

The Robinson Myth Reread in Postcolonial and Postcommunist Modes

EDITH W. CLOWES

The theory of postmodernism has prided itself on the claim that, as an ideological phenomenon, postmodernism topples “totalities,” ebulliently undermining absolute truths, including meta-narratives of emancipation and enlightenment, gladly departing from a “modernist” nostalgia for some kind of ultimate certainty. In neo-Marxist terms, everything has become commodity. All can be traded for the right price. Everything is measured on the sliding scale of exchange value. As deliberately underdefined as postmodernism is, most critics will still agree that it involves a shifting and fragmentation of the valuative ground. A more difficult and possibly more compromising issue is the question of the extent of the culture of postmodernism. I say “compromising” because, if indeed the postmodernist phenomenon is pervasive, we must confront the apparent paradox of the global reach of a phenomenon that focuses on ideological localization. At present we have the possibility of at least a “negative” totality, that is, a “total” skepticism about claims to absolute truth. This potential demonization of exclusivist thinking may help to form yet another either/or structure that polarizes anarchy and authority, yet another pair of binary oppositions that postmodernist thinking typically claims to resist. The result might only be a relatively benign world feudalized in a patchwork of “local,” “provisional” agreements as to what constitutes truth, as Lyotard imagines it. Or, and this is closer to present political realities, the result might be a series of new mini-totalities that brutally displace the passivity and gridlock that accompanies skepticism. For our activity as critics and historians particularly of non-Western or semi-Western cultures, the danger may be that a widespread enthusiasm for semiotic, ideological, political, and other fragmentation might turn into a new claim of Western cultural hegemony in which the specific character of any given culture is easily ignored.

The merging of elite aesthetic practice with popular modes of expression is usually noted as one of the bases of postmodernism. Thus, at least in Western culture, indicating the considerable breadth of this phenomenon. And, although in the early 1980s postmodernism referred only to a Western phenomenon, a proliferation of critics in non-Western (that is, non-first-world) areas are now exploring the possible uses that postmodernist theory might have for characterizing the remarkable ideological fragmentation occurring in other cultures. In 1991, Kwame Anthony Appiah in his wonderfully titled article, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonialism?" raised the problem of a global postmodern culture.¹ Appiah immediately qualifies his choice of word to say that "that emphatically does not mean that it is the culture of every person in the world" (Appiah, 343). Indeed, Appiah relates the terms postcolonial (and postmodern) only to a very small Western-educated and Western-connected elite in Africa that acts as a conduit for cultural trade between the centers and periphery of Western culture.

Critics in the Eastern European and Slavic sphere have also begun to probe the implications of postmodern culture for late Communism, or now postcommunism. In their as yet unpublished work for the SSRC summer workshop on contemporary Russian culture in 1992, Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov draw attention to the commodification and popularization of Russian culture. Mikhail Epstein in his articles, "After the Future: On the New Consciousness in Literature" and "Relativistic Patterns in Totalitarian Thinking" and his forthcoming book, *After the Future: Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, makes direct connections between the Western and Soviet modes of "reduction of the world to a play of signifiers" ("After the Future" 443). In my own work on "meta-utopian" fiction I have noted a number of issues that Russian fiction shares with Western postmodernist thought.² Postmodernist thinking has lent non-Western critics like Appiah and Epstein useful terms for characterizing actual processes in these cultures. Although this borrowing is probably helpful, there are always the dangers of the homogenizing very distinct discourses and cultural trends and of imagining that we have a truly global, Western-inspired cultural development at hand—when this is not the case at all.

This essay aims to examine two local cases in cultures that have perhaps one foot in the European heritage and to probe the usefulness of imposing postmodernist models on them. One work has been very much in the critical limelight—J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Foe* (1986), a product of that bastion of colonialism, South Africa. The other is Liudmila Petrushevskaja's story, "The New Robinsons: A Chronicle of the End of the 20th Century" (1989), a product of that mighty fortress of Communism, the Soviet Union. My focus will be on what I suspect is a defining issue in postcolonialist and postcommunist cultures, the myth of "economic individualism," as Ian Watt calls it in *The Rise of the Novel*. Coetzee's and Petrushevskaja's works are, of course, wholly unrelated and share only three

facts. Both were written during the middle-to-late 1980s, a time when cultural skepticism was making itself felt among mainstream intellectuals in both societies. Both authors are counted among the committed "liberal" literary intelligentsia, but both use the works under discussion to undermine the claims to moral and aesthetic superiority made in the "realist" medium traditional for literary liberalism. And, finally, both give contemporary rereadings of that cornerstone of Western modernity, and the originating text for the myth of economic individualism, Defoe's *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.

We use the terms *postcolonial* and *postcommunist*, but we must face the fact that neither work was actually written in a society that was *post*-anything. We can say with certainty that "The New Robinsons" was written during the last years of Communist rule, and that *Foe* appeared not long before Bishop Tutu received the Nobel Peace Prize, before Nelson Mandela was released and the serious discussion of instituting representational government in South Africa began. But both works are informed by a mentality that challenges the ruling ideology, either implicitly or explicitly.

Despite their complete lack of historical contact, Soviet and South African alternative writing cultures have some apparent parallels. Both Coetzee and Petrushevskaja emerged in a milieu best described as *modernist* in Adorno's sense and perhaps *dissident* in Russian parlance. A milieu in which the writer was beholden to tell the truth about the abuse of political power, in the name of some oppressed social group. In both cultures telling the truth could at times be "tantamount to treason" (Lazarus 140). In the 1980s the dissident intelligentsia in both cultures stood to lose their rationale. As Neil Lazarus puts it, there is no longer a "people" to speak for (Lazarus 145). A fully-voiced Black movement has emerged in South Africa; the Soviet populace is trading literary prophets for economic profit and turning from didactic art toward a culture of popular "entertainment." A growing sense of what Lazarus calls its own "marginality and acute self-consciousness" (148) confronts the literary elite in both cultures.

Both works preview this situation in varying degrees. Petrushevskaja's story is seemingly written in the mold of didactic art: it appears to be a warning about possible future persecution. It deals with a family that leaves the city and moves to the country for its own survival. Soon strange incongruities emerge. The agents of and reasons for persecution are never clear. The teen-aged narrator "teaches" us nothing and claims to speak for no one but herself. Above all, she has no ideological axe to grind. Coetzee's novel is much more clearly caught between concepts of literature as play, as entertainment, and as didactic exercise. It focuses ultimately on the difficulty of literature as voice of social conscience, speaking for a silenced and persecuted other with which one cannot hope to communicate.

It will help us if we orient our discussion in a historical consideration of Defoe's work and its reception in both cultures. Soon after its publication,

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* became the Urtext for a very widely proliferated myth of economic individualism. As myth it created a paradigm for a certain type of economic and social behavior, showing how one can serve one's personal material interests and still be a morally upstanding human being. Its general characteristics are of course very familiar. Its subject is a white man, its narrative one of rebellion against the patriarchal order, and the reestablishment of a patriarchal order—now on one's own terms. Historically *Robinson Crusoe* marked the transition in utopian social thought between utopia as satirical fantasy and utopia as realizable project (Manuel and Manuel 433). Not strictly speaking a utopia, it gave material for utopian thinking. Situating his protagonist in the longstanding utopian chronotope of the island, Defoe made the industrious, God-fearing individual the legitimate agent for realizing wealth and power in the New World. As T. J. Reiss puts it in *The Discourse of Modernism*: "Crusoe elaborates the place of the individual . . . in an already familiar order: it is the story of the *legitimization* of that elaboration and of that place" (Emphasis added; 295). In Defoe's novel possession of (utopian) territory is legitimized in the name of an *individual self*, and *not* in the name of the state.

It is essential for our interpretation of these recastings of the myth to ask how the Robinson myth has functioned historically in the specific cultural contexts of colonialism and Communism. As Allan Gardiner puts it in his article, "Colonial Encounters of the Robinsonian Kind," the Robinson myth has long served in South African literary culture as an unexamined norm. Coetzee has been concerned to unmask this norm, not only in *Foe* but in earlier novels such as *Dusklands* (1983). In his collection of critical essays, *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee implies an incongruity between the robinsonian chronotope of the colonized island with its alleged improvement on nature and the African continent. He points out that Africa was not part of a New World: it was too connected to Europe to represent new space and time (2). As he puts it, "The Cape . . . belonged not to the New World but to the farthest extremity of the Old: it was a Lapland of the south, peopled by natives whose way of life occasioned curiosity or disgust but never admiration" (2). Colonists, far from improving nature, ran the risk of returning to nature, that is, themselves submitting to a savage life of sloth and brutality. Visitors to the colony worried that "Africa might turn out to be not a Garden but an anti-Garden, a garden ruled over by the serpent, where the wilderness takes root once again in men's hearts. The remedy they prescribed against Africa's insidious corruptions was cheerful toil" (3)—that is, the Crusoe remedy of labor for the conditioning of one's "spiritual biceps" (Watt 160). Coetzee further implies that most South African writing has been little more than an acceptance of the hierarchical, racist thinking implicit in Defoe's novel (Gardiner 183).

The reception of Defoe's novel is an important boundary marker between Russian and West European cultures. As an archetype of economic individual-

ism, Robinson Crusoe has never been received sympathetically by Russian readers. Nonetheless, he does appear as a figure of isolation—metaphysical or social—in works as diverse as Aleksandr Herzen's meditation on history, *From the Other Shore* (1847-1850); Lev Shestov's compendium of philosophical aphorisms, *All Things Are Possible* (1905); Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957); or Abram Terts's meta-utopian experiment, *Liubimov* (1962).³ Here the problematic of economic individualism is completely ignored and, along with it, issues of personal economic power, labor, and trade as the bases for a new social ethic—legitimization of the self through possession and enlightened management of territory. A well-known Stalin-era parody of the Robinson myth is Ilia Ilf's and Evgeny Petrov's amusing story, "How Robinson Was Made" (1933). Here Robinson as archetype of entrepreneurial energy and technical know-how fights for survival in a bureaucratic culture. Probably an appealing figure to a certain spectrum of readers from the era of the New Economic Policy (1921-1928) who themselves were interested in making a buck, Robinson is supposed to be the hero of a story written by a young writer of adventure stories (a genre under strict control from the 1920s until the late 1980s). In the hands of an editor, long proficient in the ways of ideological censorship, this story becomes something quite different. Robinson is deconstructed, and in his place are put all kinds of bureaucrats and petty committee types who resent personal initiative. They fight over what should be saved from the ship, preferring office paraphernalia like stamps and fireproof cabinets over tools and building materials, and they immediately requisition all the goods that are salvaged. As an economic myth the Robinson story is completely incompatible with centralized democratic socialism. As far as I know, Petrushevskaja's story stands out as the first even partially sympathetic treatment of economic individualism in Russian literature. Perhaps her story is a parable about the persecution of economic initiative.

If readers have the impression that there will be many more differences than similarities between the two responses to this Urtext of Western modernity, they are absolutely right. But these differences are essential to keep in mind if we are going to talk seriously about trends in various parts of the world *away* from absolute values, fixed identities, and the like. Despite the two wholly different cultural ambiances, some intriguing parallels nonetheless invite us to contemplate the multiplicity of valuative fragmentations and their techniques of deconstruction.

In our comparison and contrast of *Foe* and "The New Robinsons," we will focus on three areas: the voice of the (female) narrator and the question of gender roles, the nature of the island or isolation chronotope, and the reframing of the robinsonian narrative that occurs in both works. An intriguing point of departure shared by these two works is the fact that in each the narrative voice is female. Both draw attention to the maleness of Defoe's concept of economic individualism. Also interesting is the impression in both that narration as an act

of liberation is compromised in a number of ways and is ultimately *not* liberating. The narrator of *Foe* is Susan Barton, an adventurer somewhat in the tradition of Defoe's *Roxana* (Spivak 157). Her challenge to the hegemony of male consciousness in the Robinson myth is certainly deliberate. In search of a long-lost daughter, she is shipwrecked on a desert island only to be saved by a tongueless black man (Friday) and a European man dressed in skins (Cruso). When they are saved, she returns to England determined to write and sell her memoirs, which she eventually titles *The Female Castaway*. Her aim is to become wealthy. She finds the writer Foe (long before he dignifies himself with the more noble surname, *Defoe*) who is to transform her eyewitness account into readable fiction. Her chronicle thus becomes the "real" material from which the novel we know is generated.

That this novel is a creation of an exclusively male imagination is underscored as Foe suggests taking Barton out of the story altogether and telling *her* story (her search for her daughter) elsewhere. Barton fights a battle for self-determination, to free herself from a man's projection of what he thinks she should be and to define herself in whichever way she sees fit. As she tells Foe: "I choose not to tell [my adventures before the shipwreck] because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131). But as she struggles, she feels her hold over the narrative and her image of herself as a free subject slipping away. Moreover, Barton's position is already compromised because she adopts a masculine identity in order to further her cause. In England she uses Cruso's name, claiming to be his wife, to gain control over his material effects (he has died on the ship on the way to England). Much later, Foe and Barton tussle over who is to "father" the story. Throughout the second half of the story it becomes increasingly clear that this struggle over gender roles is really irrelevant in comparison to the great mystery of the silent Friday's story—his past, his thoughts, his desires. Neither Barton nor Cruso nor Foe has any way to communicate with Friday. All are blind and deaf to the meaning of his various acts, his whirling dances, his dressing up in Foe's clothing, his sketches on a slate.

The nameless girl-narrator of "The New Robinsons" stands out as one of two female voices in the rich Russian tradition of utopian writing. The other, of course, is central to the Russian tradition, Vera Pavlovna in Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* (1864). "The New Robinsons," however, is the first to be "authored" by a female writer. Petrushevskiaia's narrator is naive by comparison to Susan Barton. Her story is loosely comparable in tone to the pieces of Part I of *Foe* in which Barton recounts her island experiences. Both are genuine "realists": they are "artless" chroniclers, writing down precisely what they see and do. However, Petrushevskiaia's story has none of the challenge to the Robinson Cru-

soe figure that *Foe* contains. Petrushevskaiia's narrator makes no challenge to gender roles and has no particular stock in being female. As the story's title implies, she easily counts her mother and herself as "Robinsons." Between members of the family in "The New Robinsons" there is easy compatibility; no one insists on his or her primacy. The mother and daughter take care of all trade, gardening, and animal husbandry, while the Crusoe-like father seeks out a new location, salvages items from abandoned dachas, and builds the new retreat deep in the forest.

Although the narrator makes no overt comment about gender roles—and certainly appears to react much less problematically to her robinsonian father than Barton does to Cruso—certain strange realities of gender become clear as she gives her account. Most important, the countryside is uniformly female. Women serve all social, political, and economic functions. There are *no men*. This aspect of the story brings up a major point about Petrushevskaiia's story. In an essay emphasizing postcommunist thinking, one might expect to hear how this narrator topples Stalinist values. There is no actual reference to collective farms or to collectivization, and I cannot find any allusion to Stalinism or any other version of Marxist-Leninist ideology, or, indeed, of any official, "ruling" ideology. Something quite different is at stake here. The key system of values that Petrushevskaiia challenges is the nostalgia for some rural, purely *Russian* idyll that gives village prose its power. Solzhenitsyn in "Matryona's House" or Rasputin in *A Farewell to Matyora* sketch a matriarchal icon of that "one righteous person," as Solzhenitsyn puts it at the end of his story, "without whom, as the saying goes, the village cannot stand. Neither can the city. Neither can our whole earth" (Solzhenitsyn 122). In this exclusively female world this mother figure is travestied by the old, toothless, silent Marfutka (whose name, in the grand tradition, also starts with "M"). In her portrayal, Petrushevskaiia seems to respond to the irritation of critics who asked of village prose "how many more *driákhlye starúkh*i or 'decrepit old ladies' one would have to endure before this trend ran its course" (Parthe 86). Marfutka is no longer really even counted as a person. She sits "like a mummy wrapped in a multitude of greasy scarves, rags and blankets" (Petrushevskaiia 167); she lives in an unheated house, eats rotten raw potatoes, although people bring her fresh ones. As another neighbor puts it, she is waiting to die. She never utters a word and is indifferent to kindness and cruelty. At most, the young narrator decides, Marfutka represents some minimal notion of freedom. Only when a person has nothing and is ready to die do others let her alone. Thus, while drawing on the usual female/victim emblem of quiet acceptance of suffering and persecution—that has been the real lot of the Russian peasantry in the twentieth century—Petrushevskaiia makes this emblem absurd and desensitized.

If any sense of gender otherness is to be felt in this story, it is in the vague references to forces of persecution—real or imagined—in the implications of pos-

sible civil war or famine. This other, unfamiliar *male* world, it is implied, is violent and coercive. At the end, when the family has moved still deeper into the woods, the girl mentions that she is sure that eventually “they” will come and take everything that “we” have, including her. Still, as usual, the narrator’s genuine fear is never fully justified by experience. There are only two bits of evidence of the presence of the other. One is the appearance of a four-month-old, severely malnourished baby on the doorstep of the family’s dacha. The other is a “khozkománda” or kitchen crew that takes over the family’s vegetable garden once the family has abandoned it. Whether this khozkománda belongs to an army, a farm, another family is never explained. Petrushevskaja’s tactic seems clear: she is making abstract the real Russian experience of persecution that has pervaded the twentieth century. Just as background music in a movie prepares the audience to be scared, so Petrushevskaja uses innuendo, pulling the right strings to bring out a paranoia that is all too near the surface and has been justified too many times in Russian history. But she never backs it up with “real” events.

Both stories alter the island/isolation chronotope of *Robinson Crusoe* in distinctive ways, each using it to challenge a predominant social ideal. In Defoe’s novel the experience of living in isolation on the island allows Robinson to work out both the morally elevated mentality necessary for and a practical blueprint of responsible stewardship. We remember his ironizing over the idea that he is “king” and his goats are his “subjects.” At the end of the first third of the novel Robinson has an epiphany, starting with the discovery that some old husks that he had thrown out had sprouted into barley ears and stalks of rice (Defoe 68-69). What has been a wild place or even a wasteland becomes conceivable as a garden. Both narratives from the 1980s focus on this garden motif, not to create a new Garden of Eden but rather to project an absurd world. As Aparajita Sagar points out, cultivation of the land is a justification for appropriating the land from the barbarians: land is for those who make the best use of it. She notes, too, that the colonizer in colonial myth rather disingenuously compares his role to that of John the Baptist: his task is “to prepare the earth and the land for eventual takeover by its rightful possessor, the colonized” (Sagar 244).

In *Foe*, Coetzee emphasizes the fruitlessness of the whole colonial venture. Susan Barton encounters a Crusoe who has brought *no* seeds to plant and discovers none on the island. His “improvement” of nature consists of a Sisyphus-like labor of carrying stones up the island’s hills to build terraces that perhaps later explorers will be able to use as garden plots. As he puts it: “The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them. Clearing ground and piling stones is little enough but it is better than sitting in idleness” (*Foe* 33). Thus, labor is deadening but nonetheless the only alternative to boredom, sloth, and a return to savagery: it has none of the spiritually improving and transformative qualities that it has in

Defoe's novel. In Coetzee's work the wasteland remains a wasteland and cannot become the locus for a mythic transfiguration.

In "The New Robinsons" the garden exists not in isolation but in a larger social context of the wasted countryside and particularly the tiny three-person hamlet of Mora beyond Mora Creek to which the family moves. It is central to the parabolic character of the story that the name "Mora" comes from the Russian colloquialism, "mor," which means "wholesale death." Within this context the garden becomes a haven for survival amidst the larger wasteland. The narrator supposes that death is everywhere where she and her family are *not*. Death is always absurd, mentioned as a nonsequitur. For example, after telling us that in a very short time she and her mother have become peasant women with dirt ingrained in their fingernails, she mentions in an offhand manner, "by the way, Tania's [the local doctor's] constant visitor, the shepherd Verka, hung herself in the woods" (Petrushevskaja 169). When the narrator thinks of people who are no longer near the family, she supposes that they are dead. For example, she thinks of her grandparents who stayed in the city as being "already corpses" (170). Moreover, any animal that dies or is killed is quickly salted away, turned into food. This almost pathological distancing of self from death works to undermine the verisimilitude of an otherwise believable narrative.

In contrast to the narrator's musings about "there," about distant people and places, the "here," the garden and little animal farm, come to life and gain plausibility through the small details of the father's salvaging and building, and the economic activity of mother and daughter—their buying, selling, bartering and trading, hiring and finally adopting various of the "natives" (the narrator actually uses the Russian word "aborigény" [171]). This use of detail completely parallels Susan Barton's early justification of the representational character of her account: "The truth that makes your story yours alone, that sets you apart from the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids, resides in a thousand touches which today may seem of no importance" (18). The *local* and *concrete* quality of meaning makes this story ring as if in a postmodern way. Everything at a distance is abstract, absurd, dead; whereas, the local is palpable—and thus alive.

When we look at the way in which the Robinson fabula is recast in these two narratives, we find quite different treatments. *Foe* empties out the colonial message of Defoe's novel; "The New Robinsons" partially accepts Defoe's myth of the spiritual value of industry. If we can argue that *Robinson Crusoe* is one of the key embodiments of the meta-narrative of enlightenment and liberation, then we can likewise argue that both Coetzee's and Petrushevskaja's works compromise the possibility of gaining real insight, freedom, and power. The Defoe fabula has six basic parts. It starts with *rebellion* against a patriarchal order and its endorsement of what Robinson calls the "middle state" (Defoe 2) of society, and it ends with a *reinforcement* of patriarchal social order and the ascendancy of the mid-

dle state. In moving from rejection to reassertion, Robinson first experiences *adventure and ruin*—enslavement, followed by colonization of land in Brazil, enrichment, and finally shipwreck. Then he lives in *isolation* in which he must rely on his own technological ability to save his life. He salvages goods and materials from the ship and achieves material security. The next stage comes with Robinson's *illness and epiphany*. This spiritual self-overcoming starts with the seemingly miraculous discovery of the sprouts of barley and rice that spring from the discarded waste. During his sickness he remembers his father's words, and he judges himself for continually contesting God's justice. He hears his conscience as a voice enumerating the times during his adventures that he could easily have died, but did not. He then opens the Bible to the words, "Call on Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify Me" (Defoe 83). As he recovers from his illness, he meditates on these words.

Physical and spiritual recovery give Robinson new energy, and he develops a complete microcosmic economy on the island. Among his activities are planting his two "plantations," as he calls them, animal husbandry, crafts and "manufacturing," and a defense infrastructure. He thinks of his land as a mock kingdom with himself as the king and his goats as the subjects. Robinson, to his credit, has a sense of self-irony and puts the emphasis on the word "mock." The final stage, before he becomes a real "governor" (Defoe 247) and establishes a real "brotherhood" of business on the island (255), is his *conquest* of the island, his fight with the cannibals and his *establishment of a mini-social order*. Friday becomes his real human subject, and he becomes the just ruler.

In *Foe* the mythic legitimization of economic individualism collapses. Coetzee's Cruso is a flat, boring, unmotivated person capable neither of rebellion nor of moral reflection. Shocked at the injustice of Friday's loss of his tongue, Susan Barton does ask whether "Providence" was "sleeping" (*Foe* 23). Cruso's response is morally indifferent: "For the business of the world to prosper, Providence must sometimes wake and sometimes sleep, as lower creatures do" (23). Neither is there any epiphany. As in Defoe's work, Cruso falls ill during a terrible storm. Barton nurses him back to health. Here, in contrast, there is no moment of higher moral insight, there is only a brief sexual encounter between the two (29). Barton implicitly connects the spiritless and seed-less sexual act to the seed-inspired epiphany of Defoe's hero. She muses much later to Friday: "If your master had truly wished to be a colonist and leave behind a colony, would he not have been better advised (dare I say this?) to plant his seed in the only womb there was?" (83). Beyond this lack at least of a spiritual "climax" there is no spiritually uplifting aspect to labor, no economy that is set out, no legitimization of any social order—in short, no liberation for anyone from the dullness and opacity of life. Cruso's only rule is as flat as he is: "we shall work for our bread" (36). He is socially unaware, fully accepting slavery and Friday's tonguelessness. Once back in England, Barton tries to find a way to set Friday free and send him

back to Africa. She delivers him to a ship in Bristol with money and his documents around his neck, only to realize that he is defenseless and will almost certainly be sold back into slavery.

Spivak has noted the incompatibility of the three narrative segments that make up *Foe* and the resulting indeterminacy of the work as a whole. The island story is shadowed by those of Barton and Friday. No story really gets told, and the island adventure remains nothing more than an opaque fragment, hiding more than it reveals. Cruso, Barton suspects, is unable to tell truth from fantasy (*Foe* 12) and generally has the attitude that: "Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering" (17). Thus, his past, what brought him to this island, is never disclosed. Susan herself resents Foe's attempts later to excise her from the island account and create a past and a story of loss and recovery of a daughter. She deliberately refuses to give more than a general outline of her past, preferring to cast herself not in the role of mother but of adventurer. These two stories, insofar as we gain insight into them, seem quite devoid of meaning. As Foe puts it, Barton's island account "is like a loaf of bread. It will keep us alive . . . if we are starved for reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections" (117).

The third story, Friday's, remains a mystery, as Barton puts it, a "hole in the narrative" (121). Throughout, Friday throws down intriguing clues, symbolic acts, seemingly full of significance, if only one could enter his semiotic sphere. Following Cruso's and Barton's intercourse he strews petals on the sea (32). In London he dances frenziedly. When Barton tries to teach him to write, Friday draws a row of feet with eyes on them, only to erase them (147). Later he writes a whole series of *os* (152). The last chapter is a dream sequence in which everyone is long dead except Friday. The narrator hears "sounds of the island" (154) coming from Friday's mouth. Then the narrator descends into the shipwreck where Barton's and Friday's corpses are found. In this place where "bodies are their own signs," presumably where everything is as it appears, Friday opens his mouth and emits a "slow stream, without breath, without interruption" (157).

Thus, the emphasis of this novel is on the enigma of Friday, which has no apparent access to meaning. Every critic who has written on *Foe* remarks, we are left with silence, emptiness, and Barton's protest: "In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me" (133). There is no essence, only a surface lacking substance and meaning.

"The New Robinsons" seems less deconstructive of the Robinson myth than *Foe*, but it does use the Robinson myth to "occult" all politically "correct" thinking by simply ignoring it. Situated in a Soviet and Russian tradition that is hostile to economic individualism and trades in ideologemes rather than in material goods (Epstein, "Relativistic Patterns"), "The New Robinsons" ignores all ideologemes and takes on the challenge of the economic self against persecution.

Thus, there is no epiphany or sudden insight into the “right” way of thinking because there is no right way of thinking. But neither is there a meta-aesthetic meditation about the impossibility of storytelling: the narrator *desires* to account for herself and her family’s survival. Each time they escape, the family is jubilant at once again outwitting a seemingly inexorable fate. In this story, unlike *Foe*, the words are not reduced to “dead stones.” Still, the story participates in no grand *récit* of emancipation and enlightenment. Although the story is about periodic escape, the liberation narrative is compromised by the seemingly “real” perception of being hunted, by the indeterminacy of the information given by the narrator, and by Petrushevskaja’s play with automatized reactions of the reader. To start with, escape is at best a provisional sort of liberation. The possibility of starting a “whole new life” in new conditions is nil; there are no new conditions.

The fabula starts with a kind of farcical “rebellion,” that is, a dispute that the narrator recalls between the parents and grandparents over an apartment. The reader never actually sees the “storm clouds” that the family perceives to be gathering over them. Given the traditional Aesopian connection in Russian writing between bad weather and political disfavor, the reader automatically decides that the father is in political trouble. This assumption is nowhere justified—like so much else in this story that plays on readers’ expectations. The “adventure” part of the tale consists, it would seem, of a battle against famine. (Why there should be famine is likewise never explained but simply taken to be plausible.) Further, the family never completely achieves the isolation they seek; they coexist with the other three survivors in Mora. Eventually they do achieve a small level of security. About the time that the “invasion” of their territory starts, they adopt a little girl and are left with the baby Naiden. Earlier they had taken over the territory from others who had abandoned it; now they are in no condition to defend it. Almost immediately after saving the life of the baby, they move into the forest.

The state of social order is never made clear. Is there dictatorship or anarchy in the larger world? Neither the narrator nor her parents ever succeeds in establishing a lasting order in their “garden” world. But at the end, the narrator somewhat ironically suggests an *almost* mythic vision of world order—one that has all the elements needed for the good life. When they are comfortably ensconced for the winter in their new hideaway in the forest, she says

The winter covered all paths to our house with snow, we had mushrooms, dried berries and jams, potatoes from father’s garden, an attic full of hay, marinated apples from deserted forest estates, even a barrel of pickled cucumbers and tomatoes. On a piece of woodland hidden under the snow winter wheat was growing. We had goats. A boy and a girl for the continuation of the human race, a cat who brought us naughty forest mice, we had the dog, Beauty. . . . We had a grandmother [Anisia], a mine of folk wisdom and knowledge. Around us stretched the cold spaces. (171-72)

This pleasant idyll has an ironic ring when we consider the family’s general predicament. Moreover, we wonder what kind of mine of folk wisdom Anisia the

peasant woman can be. Earlier she spitefully killed one of her goats that the family had wanted to purchase for its herd; when gathering mushrooms, she had brought the very poisonous mukhomory back to the house!

One interesting aspect of this response to Defoe's narrative is its variety of scenarios in which freedom might have meaning, if only very provisionally. One is the timeless, changeless idyll of the hideaway in wintertime. Here they are physically "free," but not free of their paranoia. They go to great lengths to hide the location of their house from other people, including not hunting with their rifle and chopping wood only during snowstorms. The narrator is sure that sooner or later they will be discovered.

The idyll gives way to two other possible outcomes. One is the Marfutka alternative, that one is "free" only when there is no material wealth and no youth and energy to take away. The narrator remarks that: "When we become like Marfutka, people won't bother us any more" (172). Beside this minimalist, indeed, nihilist definition of freedom (familiar to any reader of Gulag prison memoirs), there is another quite robinsonian possibility. Just as Robinson builds himself several dwellings, among them, a "fortification" and a "country seat" so we find in the story's last lines that "we have a long time to live yet. . . . we are not dozing. . . . father and I are outfitting a new retreat" (172). One can live only through a continual effort of reappropriation and rebuilding. In *Robinson Crusoe* the protagonist fortifies his situation once and for all; here is a constant battle with occasional respite, but a battle that will eventually be lost.

The degree to which this family is purely the persecuted and in no way the persecutor must be raised. Just as some unknown assortment of people encroached on their garden, so this family, on arrival, scavenged in abandoned houses for what they needed. They took over other people's garden plots, particularly Marfutka's, and knocked down fences. The narrator seems clearly to distinguish between self and other, life and death, persecuting and being persecuted; but one is left suspecting that these differences are possibly not so firmly drawn.

How useful is a postmodernist paradigm for interpreting *Foe* and "The New Robinsons"? Used judiciously, without necessarily labeling these works "postmodern," it has helped to delineate the idiosyncracies of each particular discourse. In *Foe* postcolonial concerns merge more fully with Western, postmodernist discourse than postcommunist ones do in "The New Robinsons." Certainly *Foe* gives a clearer example than "The New Robinsons" of a process of undermining literary realist claims to authenticity and abandoning large cultural myths. But Petrushevskaja's story indicates a similar kind of irony and skepticism about its own reliability. Both works abandon longstanding absolutes. *Foe* openly exposes colonialism; "The New Robinsons" simply ignores Marxism-Leninism and also discredits its most vibrant replacement, the counterutopian nostalgia for a rural idyll of pure Russianness. *Foe* disappears into the "hole" in its narrative, Friday's (tongueless) mouth. The narrator of "The New Robinsons"

remains resolutely with the mode of “chronicle” or eyewitness account, naively (compared to *Foe*) claiming plausibility, verisimilitude, and meaning. Although she establishes basic valuative oppositions—self-other, life-death, here-there—she, neither explicitly nor implicitly, defends a system of values in the way Susan Barton does. Thus, she can come to no real conclusion, and what might seem to some an apocalyptic story trails on as a process of survival that continues in the same pattern, but can achieve no “higher” goal.

Shifting valuative ground characterizes both works. This is obvious in *Foe* where Susan Barton’s assumptions about herself and other characters shift and melt into one another. The European self with its belief in self-liberation and self-determination washes into a vague, indefinable lack of selfhood. What Appiah has called the “contamination” of the line between self and other (354) is less immediate in “The New Robinsons” where a youthful narrator imposes her own seemingly firm valuative oppositions, none of which she ever doubts. Yet we wonder why we should believe her. As in *Foe*, the information given about the family’s past is so sketchy and vague, and her observations are so full of paralogisms. In short, there is reason to believe that she is unreliable. We suspect that Petrushevskaja is using this naive narrator at least in part to play on an automatized (and certainly historically justified) paranoia in Russian thinking.

What seems paradoxical but is nonetheless true in both of these works is an inability to negotiate between self and other (Roberts, 91). *Foe* ends with the awareness of this inability, and in this sense has a kind of a social “message.” “The New Robinsons,” with its strong fear of a predatory other, makes absolutely no effort to define that other and has no interest in communicating with it. If these two works share any general pattern, it is this very problematic relationship of self to the other, whether the other represents the persecutor, as in “The New Robinsons,” or the persecuted, as in *Foe*. An awareness of the impossibility of communication can easily merge into a sense of the undesirability of communication. A possible pathological aspect of postmodernism as a broad phenomenon might be a proliferation of this feeling. The denial of the old ability of the (Robinsonian) self to speak *for* an other may be replaced with a loss of will to speak *to* an other, that is, to negotiate a middle ground. Self and other in *Foe* and “The New Robinsons” are complicit to differing degrees, and yet the incommunicability between them is worrisome. Here, certainly, the global development of mini-totalities finds its start.

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NOTES

1. See also the article of anthropologist Jonathan Friedman.
2. See especially, Clowes, 208-221.
3. For another instance of the Robinson myth as an indicator of metaphysical and social isolation,

see novelist Andrei Bitov's celebration of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead*: "Novyi Robinzon (k 125-letiiu vykhoda v svet "Zapisok iz mertvogo doma"), *Znamia* 12 (1987): 221-227.

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