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Parrot Poll: **A**nimal Mimesis in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

One of the most famous scenes in Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, published 1719, depicts an animal mimesis:

I got over the Fence, and laid me down in the Shade to rest my Limbs; for I was very weary, and fell asleep: But judge you, if you can, that read my Story, what a Surprize I must be in, when I was wak'd out of my Sleep by a Voice calling me by my Name several times, *Robin, Robin, Robin Crusoe*, poor *Robin Crusoe*, where are you *Robin Crusoe*? Where are you? Where have you been?

I was so dead asleep at first, [...] that I did not wake thoroughly, but dozing between sleeping and waking, thought I dream'd that some Body spoke to me: But as the Voice continu'd to repeat *Robin Crusoe, Robin Crusoe*, at last I began to wake more perfectly, and was at first dreadfully frightened, and started up in the utmost Consternation: But no sooner were my Eyes open, than I saw my *Poll* sitting on the Top of the Hedge; and immediately knew that it was he that spoke to me; for just in such bemoaning Language I had used to talk to him, and teach him; and he had learn'd it so perfectly, that he would sit upon my Finger, and lay his Bill close to my Face, and cry, *Poor Robin Crusoe, Where are you? Where have you been? How come you here?* And such things as I had taught him. (103-104)

In the following I will give an animal reading of this famous scene,¹ arguing in the theoretical framework of Cultural and Literary Animal Studies (McHugh; Borgards, "Introduction"). For such an animal reading of the mimetic parrot, two elements in a theory of mimesis (Gebauer, Potolsky) are of particular importance. First, since Aristotle there has been a question whether mimesis is something common to humans and animals or if humans are gifted with the special ability to reflect on the mimetic act. That some animals are capable of mimetic actions seems evident. But are there animals other than humans which perform mimetic actions in a non-functional manner or which enjoy mimetic actions of their conspecifics in an aesthetical way? An animalistic position² would claim that mimesis is the common ground of all animals, including

humans. Many animals are notorious mimics, and so human culture and art, which stems from this mimetic ability, is a product of animal mimesis. An exceptionalistic position, in contrast, would claim that mimesis is the very thing that sets humans and animals apart. Many animals may be notorious mimics, but only humans turn this ability into culture and art.

The second element in the theory of mimesis which is of importance for an animal reading of Defoe's parrot is the fact that the term "mimesis" has — again since Aristotle — been related to at least three slightly different concepts. On the one hand, mimesis means imitation. If one imitates another, there is a clear distinction between the imitating subject and the imitated object: in imitating, the imitator itself does not change. On the other hand, mimesis indicates a process of becoming similar, a process I would like to call "similation." If one becomes similar to another, the previously clear distinction between both beings involved in this process is questioned: in becoming similar, the one who becomes like the other changes. And finally, mimesis can be understood as representation, e.g. when Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* represents the abstract concepts of individual love and political hate in a concrete, physical form of visible actions. Exceptionalists would admit that some animals are capable of mimesis in the sense of imitation; they would feel uneasy thinking of animals as having mimetic abilities in the sense of "similation"; and they would deny the possibility that at least some animals other than humans are capable of mimesis in the sense of representation. Animalistics, in contrast, would rethink all of these ideas of imitation, "similation," and representation in the animal kingdom.

With these questions in mind, I want to sketch three arguments regarding Poll the parrot. First, I show in a close reading of the rare references in the novel to the parrot, that the relationship between Robinson and Poll is not one of simple hierarchy but is also characterized by a certain kinship. I will expand on this by looking at the zoological knowledge about the parrot in the 18th century; and I will relate this discussion to the questions of mimesis I just mentioned. Second, I give a brief postcolonial animal reading of the relationship between Robinson and Poll, which is repeated in the relationship between Robinson and Friday. This intersectional turn demonstrates that a new understanding of the parrot Poll may lead to some new perspectives on Friday and on colonial mimesis. Third, I will give a poetological reading of the relationship between Robinson and Poll, which is repeated in the relationship between Robinson and his journal. I will push this poetological reading further by both using and criticizing Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Defoe, Robinson, and Poll. The specific form of animal mimesis, which can be described with and beyond Derrida, even affects,

as I will conclude, the relationship between Defoe and his novel *Robinson Crusoe* and between the modern subject and the rise of the modern novel.

The first encounter between Robinson and Poll is dominated by violence:

I saw Abundance of Parrots, and fain I would have caught one, if possible to have kept it to be tame, and taught it to speak to me. I did, after some Pains taking, catch a young Parrot, for I knock'd it down with a Stick, and having recover'd it, I brought it home; but it was some Years before I could make him speak: However, at last I taught him to call me by my Name very familiarly. (80)

The act of choosing one specific parrot out of a flock of parrots is performed as an act of direct violence: "I choose you" equals "I knock you down." This sets up a strict hierarchy: There is one who knocks down and one who is knocked down. In consequence, the learning-process follows a similar hierarchy: there is one who teaches, and one who is taught. This obviously holds true for language itself: there is one who can speak; and one who must be equipped with words. Robinson asserts himself as an active producer and Poll as a passive receiver of language: "I [...] make him speak."

In the light of this violence and this hierarchy, Poll's speech-act seems to be mimesis only in the restricted sense of mere imitation. Poll just learns to repeat the words spoken by Robinson; to do so, he doesn't need to know the meaning of these words. When Poll talks, Robinson is amazed; but this remains — at least at first sight — a surface effect. Even a talking parrot is only a parrot; even as the subject of imitation he does not change in his very essence. A talking parrot only sounds like a human without becoming human.

But there is an alternative reading of the first contact between Robinson and Poll, as the very moment of violence also marks the start of Crusoe's caregiving. Robinson takes care that his strike on the bird isn't fatal; he acts within the limits of a restricted violence; and he waits until the bird has recovered consciousness. After bringing the bird to his home, Robinson puts the parrot in a cage and therefore has to take care of him by feeding him.

As a consequence, a communal life develops, a sharing of bread, as Donna Haraway would put it, a *cum panis* of messmates (*Species* 17), companion animals sitting around a

common table as in the famous scene which depicts Robinson and his animals at dinner (cf. 108). In this alternative reading of Robinson's and Poll's relationship there is not only violence but also caregiving, not only strict hierarchy but also some kinship (*Staying* 99-103).

With this care and kinship, Poll's speech-act points to mimesis, not only in the sense of imitation but also in the sense of simulation. There is some kind of change going on within the parrot while he is being taught human language. The talking parrot — even if not becoming human — develops a set of similarities to his human companion. These similarities are reflected in the text in several ways. First, the moment Poll begins to talk, the text changes from the pronoun "it" to the pronoun "him": "I brought *it* home; [...] I [...] make *him* speak." Second, with the first word Poll speaks his bird beak is metaphorically transformed into an anthropomorphic mouth:

I diverted my self with talking to my Parrot, and teaching him to Speak, and I quickly learn'd him to know his own Name, and at last to speak it out pretty loud POLL, which was the first Word I ever heard spoken in the Island by any *Mouth* but my own. (87; emphasis added)

Third, in the famous scene I quoted in the beginning Poll is depicted not as a trained parrot, which reacts to a cue like an animated automaton, but as an autonomous person, who actively searches for Robinson and intentionally addresses him:

First, I was amazed how the Creature got thither, and then, how he should just keep about the Place, and no where else: But as I was well satisfied it could be no Body but honest *Poll*, I got it over; and holding out my Hand, and calling him by his Name *Poll*, the sociable Creature came to me, and sat upon my Thumb, as he used to do, and continu'd talking to me, *Poor Robin Crusoe*, and *how did I come here? and where had I been?* just as if he had been overjoy'd to see me again; and so I carry'd him Home along with me. (104)

It is Poll who initiates the communication, it is he who takes the active part. Robinson in turn is placed in the position of the reacting partner, thereby inverting both the hierarchy of the first contact between Poll and Robinson and the traditional structure of human-animal relations. Fourth, and finally, as a communicating partner Robinson explicitly describes Poll as a "sociable creature" which acts "just as if he had been

overjoy'd to see me again." Poll seems to have become a living being endowed with the powers of language, joy, empathy, and reason.

So, at a closer look the relationship between Robinson and Poll is not structured by simple dominance of the human over the animal but by a fundamental ambivalence of violence *and* care, hierarchy *and* kinship, and – in terms of mimesis – imitation *and* simulation. This ambivalence is not just a literary fiction, it is also discussed in philosophical discourse and documented in the zoological sciences of the 18th century.

The well-known philosophical staging of the talking bird comes from William Temple's account of a conversation between a Brazilian parrot and Prince Maurice, which was incorporated by John Locke into his 4th edition of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1700. In this account the parrot seems to talk quite reasonably with the "company of white man," recognizing the prince as "Some General or Other" and characterizing his own profession as a chicken's guardian: "Je garde les poules [...] et je sais bien faire; and made the Chuck four or five times, that People use to make to Chickens when they call them" (Locke 333). Most of the reception of Temple's account was rather skeptical, referring to the unreliability of the story and to the assumption that parrots can only imitate the sound of words but never comprehend their meaning. With this disapproval, 17th and 18th century parrot discourse dismissed the high esteem of the parrots in the Middle Ages, which "tended to view them with reverence and amazement, and credited them with powers far beyond any attributed to them before or since" (Boehrer 50). Hence, from a skeptical point of view, the conversation between the parrot and the prince is nothing more than an effect of mimesis in the restricted sense of mere imitation.

Locke was completely in line with the skeptical arguments of his time, pointing out that animals do not have abstract ideas and therefore no language (cf. Boehrer 70). But despite this, Locke's reference to Temple's parrot nevertheless offered arguments that lead to a "a muddling of the animal and the human," insofar "as Temple's story draws attention to the fact that humans acquire language, like parrots, by imitation, whether of chickens or of other humans" (Walmsley 418). From this point, mimesis may have productive effects; it could be one of the foundations of human speech.

As for the zoological sciences, a similar ambivalence can be demonstrated in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, with its rich chapter on the parrot, which is certainly a main

document in the discussion of animal mimesis in the age of enlightenment.⁴ Buffon starts the chapter as follows:

The animals which man has the most admired, are those that seem to participate of his nature. He is struck with wonder as often as he traces his external form in the ape, or hears his voice imitated by the Parrot; and, in the first moments of his surprise, he is disposed to rank them above the rest of the brutes. [...] Had what was equally possibly taken place, had the voice of the Parrot been bestowed on the ape; the human race would have been struck dumb with astonishment, and the philosopher could hardly have been able to demonstrate that the ape was still a brute. It is fortunate, therefore, that nature has separated the faculties of imitating our speech and our gestures, and shared them between two very different species; and [...] she has reserved for him [for man, RB] alone the power of improving them; the noble mark of our pre-eminence, which constitutes our empire over the animated world. (63, 64-65)

On the one hand, Buffon admits that the parrot and the ape are both gifted with special mimetic abilities: an ape looks like a human, a parrot sounds like a human, and the imaginary cross-breeding of ape and parrot even looks *and* sounds like a human. But on the other hand, Buffon emphasizes that there is an unbridgeable gap between humans and animals:

The power of imitating our discourse or our actions confers no real superiority on an animal. It never incites to the cultivation of talents — it never tends to the improvement of the species. The articulation of the Parrot implies only the close analogy of its organs of hearing and of voice to those in man. (417-18)

This underpins a central zoological doctrine of the enlightenment: the closer an animal approaches the human, the stronger the rhetorical energy invested in reaffirming the anthropological difference between humans and animals. According to this rhetorical strategy,³ Buffon emphasizes that the parrot's ability to learn human language is only mimesis in the restricted sense of imitation:

There are also two different kinds of imitation; the one is acquired from reflection, the other is innate and mechanical; the latter proceeds from the common instinct diffused through a whole species, which prompts or

constrains each individual to perform similar actions; and the more stupid the animal, [...] the closer will be the resemblance. (418-19)

That is all that animals can achieve. The ability to improve these skills is exclusively human and explains the superior position of humankind. So, just as in the case of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the relation between Human and Parrot is characterized by violence, hierarchy, and — in terms of mimesis — mere “mechanical imitation” (422).

But there is — as in the case of Defoe — an alternative reading of Buffon's chapter on the parrot, for the full force invested by Buffon in reaffirming the anthropological difference hints at the underlying threat that a speaking animal poses in the age of enlightenment. And what is more, in a later chapter Buffon switches from general considerations on the parrot to the description of a specific subspecies, the Jacko, and to one individual bird famous for his mimetic abilities:

But not only has this bird a facility, it has also an eagerness, in imitating the human voice. It listens with attention, and strives to repeat; it dwells constantly on some syllables which it has heard, and seeks to surpass every voice by the loudness of its own. We are often surprised at its repeating words or sounds, which we never taught it, and which we should not suppose it to have noticed. It seems to set itself tasks, and tries every day to retain its lesson. (446)

Obviously, this parrot does not just copy empty and meaningless sounds. This parrot shows a trait that Aristotle explicitly reserves for human mimesis (Aristotle 15): he not only mimics human speech but also enjoys his mimetic action. Thus, he adds a reflexive dimension to his parroting, even a form of reasoning. By talking like a human, this parrot not only imitates humans, he even becomes similar to humans. Even though Buffon generally rejects the possibility of an animal surpassing “mechanical imitation,” he is obviously fascinated by this parrot's capacity for mimetic simulation.

As a consequence, Buffon values the parrot's faculties higher than those of the ape, as it offers humans social interaction, amusement, and diversion:

That sort of society which the parrot forms with man, is, by means of language, more intimate and pleasing than what the monkey can claim from its antic imitation of our gestures and actions. [...] It diverts and

amuses; in solitude it is company; it takes part in conversation, it laughs, it breathes tender expressions, or mimics grave discourse. (450-51)

Even in this context Buffon insists that the parrot only performs a “play of language without meaning” (451). Nevertheless, his description closely resembles that of Poll, the “sociable creature,” Robinson’s conversational partner, the messmate and companion for his profound solitude. So, at a closer look, the relationship between humans and parrots in Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* is characterized by the same ambivalence between violence and care, hierarchy and kinship, imitation and simulation, as in the case of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.

When Friday enters the scene, he replaces Poll: there is barely any mention of Poll in the second part of the book. This replacement is emphasized by an episode in which Friday is introduced to the power of guns by randomly shooting down an innocent parrot:

I loaded my Gun again, and by and by I saw a great Fowl like a Hawk sit upon a Tree within Shot; so to let *Friday* understand a little what I would do, I call’d him to me again, pointed at the Fowl which was indeed a Parrot, tho’ I thought it had been a Hawk, I say pointing to the Parrot, and to my Gun, and to the Ground under the Parrot, to let him see I would make it fall, I made him understand that I would shoot and kill that Bird; accordingly I fir’d and bad him look, and immediately he saw the Parrot fall, he stood like one frighted again, notwithstanding all I had said to him; and I found he was the more amaz’d because he did not see me put any Thing into the Gun; but thought that there must be some wonderful Fund of Death and Destruction in that Thing, able to kill Man, Beast, Bird, or any Thing near, or far off. (153)

What is strange about this episode is the absurdly exaggerated and detailed account of the killing of the parrot. For the sake of the story it is absolutely unnecessary to report Robinson’s confusion regarding the species of the bird. But in light of the animal-colonial context this false belief and its revision is of crucial importance: listen, reader, it is not a hawk or any other bird which is killed by Robinson, it is a parrot! Robinson would probably never kill Poll; but obviously he kills a parrot to symbolically clear the space for the human newcomer on his island. So above all, this episode points out that Friday takes the place of Poll.

The episode thus fits in perfectly both with the literary tradition of using the parrot as “a common deprecatory metaphor for threatening figures of alterity like social climbers, racial ‘others,’ and women who speak out or write improperly” (Powell 64)⁵ and with the colonial discourse constantly correlating “beasts” and “savages” (Gasché). During his first weeks on the island Robinson himself seems almost obsessed by the idea of being devoured either by cannibals or carnivores, and therefore looking for “Security from ravenous Creatures, whether Man or Beast” (Defoe 44) being exposed to “any Violence of Man or Beast” (49). Friday, too, is a cannibal; but in his first encounter with Robinson he is above all a victim of cannibals. So Robinson draws his analogy not between Friday the cannibal and a carnivore predator but between Friday the speaker of a foreign language and a talking bird. Nevertheless, it was common colonial practise to draw an analogy between racial and cultural difference and the anthropological difference between human and animal, placing the European at the side of the human and the Non-European at the side of the animal.

In the light of this critical perspective it is easy to see Robinson’s relationship with Poll as a preparation of his relationship with Friday, or the other way round: his relationship with Friday as a repetition of his relationship with Poll. As in the case of Poll, the relationship with Friday is also based on violence. That is why Robinson exhibits his power by killing an animal in general and a parrot in particular: I can kill beasts, so I could kill savages; I can kill a parrot, so I could kill you. With this demonstration of his power to kill Robinson erects a clear hierarchy: Friday is down at his feet.

Consequently, the first lessons in which Robinson teaches Friday the English language⁶ and culture are modelled after the lessons in which Robinson taught Poll to speak. One can even notice that Crusoe teaches Friday a poorer language than Poll. While the language taught to Poll is full of affection, melancholy, and grief, which points to the vulnerability of both Crusoe and Poll, the language taught to Friday is orchestrated by domination, order, and servility. From this perspective, there seems to be more compassion between Poll and Crusoe than between Friday and Crusoe. And, as seems to be the case with parrots, Friday learns some words and phrases, but is not able to improve his English in the 12 years he stays with Robinson — as Charles Gildon pointed out in his famous satirical critique of the novel, published in 1719, with Friday complaining about his author Defoe “to make me such Blockhead, as to be able to speak *English tolerably well* in a Month or two, and not to speak it better in twelve Years after” (Gildon 71). In learning a poor English, Friday is “reduced to the status of colonized other” (Nash 91).

From a colonial perspective, this is exactly what the Non-Europeans were supposed to do: they were simply to imitate the imported culture. Consequently, one could argue that “Poll is a man Friday with Feathers, and the bird’s status as such supplies precedent for Friday’s own servitude” (Boehrer 71). But with Poll at least two models of mimesis are at work: imitation *and* similiation, thus somewhat resisting this colonial perspective. Sometimes the parrot simply seems to be a projection screen used by Robinson; but sometimes he seems to act like a real person talking to Robinson. So, when Friday replaces Poll the repetition of the parrot’s domestication not only includes violence, hierarchy, and imitation, but the whole ambivalence of violence *and* care (remember Robinson rescuing Friday from being devoured by the cannibals), of hierarchy and kinship (see the new messmate community developing after Friday’s arrival on the island), of imitation *and* similiation (e.g. the change Friday undergoes in habits and religion).

At first sight Friday is just a parrot imitating humans, and so are the colonized people. But by using intersectional arguments, a postcolonial animal reading (Huggan and Tiffin 18) can complicate this interpretation of Friday as a mere object of colonial dominance. An Animal Studies perspective takes into account that the parrot is not a simple but an ambivalent figure. Instead of just rejecting the animal metaphor as reducing the Non-Europeans to brutes, it could be worth rethinking the animal metaphor as reflecting the complexity of the relationship between Europeans and Non-Europeans. This reading does not suggest that there are no differences between teaching Poll and teaching Friday. It only blurs the often assumed strict binary opposition between activity and passivity, setting Europeans and Non-Europeans apart by using the traditional anthropological distinction between man and animal.

But leaving this line of argumentation aside, I turn to the poetical implications of Robinson’s parrot Poll. Before talking to and with Poll, Crusoe had already started writing in his journal. The novel hints at an analogy between Poll and the journal in a subtle way. The first sentence of the journal sets a tone of despair, with Crusoe bemoaning his fate:

I poor miserable *Robinson Crusoe*, being shipwreck’d, during a dreadful Storm, in the offing, came on Shore on this dismal unfortunate Island, which I call’d *the Island of Despair*, all the rest of the Ship’s Company being drown’d, and my self almost dead. (52)

One of Poll's phrases in direct speech reported by Robinson is closely linked to this passage: "Poor Robin Crusoe, [...] *how did I come here? [...] where had I been?*" (104). So, both the journal and the parrot reveal their basic function. They allow Robinson not only to articulate himself and his self in the first person but also to receive and observe this articulation. Therefore, the journal and the parrot operate like linguistic mirrors. Not: I see myself, but: I read myself. And: I hear myself. Taking into account that the *creatio ex nihilo* of a self-made subject and the individuation of a modern subject are core topics of the novel (Fallon 50-51; Watt 60), a journal beginning with the pronoun "I" can be understood as a crucial tool in Robinson's self-fashioning (Greenblatt), a process in which the self is simultaneously the fashioning subject and the fashioned object.

In a similar way, the parrot contributes to Robinson's self-fashioning or "self-composition" (Fallon 49; Calder 171; Jager). When Robinson listens to Poll he not only hears his own words reflected back to him, but even the intonation and tone of his own voice: "I saw my *Poll* sitting on the Top of the Hedge; and immediately knew that it was he that spoke to me; for just in such bemoaning Language I had used to talk to him, and teach him" (104). So, the parrot is the closest one can get to a tape recorder in the 18th century. In Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, the admired Jacko performs these recording abilities to a remarkable extent:

One of those Guinea parrots was so completely drilled by an old sailor, that it acquired exactly his hoarse voice and cough; and though it was afterwards given to a young person, and was in no other company, it never forgot the lessons of his first master, and it was diverting to observe its transitions from a soft gracious tone to its former hoarseness and coarse sea tones. (Buffon 465-56)

So the parrot seems to be the medium of self-recording in the 18th century. In Robinson's solitude, this reflection of his own voice is more than just comforting; it is one of the main pillars in the self-fashioning process of the castaway.

This self-fashioning function of spoken language Defoe may have found in an article written by Richard Steele, published in 1713 in *The Englishman*, that reported the story of the castaway Alexander Selkirk. Selkirk, who is known to be Defoe's model for his Crusoe character, spent four years on the Island of Juan Fernandez (Secord 30-23, 53-63;

Rennie 73-74; Fausett 86-95). Because of its geographical location east of Chile there are no parrots on Juan Fernandez. So Selkirk could not make use of their voice recording abilities. Instead, Selkirk used the Bible: “It was his Manner to use stated Hours and Places for Exercises of Devotion, which he performed aloud, in order to keep up the Faculties of Speech, and to utter himself with greater energy” (Steele 172). For Selkirk, talking aloud is a crucial self-technique:⁷ I speak, therefore I am human. In addition, Selkirk reflects on his act of speaking: I *hear* myself speaking, therefore I *know* that I am human.

Defoe on the one hand *adapts* this practice. Like Selkirk, Crusoe, too, speaks aloud and listens to his voice in order to preserve his identity, or as Crusoe expresses it, to “compose my self” (104; cf. Nash 91). But on the other hand, Defoe *transforms* this practice. He places the parrot as a medium between the act of speaking and the act of listening. Selkirk speaks and listens at the same moment. With Crusoe there is a time lag. First he speaks, and only later he listens. So the parrot operates as the externalization of the speech act, or as the intermediary in the act of listening to his own voice. He is, in the strict sense of the term, a medium.

This exactly is the reason why Poll the parrot can be compared to Robinson’s journal. First and foremost, Robinson writes his journal for himself and not with the intention to document his life for other people. Thus the journal lends itself to a poetological reading. If in literary texts there are characters writing journals, this can be read as a metaphor for the authors writing their novels. These two levels — Robinson as a writer and Defoe as a writer — are twofold within themselves. Robinson writes his journal, and he writes his autobiographical report, in which he includes a “Copy” of his journal (52). Defoe, in turn, is the author of the novel titled *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and as such is also regarded the one who invented the genre of the modern novel (Watt 92; Drabble 265) or at least as one of the important figures in the early history of this genre (Davis).

So we have to consider four layers of poetological reflections:

1. Robinson writes his journal.
2. Robinson writes his autobiographical report.
3. Defoe is the author of *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.
4. Defoe is the author of one of the first modern novels.

A poetological reading of these four layers may argue as follows:

1. Robinson writes his journal for the purpose of self-assurance: I write, therefore I am. This is why the journal begins with the letter or word "I": "I poor miserable *Robinson Crusoe*."
2. Robinson composes his autobiographical report as a re-enactment of his self-fashioning performed through his island journal. This is why this report also begins with "I": "I Was born in the Year 1632" (4).
3. By establishing Robinson as a writer, Defoe indicates that writing is the main cultural technique in Robinson's process of self-fashioning, or even in a broader sense: that all cultural techniques used by Robinson, whether in agriculture or war, are in their structure similar to the process of writing. Robinson's success is due to the fact the he is "writing the island."
4. What is true for Robinson as a character of this *special* novel also holds true for the modern subject as the main character of the *modern* novel in *general*. The modern novel negotiates the self-fashioning of the modern subject and implements writing as one of the main cultural techniques of this self-fashioning process.

This would be a first poetological reading using the theoretical framework of Foucault or Greenblatt. And it is certainly not wrong. But in the frame of Cultural and Literay Animal Studies we can go two steps further, one step with Derrida, and one step beyond Derrida.

In his second seminar on "The Beast and the Sovereign," Derrida presents an elaborate reading of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. On the scene in which Robinson is addressed by Poll with "*Poor Robin Crusoe, [...] how did I come here? [...] where had I been?*" Derrida comments as follows:

The auto-appellation, the auto-interpellation comes to him from outside, from the world, and thus returns from the outside or from the other toward him. But it remains a circular auto-appellation, because it comes from a sort of living mechanism that he has produced, that he assembled himself, like a *quasi*-technical or prosthetic apparatus, by training the parrot to speak mechanically so as to send his words and his name back to

him, repeating them blindly. One could say of every autobiography, every autobiographical fiction, and even every written confession through which the author calls and names himself, that it presents itself through this linguistic and prosthetic apparatus — a book — or a piece of writing or a trace in general, for example the book entitled *Robinson Crusoe*, which speaks of him without him, according to a trick that constructs and leaves in the world an artefact that speaks all alone [...]. One could imagine that when Poll proffers and calls “Robinson Crusoe”, it is referring not only to the character — moreover fictional — called Robinson Crusoe, but also to the title of the book, to which the character tends to be responsible, since he is its signatory, at the very moment that the book, like the parrot and what it calls, no longer needs him. (Volume II, 86-87)

What Derrida suggests is, first of all, to shift the poetological moment of the novel. Traditionally this moment would be the introduction of the journal, because this is when the writer writes about a writer and thereby configures a self-reflexive poetic situation. Derrida, in contrast, pinpoints the poetological moment when Robinson encounters Poll, because this is when the speaker of the sentence in the first person becomes the listener of this very sentence.

This shift from a scene of writing and reading to a scene of speaking and listening is linked to the idea, that “writing [...] in general” is always a type of “autobiography.” At this point Derrida refers to a typical deconstructive argument in three steps. First, the traditional, metaphysical distinction between the oral and the written word favors the spoken word, because self-expression seems to be more authentic when spoken orally. So the best metaphor for the autobiography would not be a written journal but a recorded voice. Given the fact that in the 18th century no recording devices existed, the parrot seems to be the closest Defoe can get to an appropriate metaphor for the self-recording structure of an autobiography.

Second deconstructive step: but the parrot is a dangerous metaphor. His ability to repeat the first-person utterance of an autobiographical subject like Robinson is due to the fact that he is trained to do so. Poll does not just repeat a sentence *spoken* by Robinson, but a sentence *repeated* by Robinson. He repeats a repetition. And in constantly being repeated the first-person utterance loses all its authenticity, its presence, even its orality. The words of the parrot become just another form of writing, of *écriture*.

Third and final step: if this is true, the poetological moment of the novel, the “auto-appellation” (as Derrida coins it), gets a totally different direction. The auto-appellation is not only a *self*-appellation, which reconfirms the self as the subject and object of the appellation. It is also an “*automated*” and *mechanical* appellation, which comes between the subject and his autobiographical self-expression. This has consequences on all the four layers of poetological reflection.

1. Robinson might be writing his journal with the *purpose* of self-*assurance*, but there is always the *effect* of a self-*loss*: I try to write about myself but I lose myself in the writing. This is why the journal begins with a paradox. From the perspective of Robinson, the journal is the first written articulation of his stay on the island. But for the reader, who has already read the autobiographical report about Robinson’s first weeks on the island, the journal is a mere repetition of well known facts. Robinson himself points to this necessary repetition introducing “my Journal, of which I shall here give you the Copy (tho’ in it will be told all these Particulars over again)” (52).

2. So by repeating the journal in the autobiographical report the theme of repeated repetitions becomes omnipresent. If the encounter with Poll is indeed the main poetological moment, then the whole autobiographical report is nothing but perpetual self-imitation, or self-parroting of a lost castaway. This is why there are not two, but three interrelated sentences in the first-person, the first at the beginning of the autobiographical report, “I was born in the Year 1632” (4), the second at the beginning of the journal, “I poor miserable *Robinson Crusoe*” (52), and the third in Poll’s speech: “*Poor Robin Crusoe, [...] how did I come here?*” (104).

3. By depicting Robinson as a self-parroting castaway Defoe indicates that imitating is one of the main cultural techniques in Robinson’s project of constructing his world on the island, or even more generally: that all cultural techniques used by Robinson, whether in agriculture or war, are in their structure similar to imitating processes. It is all about mimesis, or more precisely, about mimesis in the sense of empty imitation. This kind of imitation is not something that sets animals apart from humans, but something they share, just as Temple’s and Locke’s parrot reminds us “that humans acquire language, like parrots, by imitation” (Walmsley

418). Hence, Robinson is not the self-made man he seems to be. He is a repetition of European standards, which reduces Crusoe's abilities to those of an imitating parrot.⁹

4. What is true for Robinson as a character of this *special* novel also holds true for the modern subject as the main character of the *modern* novel in *general*. The modern novel negotiates the self-parroting by the moderns and implements imitation as one of the main cultural techniques of a fundamentally unstable subject.

This would be a second poetological reading using the theoretical framework of Derrida. And this too is certainly not wrong. Poll the parrot is a poetological figure, taking up a literary tradition beginning in medieval texts, where the "substitution of the parrot for the nightingale is a convention which personifies the literary shift from lyric to narrative" (McMunn 71).

But I would like to go one step further by questioning Derrida from the perspective of animal mimesis. Derrida describes Poll as "a sort of living mechanism." In this description there seems to remain a strange proximity to one argument of René Descartes's infamous mechanistic philosophy: the animal as a machine, maybe a machine of some complexity, but nevertheless a machine. In his three books on animals (*The Animal that therefore I am* and the both Seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign*) Derrida himself invests much energy in deconstructing Descartes, and so this reference to a mechanistic model may sound strange. But Derrida seems to confirm his description, when he calls Robinson the producer and Poll the product: "a sort of living mechanism that he has produced, that he assembled himself, like a *quasi*-technical or prosthetic apparatus" (Volume II, 86). If the parrot is like a mechanism or an apparatus, then it would only be possible to train him "to speak mechanically"; all a parrot would be able to do with words is "repeating them blindly." For Derrida, Poll seems to be capable of mimesis only in the restricted sense of mere imitation, but not in the more advanced forms of "similation" or representation.

In order not to misunderstand this description, we have to consider that Derrida in his first seminar on "The Beast and the Sovereign" deconstructs the binary opposition between "the living being and the machine, the living being and its mechanization, the marionette, the mortal and the immortal" (Volume I, 184). Mechanization for Derrida is neither something that sets animals apart from humans (in a Cartesian sense) nor something that completely rules humans like animals (in an naturalistic sense), but

rather a common element of both animals and humans.⁸ Hence, human mimesis too partly tends to be in the restricted sense mere imitation. But this deconstruction of the automaton may be supplemented from three perspectives: systematically, historically, and literally.

From a systematic point of view, the mechanistic description of Poll presupposes an understanding of the animal that remains to be proven. This is exactly Derrida's own argument. We may not presuppose that the animal in general is only a reacting mechanism; we should take into consideration that eventually every individual animal is a responding other. Derrida elaborates this constellation of response and responsibility in the famous scene of him naked in his bathroom and his cat looking at him as a naked philosopher. Why should Robinson's parrot be less responding than Derrida's cat? Speaking systematically, there is no reason for such discrimination.

But perhaps, one could argue, Derrida is not expressing his own opinion on Poll but only referring to the state of knowledge at the time of Defoe. So the question would not be: what do we, today, as deconstructive philosophers or empirical ethologists (e.g., Pepperberg), know and think about parrots? but rather: what was known and thought about parrots in the 18th century? In his description Derrida would not be *using* mechanistic terminology but only *quoting* it.

But from such an historical perspective it is possible to criticize this argument as well. Certainly in the early 18th century Cartesian mechanism was the mainstream theory in the zoological sciences. But as shown in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* it is exactly the parrot that problematizes this mainstream theory. Not that Buffon would abandon mechanism. He rather reconfirms his mechanistic attitude when he states that even the imaginary crossbreeding of ape and parrot would in no sense be equal to a human being. But in speaking about the adored and sociable Jacko this mechanistic position tends to lose its consistency. So in the science of the 18th century there is ambivalence in the assessment of the parrot that should be taken into account.

Yet perhaps, one could add, Derrida does not refer to the state of knowledge at the time of Defoe but simply to the way Poll is presented by Defoe himself. In his case the question would not be: what was known and thought about the parrot in the 18th century? but: how is Poll depicted in the *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*? In his description Derrida would not quote the mechanistic terminology of the early 18th century but the mechanistic terminology of Defoe's novel.

But also from this literary perspective things are more complicated. Certainly in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* Cartesian mechanism configures most of the literary animals of the novel. But as we have seen, it is exactly the parrot that questions this animal mechanism. Not that Defoe would raise Poll to the rank of a human interlocutor. He rather emphasizes the difference between parrot and human when he replaces Poll by Friday. But in the scene with Poll talking to Crusoe this position tends to lose its consistency. So not only in the science of the 18th century but also in Defoe's novel there is ambivalence in the assessment of the parrot that should be taken into account.

If this supplementing of Derrida's argument is valid, the poetological reading of Poll the parrot again takes a different direction. Poll is not the model for the simple constellation of violence, hierarchy, and — in terms of mimesis — imitation, but suggests the paradoxical constellation of violence *and* care, hierarchy *and* kinship, or in terms of mimesis: imitation *and* "similation"/representation. This again has consequences on all four layers of poetological reflection:

1. Robinson might write his journal with the purpose to combat his solitude. But if it is true that Poll is more than an apparatus, if it is true that his mimesis surpasses simple imitation and tends towards "similation" and representation, if it is true that he is a real companion, then Robinson is not alone.¹⁰ This certainly applies from the moment when Robinson knocks Poll down. But Poll's sociability hints at the fact that Robinson is surrounded by other sociable creatures as well — some cats, a dog, and a lot of goats.
2. By using Poll as a model for his autobiographical report, the ambivalence of violence/ care, hierarchy/ kinship, imitation/ "similation" becomes omnipresent. If the scene with Poll is indeed the main poetological moment, than the whole autobiographical report is a performance of this very ambivalence, linking Robinson deeply to his companion critters.
3. By linking Robinson to the mimetic abilities of his companion critters, Defoe indicates that mimesis is an ambivalent cultural technique in Robinson's island project, or, even more generally, that all cultural techniques used by Robinson, whether in agriculture or war, are in their structure similar to mimetic processes. It's all about mimesis, not in the

restricted, but in the full sense of the term: about mimesis as imitation *and* “similation” *and* representation. Robinson’s imitation of European standards is altered in the very process of mimesis, a process which can find a model in Poll pitying poor Robinson.¹¹

4. What is true for Robinson as a figure of this *special* novel also holds true for the modern subject as the main figure of the *modern* novel in *general*. The modern novel often negotiates mimesis as the main cultural technique of a fundamentally situated and animal-related subject.

By using an animal studies approach towards the question of animal mimesis and by integrating the question of animal mimesis into the interpretation of *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, we see that Poll turns out to be an important figure for some of the main topics of this novel. By emphasizing the relationship of Crusoe and Poll, by analyzing its modelling function for the relationship of Crusoe and Friday, and by reading Poll as a powerful poetological animal, we can add an animal reading to the critical tradition that somehow neglected the impact of this specific animal in this specific text, as well as the impact of animals on modern writing in general. Since Boccaccio, we might search for the falcon virtually hidden in every novella.¹² Since Defoe it might be useful to look if there perhaps is a parrot in any novel we are reading.

Notes

1. For animals in Defoe’s novel cf. Borgards et al.; Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign. Volume II*; Armstrong; Williams; Gasché; Mackintosh.
2. For animalism and exceptionalism, cf., e.g., Olson.
3. For rhetoric in Buffon, cf. Loveland; Stalnaker.
4. For animals in the age of Enlightenment, cf. Senior; for parrots in the 18th century, cf. Robbins 125-128.
5. For parrots as figures of “antifemale satire” in the early 18th, cf. Brown 95.

6. For a postcolonial critique of Robinson teaching Friday, cf. Spivak 187; for the connection between “domestication of the wild” and “the acquisition of language and particularly its relation to power,” cf. Nash 90.
7. For verbalization as crucial self-technique, cf. Foucault 49; for a reading of Steele, cf. Borgards, “Selkirks Tiere.”
8. Cf. Cary Wolfe, who emphasizes that for Derrida there is always an “estranging prostheticity and exteriority of communication [...] shared by humans and nonhumans the moment they begin to respond to each other by means of any semiotic system”(119)
9. That is why Gilles Deleuze is so bored by reading *Robinson Crusoe*; cf. Deleuze 12.
10. For Robinson’s “I am alone” as statement of sovereignty, cf. Derrida II, 1.
11. That is why Gilles Deleuze shouldn’t be so bored by reading *Robinson Crusoe*.
12. For Paul Heyse’s “falcon theory,” referring to Boccaccio’s novella “The Falcon,” cf. Hutchinson.

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