies. The term "perhaps" is often for him a moment of ambivalence, a moment of hedging his bets.⁶ In this instance however, by even countenancing such a grave threat to sovereignty, it seems to implicitly weigh in on the more radical and subversive side of things. Even if Derrida does not ultimately call for an unmaking of sovereignty (as we have seen), it may be that his exposure of its secrets, its ephemeral nature and weakness through his careful study of *Robinson Crusoe*, combined with this moment of countenancing the unmaking of what we think of as the sources of sovereign authority (and, in this case in particular, the authority of God), could produce a break with phantasm, an unmaking of it *malgré lui*.

In the sentence that follows from this "perhaps," we see that Derrida is already hedging somewhat. He writes:

Perhaps, but in any case if we must still speak of sovereignty, for this God more divine than the God of onto-theology, it will be another sovereignty, certainly one foreign to ontic power, and therefore foreign to political theology and to creationism, and to fundamentalism, in all senses of the term, In particular the sense that refers to a founding God ([9], p. 215).

Derrida's evocation of "another sovereignty" may accord with Benjamin's, a sense of a sovereignty that has been unmade, deflated, exposed. It could be the sovereignty that comes from his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, the sovereignty that turns its back on God in order to come to terms with God's absence in the world (as Woolf implicitly tells us too).⁷ But it could also be an image of sovereignty that is not that different from liberal visions: a sovereign that is declared to be "free" from delusion ("foreign to ontic power") but which is (therefore) all the more immersed in phantasm, a sovereignty that is also "free" from political theology and fundamentalism. But Benjamin's point is not to free sovereignty from political theology but rather to engage with political theology to distort and subvert the idols of sovereign power. Such a move would not "free" us but would at least lessen the hold such idols have over our lives. A world without creationists and fundamentalists may be a preferable world for many of us to the one we are living in but getting rid of such obvious forms of idolatry may yet condemn us to living with a more subtle and intractable idolatry that can hide behind the appearance of "atheism" and even "freedom".

the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach" ([14], p. 312).

⁶ For example, in his famous reading of Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" entitled "Force of Law," Derrida tells us: "'Perhaps', one must always say perhaps for justice" ([15], p. 27).

⁷ In this sense, we can see even in *Rogues*, that Derrida has his resistant moments. He tells us that "wherever the name of God would allow us to think something else, for example a vulnerable nonsovereignty, one that suffers and is divisible, one that is mortal even, capable of contradicting itself or of repenting (a thought that is neither impossible nor without example), it would be a completely different story, perhaps even the story of a god who deconstructs himself in his ipseity" ([1], p. 157).

Even so, we should not forget the “perhaps,” the moment just before this questioning or backpedaling begins on Derrida’s part. It remains significant that he countenances the possibility that sovereignty can be radically unmade because such a possibility is exactly what is needed to undermine sovereign assertions of its permanence, its impeachability and eternity. If his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* eats away at the foundations of sovereign phantasm, disappointing and contrasting it from the banal reality we live in, Derrida’s reading of Heidegger offers a decisive, if temporary, kicking through, a definitive break with the very heart of sovereign power. Even if Derrida changes his mind or backtracks, the potential damage has already been done.

9. A Half Circle Back

Another, and related, point in the text where Derrida approaches a particularly subversive position occurs when he speaks of “what reserves to *logos apophantikos* the power to accede to the truth, *i.e.*, to the possibility of the false, of error, of lying, and of the *pseudesthai in general*” ([9], p. 251). Here too, falseness is seen as the gateway to truthfulness; it is by turning one’s back on what passes for reality (*i.e.*, lying) that we can lessen that reality’s grip on our consciousness. Yet here too, Derrida pulls back from the fully radical possibility of this insight by aligning himself more with Heidegger than Benjamin by speaking of:

this singular event, this coming, this supervening (*Überkommenis*) , this surging up or surprising coming, this coming that falls upon... is nothing less than Being, or rather the showing of Being and of beings as such...([9], p. 253).

The idea that this purely negative experience allows something to “surg[e] up,” is precisely what a Benjaminian view of iconoclasm seeks to resist. A Benjaminian position always strives to keep the space of God’s aporia truly empty; nothing can (or should) fill it up, not even “being”.

Throughout Volume II of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida speaks of a circularity in *Robinson Crusoe* where we keep coming around to where we already were (akin to Robinson on his island, circling around and seeing his own footprint). But it may be that for Derrida we should only go half way around the circle with him; rather than returning to a sense of presence and truth via the move towards atheism and lying, we should allow those exercises to continue to trouble and subvert the phantasms we otherwise subject ourselves to. This is perhaps particularly true of the phantasm of sovereignty insofar as in this case, as Derrida makes clear, our motivations are very complicated; we both wish and fear the unmaking of sovereignty, just as we both wish and fear our own power of sovereignty, our own transcendence of death and individuality, to become some kind of great, public self.

In line with this argument, I don’t read Woolf’s sentence about the presence of an earthenware pot as a testament to the “being” of the pot. To think so is to forget, once again, that even the pot is fictional. Its “existence” is not of the same sort as an actual earthenware pot; this pot remains on the level of phantasms and fictions, albeit one that helps us unmake and undo the larger fictions that it is associated with.⁸ I think in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, the role of the pot is merely to not be God,

⁸ I would further argue that even if this earthenware pot were real, its truth would still be unavailable to us; from a Benjaminian position, we never have anything more than representation. There is no common ground with Heidegger here (unless we begin to read Heidegger himself in a very subversive way, in constellation with Benjamin).

nature or death. Its very disappointing ordinariness is not meant to suddenly become thrilling as we realize that the pot is a la Heidegger. Instead it is the feeling of disappointment itself that we must hold onto to if we are going to resist replacing one set of phantasms with another. Rather than seeking to be free from phantasm, I read Derrida as telling us (at least when I read him in constellation with Benjamin) that we should aim instead to remain disappointed in phantasm, to enhance its failure and, in this way, also enhance our own ability not to be totalized by it. It is in this way that we can come to terms with “another sovereignty” not a different sovereignty but the one we already know. Only this sovereignty has now been reduced, deflated and subverted to the point of being no more, and no less exciting, than an earthenware pot.

10. Conclusions: Derrida’s Ambivalence

In this way, it thus becomes possible to read Derrida as being in closer alignment with Benjamin on the question of sovereignty. Even if much of Derrida’s prose argues for accommodation, for ambivalence, for a weaker kind of “perhaps”, in certain moments (such as the ones discussed above) we find the means by which Derrida becomes more deadly for sovereign phantasm. We see him not only paying lip service to the power of fiction and absence in defying phantasm, but we also see him directly employing these powers in the very pages of his text.

At his best moments, when he is reading *Robinson Crusoe* as an exposure of the two edged nature of sovereign personhood, or when he is engaging with Heidegger in a way that stresses subversion over any positive engagement, I see Derrida as mastering, at least temporarily, the kind of ambivalence that he displays in *Rogues*, among many other texts. In Volume II of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida seems to transfer that ambivalence from himself to sovereignty as such. In looking at sovereignty in this text, he sees its ambivalence, its weakness, its failure, not his own. Such a transference helps to undermine sovereignty rather than have sovereignty undermine us (or him). When he is reading the text of *Robinson Crusoe*, Derrida is very often in this mode. Faced with the pure instantiation of sovereign subjectivity, he sees it for what it is: vulnerable, pathetic, as ephemeral even, as Robinson himself (as evidenced by the ambivalent status of his own foot prints—if they are indeed his). It is only when Derrida is faced with the contemporary practice of sovereignty, what he engages with in *Rogues*, that he fully pulls back from this kind of subversion. In such instances—as we have seen—Derrida chooses to live with sovereignty in order to avoid something that might possibly be worse. In so doing, all of the ambivalence that Derrida spots in sovereignty comes back to haunt him. Yet, if we read Derrida in constellation with himself—as well as in constellation with Benjamin—we see that such ambivalence can always be redirected; we can spot in the author of *The Beast and the Sovereign* a font of resistance to sovereign blandishments, to phantasm in general; this is a resistance that can then be applied to the author of *Rogues* and quite a few other texts as well. When we think of Derrida’s ambivalence as being not his own but a product of the ambivalence of what he is studying, we can see that there will always be grounds for this thinker to turn that very quality into a weapon against itself, against what he would otherwise compromise with and conform to.

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