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Robinson Crusoe: A Gendered and 'Judaic' Autobiographical Critique

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I was born in the year, 1951, in the town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the county of Wayne, in a Catholic hospital, near the large family of my mother, daughter of a rabbi and an apartment house manager, and that of my father, a young, handsome man whose virtue shone.1

Barbara Einzig's Robinson Crusoe: A New Fiction (1983)2 uses Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe as the basis for a modern, female and Jewish 'autobiography'. Her text is significant because it takes a poetic approach to engaging with the terms upon which the modern 'subject' is based, including a critique of agency, of the concept of the self and of Western bases of knowledge. In this sense, the subject of Einzig's 'autobiography' is and is not 'Einzig'.3 Interestingly, her task is similar to that of Defoe, who redefined dominant values in order to represent the socially mobile tradesman. Because Robinson Crusoe signifies for Einzig a site of masculine and Protestant dominance, her text necessarily contrasts with Defoe's approach and provides an excellent example of cross-cultural engagement with a now iconic Western text of rational individualism.

Einzig (1951- ) produces short fiction—'experimental writing exploring the borderline between poetry and prose fiction'4—and in A New Fiction she engages with Robinson Crusoe through metaphor and intertextuality.5 In her work she refers to her Jewish family background, to the work of the Jewish theorists Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, and to the practice of the Kabbalah in order to distinguish herself from the modern subjectivity associated with Defoe's text. It is said that 'the most characteristic feature of the Jewish imagination [is] the interpretation and rewriting of sacred texts'.6 In this sense, Einzig's work can be understood as a theoretical, literary, linguistic and theological engagement with Robinson Crusoe.

Her text relates to Robinson Crusoe through its title, the use of its language, its structure, incidents within the text, its use of capitalised
nouns and an explanatory preface. In this preface the language is italicised as if hand-written, and headed ‘A Word Concerning This Entertainment’. Einzig uses two main languages in the text: ‘The language is both completely my own and an engagement with that of another writer (here, of course, Defoe).’ The castaway narrative is used as a metaphor for her journey into writing. Through the text’s references to Robinson Crusoe, as well as to American colonialism and migration from post-war Europe, writing is presented as a historical and political journey.

Einzig’s work is difficult to describe in narrative terms, but a brief sketch will assist the reader. The protagonist of A New Fiction is a daughter whose ‘journey’ is described as if she is a female Crusoe. The setting of the text is not ‘foreign’, as in Robinson Crusoe, but domestic. ‘Einzig’ begins by describing her birth in Michigan, America, in a parody of Defoe’s opening paragraph. She then recalls her Jewish maternal family in Hungary and her parents’ post-war migration. Echoing Robinson Crusoe she says that her father’s name was changed ‘by the usual corruption of words in the Austro-Hungarian Empire’. She describes her father as an economist and says that her mother ‘left her trade’ to raise children. She then refers to her family’s migration across America and to her childhood in California. The text focuses on the childhood period in which she decided to become a writer. The trouble begins when, through her attempts at writing history, she begins to doubt the inheritance of knowledge received from her parents. Her doubts signify a break with the dominant modernist paradigm and, as a result, her thoughts ‘[can]not rest on any horizon line’.

After their initial encouragement her parents forbid her to write. Her father’s words echo those of Crusoe’s father: ‘if she writes on, she will be the most miserable wretch that ever was born’. ‘Einzig’s renewed determination to write is the equivalent of Crusoe’s refusal to give up his desire to go to sea. ‘My mind took up its scarcely charted course’, she says, as she attempts to write her maternal grandmother’s history. History and commerce are connected as she imagines that the story ‘might climax with a visit to Bloomingdale’s’.

Through her attempts to write history, ‘Einzig’ realises that representation and memories are uncertain and that there are different ways of seeing and knowing. In her dreams, contemporary images—such as American GIs—converge with icons of colonialism, and in her life colonial icons name consumer goods. She realises that societies and narratives are imbued with ‘a plague of connection’. This realisation
leads her to reconsider what is substantial: ‘But O! How what we
mistake with pleasure for solid ground is but a linguistic hammock’.15
The loss of solid ground represents both a problem and a possibility, and
in a parody of, and ironic comment on, the silence of the feminine in
Robinson Crusoe, she decides on ‘silence, or, if the truth be told, to
keeping my notes to myself’.16

‘Einzig’ comes to realise the dangers of the ‘sea of uncertainty’17
when her friend Eddie is arrested for attempting to uproot a large oak
tree in public while under the influence of drugs. ‘Einzig’ questions the
meaning of Eddie acting this way in public. She also questions the
rationality of the police who, she says, must have known he couldn’t
pull up a tree. The incident is used to question the agency of the
’subject’, as well as the context in which situations come to make sense
and the distinction between history and nature. Her anxiety about the
instability of meanings is also fed by her mother’s stories of her aunt’s
madness, defined as a propensity to talk to things. The implication is
that, in another context, such speech could be meaningful and rational.
Throughout the text, Einzig uses Benjamin and Arendt to suggest such a
meaningful context.

At the end of the narrative, ‘Einzig’ has inside her ‘a combination
lock ... a black and white clock ... an inherited locket with an
unidentified miniature inside’. The words are poetic and draw the
reader’s attention to the surface of the text. They also draw attention to
the potential of words and things to ‘speak’, to enclose and disclose
meanings. Her words refer to history and inherited traditions. The
possibility that such feminine poetic writing will disturb historically
constructed political boundaries and the Western construction of know-
ledge is the reason that ‘Einzig’s’ father forbids her to write. In the
description of his refusal women’s history is equated with poetry, and in
the style of the early eighteenth century, Einzig uses the language of
symbolic marriage:

My father ... trembled at the possibility of a dangerous by-product
being accidentally released through the combining of women and
history within one literary vessel. My work, he argued, began to
approach poetry, wedding all things ... should I continue on my
present course I might return us to the era prior to Adam Smith,
whose most important achievement had been to divorce political
economy from ethics.18 [my emphases]
Einzig’s text is based on the premise that meanings cannot be fixed by reference to either the material ‘real’ or to feminist or religious ideals. One of the ways in which she makes productive use of a potentially negative situation is by using textual and subjective uncertainty to indicate the power and existence of her own marginal subject-position and text.

The Language of Family

To break with the ‘vessel’ of modern subjectivity, Einzig looks to feminine and Jewish traditions. One of the ways she does this is to establish a maternal and theoretical family and to use the language of Robinson Crusoe to describe her birth (see opening quote). Her birth, like that of Crusoe’s, is represented as historical, material and textual. Defoe describes Crusoe’s year and place of birth, his father’s origin and financial position, his mother’s family, and his name change. ‘Einzig’ too refers to the year of her birth, but emphasises the specific spatial and textual coordinates of her birth through terms such as ‘in’ and ‘near’. Defoe’s introduction shows the mutuality of Crusoe’s social and textual construction. Einzig’s text also emphasises the textual construction of identity by using Defoe’s language. In this sense, like Defoe, she is using the convention of autobiography to emphasise the relation of text to life. However, her use of his language effectively locates that convention in textual and literary history, and so defines its conditions of production.

The juxtaposition of Einzig’s text with Defoe’s brings similarities and differences to the surface. ‘Einzig’, who has both father and mother, is situated in the inherited and productive discourses of commerce, religion, aesthetics and morality. Her self-presentation situates her in a Defoean world in which ‘commerce’ has flourished. As was common in early eighteenth-century literature, Einzig presents herself and other ‘subjects’ as the outcome of various symbolic marriages of different values. The description of her father as handsome and virtuous reflects the ideal marriage of aesthetics and morality, which informed the early eighteenth century. Her mother is described as the result of a marriage between ‘a rabbi and an apartment house manager’—that is, between religion and commerce.19 Her father is an economist who teaches at the university, which suggests a relationship between materialism and
knowledge. Commerce and an emphasis on appearance are dominant in each ‘marriage’ of values.

That her mother gives up her ‘trade’ to raise children defines ‘Einzig’s’ family as middle class. Her work echoes the way in which Robinson Crusoe critiqued the early eighteenth-century definition of the ‘Middle state’.20 Like Crusoe, ‘Einzig’ is not ‘bred to any trade’.21 In a similar vein to Defoe’s critique of the landed gentry, and the inheritance of wealth and privilege based on birth, Einzig critiques patrilineal inheritance. To do so her ‘original’ family is constructed as matrilineal; the priority is on her mother’s lineage rather than her father’s. Pointing to her mother’s biological and symbolic role, she says: ‘my mother enters this story early by necessity’;22 and in a recognisably feminist strategy of reversal Einzig begins her text by referring to her mother’s mother before her mother’s father, and tells of her sisters’ occupations before mentioning her father’s.

Einzig shows her sisters as female subjects who are named and constructed by various discourses. Her description ‘relates’ her own deconstructed subjectivity, presented as a fragmented text, to the subjectivity of her sisters. That is, her construction of herself as fragmented is related not just by theory and language to dominant female roles and representations, but to those representations through an emphasis on kinship and through representations of the female body. As such, when she presents her older sisters as shaped by dominant intellectual traditions, these associations are embedded in their descriptions. The formation of their identities is therefore both textual and material.

The eldest sister is described in terms of her occupation—‘a social worker in Cambridge’. Her title prioritises society and labour and emphasises material effects in the world. Her representation and occupation are consistent with an understanding of society in which structure and material conditions are prioritised. She is therefore described in terms of her position within different hierarchies. In the family she was ‘first-born’; she was also ‘president of that club we formed’. ‘Einzig’ presents this sister as formed in a system that categorises genders as separate and discrete. This is evident in her reference to her sister’s club as being related to the gendered clubs of Little Women and Pickwick Papers. This sister, then, is ‘woman’ shaped in sociological, discursive and textual terms.

In contrast, the next eldest sister is presented in terms of Western philosophy; she has ‘a mind inclined towards analysis’. Her description emphasises her physical attributes rather than her position in society.
She has ‘fair’ skin and ‘dark’ hair and she is ‘ready to smile’. The description prioritises her face and head and uses oppositional language of darkness and light. The visual basis for her knowledge is emphasised: ‘she watched things as they were about to happen’.23 In contrast to the social positioning of her eldest sister, this sister is not placed within a social structure, but is described as ‘the other sister’. As ‘other’ she occupies the conventional place of the feminine in philosophical language, just as her sister occupies the traditional female role of social worker. This second sister, as a figure of philosophic discourse, is not present in society, but ‘wanders certain islands to the west, shirt out’, indicating a romantic and idealised location within Western ideas. She appears to be located, like the figure of Crusoe, in faraway places, while she is actually located, described and produced in Western philosophic discourse. Without a trade, ‘Einzig’ is castaway between the worlds of social materiality and philosophical ideals.

‘Einzig’ describes herself and her sisters as existing within a maternal kinship. Such kinship has been described as fundamental to Judaism: ‘the determining fact of Jewish identity is guaranteed by the mother, not the father ... the evidence of Jewish birth is maternal and material’.24 ‘Einzig’s’ construction of herself as born of a matriarchal family is an intervention in which birth, marriage and family are converted into linguistic and theological terms. Birth, marriage and family are therefore presented as inseparable from an investigation of modern subjectivity. Einzig re-genders Defoe’s text and modern subjectivity by presenting this ‘matriarchy’ as a textual, linguistic and historical strategy, rather than as a literal, originary moment. Nonetheless, her association relies on powerful suggestions of such a moment from within Western society, as well as from within feminism and Judaism. As I will discuss, Einzig uses Walter Benjamin to re-present ‘her’ family as linguistic.

Travellers in Language

‘Einzig’ uses Robinson Crusoe to present herself and her family as travellers in language. In the text, the library is ‘a wilderness of information’ and her thoughts are ‘rambling’. Her father is described as ‘venturing forth’ into ‘creative writing’, and when ‘Einzig’ writes she ‘embarks’ on a ‘scarcely charted course’. She writes: ‘The original continent for which I set out required but a modest voyage: I wrote of
my mother’s mother sailing for this country’. The association between travelling and writing enables her to represent language as political and historical in relation to her family’s migration. In such a manner it serves to critique the universal and unitary ideology of modern subjectivity. Einzig shares with Defoe an emphasis on migrant and symbolically hybrid beginnings. By associating identity and writing with her family’s migration to America, she charts ‘herself’ as a discursive subject under process of translation from one mode to another.

The journey places ‘Einzig’ in America in 1951, in a family whose past is formed by being Jews in Hungary prior to World War II. This past has a utopian quality, as the land provided all that was required: ‘my mother’s mother ... lived in Herinche, Hungary, a good country, with houses, grasses of many kinds, trees, fruits, sweets, and good water that was always cold’. The ‘good country’ of Hungary supplied their subsistence needs—exemplified as ‘good water’—and the freedom to pray; it was a harmonious family. To emphasise the harmony of this ‘original’ period, ‘Einzig’ says that ‘the whole family sang beautifully’. This sense of an original state is used by Einzig not to evoke an ideal state, but to ground her identity in a language that recognises its feminine and Jewish aspects. Having said this, ‘Einzig’as’ critical distance from Judaism is also evident in her use of Benjamin, who rejected Judaism, and Arendt, whose work was criticised by Jewish leaders. These aspects demonstrate her ambivalence towards her religious background as she creates and draws on her feminine and Jewish inheritance to contrast her subjectivity with that of the Protestant rational ‘subject’.

‘Einzig’s’ feminine world of plenty contrasts with the masculine subsistence and finite culture of Robinson Crusoe. The language of ‘finitude’ implies a sense of being subject to limitation. It is a way to speak of language as a restraint and it is also a term related to the limited supply of material goods. The language of Robinson Crusoe allows Einzig to associate the constraints of language with material conditions. In this account, ‘her’ parents’ ‘legacy of finitude’ is presented as a relative term with respect to the death, scarcity and religious persecution associated with World War II. Einzig’s text also highlights the possessive character of the ‘subject’ of rational individualism. A possessive, colonial language in which ‘homes ... [are] ... claimed by strangers’ marks the loss of the family’s ‘inheritance’ and her matriarchal and Jewish ‘good country’. In the style of Robinson Crusoe, Einzig capitalises names such as Mother and makes constant use of the possessive article: ‘my mother’, ‘my sister’, ‘my grandmother’.
contrast between her own poetic language and Defoe’s text, and her evocation of a feminine past marked by plenty, gives value to the infinite nature of Einzig’s own writing.

Through depicting her family’s migration across and within America, Einzig is able to present her text and Robinson Crusoe as texts that are ‘foreign’ to each other ‘in degree of time and consciousness’, yet are also in ‘kinship’. In a literal and symbolic sense, she suggests that the act of migration and the act of writing turn family into foreigners and foreigners into family, thereby changing the status of both and effectively familiarising the reader with different values. ‘Einzig’s’ identity, suggested through multiple, intertextual references to Hungary, Judaism and to English and American literature and history, introduces different values into the ‘unitary’ story associated with Crusoe as rational economic man. Like Defoe, Einzig changes or corrupts the values of the dominant social text. Like Crusoe, ‘Einzig’ points out that her name is a ‘corruption’ of her father’s original name. Crusoe’s name, it will be recalled, was changed ‘by the usual Corruption of Words in England’. The changing of Crusoe’s name is related to Defoe’s insistence in The True Born Englishman on the hybridity inherent in English class and identity. This in turn was related to his project of justifying the hybrid gentleman-trader.

The corruption of ‘Einzig’s’ name takes place prior to her family’s migration to America. In this sense, her inheritance is of corrupted ideals and a corrupt language. In the same spirit as Defoe, she represents this corruption of language as positive. The likeness she suggests between her own and Crusoe’s naming links the two texts to social change and emphasises the connections between politics, language and identity. Migration features in Einzig’s text as the transfer of a body of people from one country to another, or from one side of a country to another. It is a transgression of boundaries that is negative and violent as well as being a positive and active shaping of identity. The transgression of values and the establishment of different subject-positions are hallmarks of the castaway narrative.

‘Einzig’s’ crisis, like Crusoe’s, takes the form of breaking with the father. Her narrative therefore links gender and politics to questions of writing and narrative. The son disobeying the father by going to sea in Robinson Crusoe is now the daughter persisting with her writing against her father’s wishes. She also writes in disobedience of her mother. In this sense, she breaks with her mother’s tradition by not giving up her trade—that is, her desire to write. Einzig’s text valorises uncertainty,
silence and privacy in contrast to Defoe’s apparent emphasis on factuality, control and presence.

**Translation and Kinship**

Benjamin and Arendt inform Einzig’s translation of *Robinson Crusoe* into a ‘new’ fiction. Their work has been understood in the contexts of Judaism, gender and Western culture. Not without controversy, both theorists are important to feminism, and gendered concepts inform their work.\(^{32}\) In *A New Fiction* Einzig makes critical use of Benjamin and Arendt to create a new feminine space in relation to *Robinson Crusoe*. Arendt and Benjamin are particularly important to the text because their work has become significant in placing the Holocaust and the diasporas that followed World War II at the centre of critiques of modernity.\(^ {33}\) In the text, ‘Einzig’ says that her family came from Kisvárda in Hungary after World War II.\(^ {34}\) When the Germans invaded Hungary in 1944 a ghetto for Jews was established in Kisvárda and people were subsequently sent to Auschwitz.\(^ {35}\) Although Einzig mentions no direct family experience of the Holocaust, as a silence it bears upon not only her identity, but on her existence. In this sense, the Holocaust, like the silent feminine of *Robinson Crusoe*, informs the text and ‘Einzig’s’ subjectivity. Flight from the Holocaust, the horror of which her father cannot speak, is the unspoken premise of the text. In this sense, both her Jewish background and her gender are represented as ‘contained’ by the text of modern subjectivity, and Benjamin’s work on translation allows her to represent that which is silenced. In ‘The Task of the Translator’ Benjamin writes:

> it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through the decayed barriers of his own language.\(^ {36}\) [my emphasis]

By situating herself as a text in ‘kinship’ with *Robinson Crusoe* and with the theories of Arendt and Benjamin, Einzig positions herself as the translator of her life considered as a text. In this way, she changes her position and representation in the text as ‘self’—that is, as agent and producer of her own meaning, and as sole and original author of the
text. The description of 'Einzig's' 'original' maternal home recalls Benjamin's sense of an original 'pure' language. The harmonious singing of this original family also represents the sign of a successful translation. Benjamin says that "...the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intention of the original not as reproduction but as harmony ...".37

Benjamin's 'theology of language' is crucial to understanding how Einzig uses Robinson Crusoe to reposition herself, as his theory establishes a two-way communication between language and materiality. This directly opposes the language of ownership and control over others depicted in Robinson Crusoe. Benjamin's linguistic theology describes how material things are named. He posits the idea of an original, sacred language in which God created the world before 'the fall of man'.38 He argues that both animate and inanimate 'things' have a 'sacred language', which informs 'man's' language. All things communicate their 'mental being', which in turn is translated by man into language.39 The communication is two-way in that the name that 'man' gives to himself and to things will depend on 'how language is communicated to him'.40

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is the nature of all to communicate mental meanings.41

In other words, what is named and the name itself are 'naturally constantly interrelated'.42 Hence Einzig's extensive use of the language of kinship. This two-way communication informs Benjamin's work on 'inanimate nature', such as shopping malls, consumables and technology. In his work the past is like a 'thing', in that although it is apparently mute and inaccessible, it informs the present. Hence the apparently enclosed and unitary subjectivity of Robinson Crusoe has potency in the present. As such, Einzig is able to translate Robinson Crusoe into a feminine mode because this 'language' is already inherent in the original text. As Benjamin states, '...a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in translatability'.43 Einzig's work can therefore be regarded as 'the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one'.44 In that Benjamin's work emerges from a political critique of materialism, it is most appropriate to a critique of Robinson Crusoe and Defoe's language. Graeme Gilloch points out that
the ‘recovery of traces, the revelation of the history of the object, the recollection of the hardship and injustice that surround the history of the commodity, are fundamental imperatives for Benjamin’. His work links materialism and language to a critique of modern subjectivity and modernity by re-establishing agency for that which is silenced by language. For Einzig, this includes the female ‘subject’ and the body.

In her preface, after referring to Benjamin’s work on translation, Einzig contrasts Defoe’s language with that of Arendt. Arendt writes:

... you look only to the communicative value of the word. I look to the disclosing quality. And this disclosing quality has, of course, always a historical background.

In contrast, Einzig quotes Crusoe as saying:

I must keep the tame from the wild ... and the only way for this was to have some enclosed piece of ground ... to keep them in so effectually ...

These two very different quotations and languages are given as examples of differently gendered philosophies of language and, consequently, different understandings of meaning and identity. Arendt—female, German-Jewish-American philosopher, refugee, product of two different societies and adherent of Benjamin’s theories of language—most closely resembles Einzig’s representation of herself. Einzig opposes Arendt’s quotation to the words of Crusoe—fictional character, masculine English Protestant son of an early eighteenth-century merchant and migrant, and modernist literary icon. Key oppositions such as fact/fiction, Jew/Protestant, past/present and masculine/feminine are established as differences and similarities by the juxtaposition of the two quotations. It is important to note that each of these quite different philosophies maintains the position of an autonomous, individual speaker. It is also relevant to Einzig’s rewriting that both speakers are ‘subjects’ with mixed-nationality backgrounds.

Arendt’s statement concerns disclosure—that is, opening and revealing—while Crusoe’s or Defoe’s concerns enclosure, keeping things in and out, remaining closed, maintaining separation. Einzig associates the first with the ‘feminine subject’ (here represented by Arendt) and the second with the ‘masculine subject’ (represented by
Crusoe). The Arendt quotation concerns language and history, and Defoe’s concerns nature. That these differences are attributed to differently gendered ‘subjects’ serves Einzig’s text well, as she uses Benjamin’s confounding of gendered distinctions, such as nature and history, to problematise the notion of a distinct, autonomous identity and the idea of an essential self.  

In Benjamin’s theory, apparently distinct concepts such as nature and history have permeable boundaries (like translations) and therefore inform each other. Benjamin’s theory of permeable boundaries and two-way communication emerges from his sense of an original language to which all other languages are related. In this sense, he posits the idea of a family of languages. In her work, Einzig literalises and feminises this linguistic family by describing ‘her family’ in matriarchal terms.

Nature and History

In A New Fiction ‘Einzig’ recalls that her parents drove a De Soto, a popular American family car from the 1950s. It had on its bonnet the helmet of Hernando de Soto, the coloniser of the southern parts of America. When ‘Einzig’ researches her history she is faced with becoming either a dominant ‘subject’ like De Soto or a forgotten and dominated ‘subject’ like the Indian ‘queen’ of whom she dreams. In her dream life, ‘Einzig’ is both figures: ‘Discouraged and exhausted, I slept. I was De Soto, and my grandmother the Indian queen who was my prisoner and hostage’. The domination of the female ‘Indian queen’ signifies the loss of the Native American Indian’s story, which is silenced by Western historical discourse. The construction of history is presented as a narrative that privileges certain acts and agencies and silences others.

Einzig makes it clear that the dominating subject-position of Western rational individualism can be occupied by both male or female ‘subjects’, and that her problem not only concerns the past but the present. For example, she dreams that she is De Soto: ‘I looked down in dejection and saw that my Spanish costume was gone, and that I had on an American GI’s uniform’. In this fashion, the past, though it is apparently enclosed like the silent symbol on the De Soto car, continues to inform and shape the present. The analogy she uses is that of the life inherent in an enclosed ‘seed or kernel or nut’. As such, when her father discusses the past with her, ‘Green, black, soft, bruised, fibrous
shapes encountered our shoes while walking'. In that agency is attributed to the walnuts, not to the feet, this suggests the active life of ‘things’ and the past represented by ‘feminine’, active nature. Benjamin says of such ‘nature’:

Man communicates himself to God through name, which he gives to nature and (in proper names) to his own kind, and to nature he gives names according to the communication that he receives from her ... [my emphasis]

In this depiction by Benjamin, nature is female and active and counters the masculine act of naming. Man does not dominate nature, as did Crusoe; here nature is active, communicating and influencing its own naming. This is relevant to Einzig’s narrative and to the relationship between the opening quotations by Arendt and Crusoe. The ‘nutshell’ for Arendt is a metaphor for the story:

... no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say.

Benjamin’s image of the ‘natural-historical’ suggests that ‘nature’ in Einzig’s work cannot simply be equated with the conventional association of woman as nature, although, as with the image of an original female utopia, it draws on the power of that imagery. In Einzig’s depiction of the family of language as feminine, and in her association of ‘nature’ with the feminine, she is engaging with Benjamin’s conception of history as nature and of nature as history. In contrast, Benjamin sometimes emphasised the masculine aspect of that relation, for example when he says that ‘Man is the namer ... he is the lord of nature and can give names to things’. By emphasising the active ‘feminine’, Einzig represents language itself as a historical and gendered construction.

Einzig’s depiction of that which is named as feminine and active collapses dualisms such as internal/external, nature/history and subject/object, and re-presents them as concepts that depend upon and contain each other. Einzig’s writing transforms the masculine languages of both Defoe and Benjamin. For her, the relationship of masculine to feminine is like that of seed and shell: a relationship that is not separate
and opposite. All such oppositions in Einzig’s work exist in a circularity in which the negative term becomes the positive term and vice versa.

Einzig’s emphasis allows her to inscribe economic and sexual desire into her text and into the text of rational individualism. By presenting herself as a child, she appears to exist in a text that echoes the exclusion of sex from rational individualism. Ian Watt (using Weber) reads sex as ‘one of the strongest potential menaces to the individual’s pursuit of economic ends’. However, the imagery of economic desire in the early eighteenth century was also expressed as sexual desire and, as I have suggested elsewhere, Defoe maintained the importance of desire in Robinson Crusoe. Einzig makes explicit the desire that is inherent in modern subjectivity in a number of ways. Firstly, by depicting travelling as a form of writing she depicts the sea as a motif of desire and associates it with textuality. Secondly, her narrative of childhood is a linguistic metaphor that locates her in a ‘child’s world’, which for Benjamin is ‘akin to the language of sacred texts’. Einzig depicts such an original language as feminine, a language in which there is no control over excess. In these metaphorical senses, Einzig’s use of montage (associated with play), her references to childhood and to the feminine, serve to reinscribe sexual and economic desire into Robinson Crusoe as a ‘new’ fiction. In this way, she draws out the sexual dynamic of power that informs rational individualism.

Public and Private Space

The images of voyage, shipwreck, island and triumphant return in Robinson Crusoe establish a private, secure and enclosed ‘subject’ that has mobility and integrity on the high seas of public, trading life. In her critique of Robinson Crusoe, Einzig’s text draws permeable boundaries between the ‘subject’ and the text, and between private and public space. This permeability reflects Benjamin’s thesis on translation and draws on the work of Arendt. In A New Fiction there is a hidden private world, associated with her mother, in which space and time are of generous proportions:

... the suburb in which we dwelt was not a mean one: great oak trees spread their boughs over the quiet streets; lanes and parks existed for walking quickly out of sight or hearing of automobiles...
This depiction has a quality of excess that ‘Einzig’ previously associated with her father: ‘His life was abundant, luxuriant’. The mutual association indicates that the two sexes dominate quite different sectors, each with a different form of excess. ‘Einzig’ expresses the view that Eddie, instead of trying to pull up a tree in a public park, could have disappeared into one of the suburb’s quiet streets and conducted his act without making himself the subject of a police inquiry. She concludes that Eddie needed to act in public and that his was ‘a deliberate performance incapable of provoking an adequate response’. His act, therefore, is like Einzig’s writing, in that it cannot be understood in the same terms as dominant discursive practices, such as the law. Her emphasis on the importance of occupying public space is the obverse and complementary state to the valuing of the private, feminine and ‘natural-historical’. In these terms, Eddie’s madness cannot be understood, but it can and does speak. It can be compared to the power of her own fragmented style of writing, and her initial decision to keep her writing to herself is confirmed in the text by Eddie’s incarceration. The worth of Eddie’s act is that, as a story, it comments on conventional meanings. In this sense, Einzig as a writer must also act in public. This recognition of the importance of the public act is suggested in her dream:

I was walking out a door; I was in a war. It was a war that went on without victory or magnitude. I wanted to reenter civilian life, to be again reduced to flowering inside my notions of what I had considered to be human, but those days seem to be gone.

In this quotation, ‘Einzig’ the private and feminine civilian is distinguished from the ‘outdoor’, masculine and combative public. In such a fashion, ‘Einzig’, occupying space differently to either her mother or father, is potentially castaway in both public and private spheres. Einzig actually represents the feminine language of her text as one that can be easily misinterpreted in the public sphere. This is made explicit when, at the end of the narrative, her mother tells her of her own sister who ‘when she went crazy [thought] that the bedsprings were alive and the refrigerator was alive’.

For Arendt, public and private spheres have different languages, in that what is experienced in the private sphere cannot be valued in the same way in the public sphere. For both Einzig and Arendt this is a positive way in which to regard the private sphere. Arendt says of the
private sphere that ‘prior to the modern age ... to have no private place of one’s own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human’. In this sense, that which must not be spoken in public is like that which cannot be known from the past. Both silences have value and actively shape the public and the present. Einzig’s depiction of marginal spaces, in which borders are permeable, is similar to that evoked by Arendt. Arendt refers to ‘ancient times’ in which the law was identified with a boundary, ‘actually a space, a kind of no man’s land between the private and public, sheltering and protecting both realms while at the same time, separating them from each other’. Such a space is protective for Arendt as she says ‘there are a great many things which cannot withstand the impecable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene’.

Einzig also acknowledges Arendt’s understanding that ‘an action can only be an action if there is a public space in which it can appear’. The public space for Arendt is ‘the organisation of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together’. In A New Fiction, Einzig expounds Arendt’s understanding that the meaning of an act cannot be determined by agency (what was intended) but must be examined according to ‘the meanings the act takes on in the eyes of spectators in different times and places’.

Einzig productively associates Arendt’s concepts of public and private with Benjamin’s concepts of appearance and translation. Significantly, both theorists conventionally gender their concepts. ‘Nature’ for Benjamin, and the private sphere for Arendt, are associated with the ‘feminine’. Through bringing the two theorists into close conjunction, Einzig affirms her writing as a feminine space of translation between nature and history, public and private space, masculine writing and feminine silence.

Belief and the Problem of Identity

Einzig emphasises the way in which the visual or the aesthetic underscores belief systems by connecting the eighteenth century insecurity over paper currency with seeing:

... when I reported where I was born it was with a sense of being a counterfeiter, shining the false silver currency of my biography and
catching your vulnerable eye. Eyes have an affinity for money, often decorating the notes themselves.69

Her stated problem is that she cannot believe her eyes, trust her senses, or ‘know’ the truth of others. The narrator is unsure whether what is being ‘seen’ is ‘memory’ or whether sight is objective, so that ‘the eye formed a kind of foreign witness’.70 She explains to ‘the reader’ that her story is based on information given to her and cannot be trusted. Here ‘Einzig’ can be understood to be attempting to counter a sense of her particular identity as a ‘shoddy counterfeit’ of the ‘real’ thing.71 In relation to modern masculine and Protestant subjectivity, her identity can only be ‘other’ in that it is ‘foreign’ and inaccessible. When she discusses her grandfather’s religion, she says ‘hasidic’ was ‘a foreign, closed word’72 and ‘so ... my public persona was to me but another fiction’.73 Her problem is that Jewish and female identities, like all identities, can only be deduced from external signs:

...certain hotels across the country refused our entrance on the grounds that we were Jewish, as a child I regarded that attribute as a private one of my mother’s, a sort of personal mood that sometimes came over her, as a small shrine to the ominous ... shut in mystery ... Perhaps Mother even made it up.74

She counters the problem of being unable to know the ‘truth’ through using feminine and Judaic references. Einzig’s use of Benjamin contrasts aspects of Judaism against Defoe’s Protestantism. The effect of different beliefs on culture and on identity is emphasised by ‘Einzig’ in her description of the family’s move to California. She says she sensed that her parents wished

... to flee a world dense with family, in which privacy was non-existent, and one was surrounded by furniture covered in plastic ... in short to break away, to move toward something else ... something benign, ambitious, unencumbered by eastern prejudice, or by what seemed to evoke that prejudice: belief.75

Einzig’s references to the harmonious singing of her original family and to Rabbi Nachman are all references to the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, a tradition that also influenced Benjamin. This influence is evident in the following description of the Kabbalah:
A song means filling a jug, and even more so breaking the jug. Breaking it apart. In the language of the Kabbalah we perhaps might call it: Broken Vessels.  

It is said of the Kabbalah that ‘the duality between the container and the contained is one of the most important Kabbalistic explanations of the creative moment’. This conveys Einzig’s (and Benjamin’s) reference to ‘things’ having a mental being, and the sense of languages being translations of an original sacred text.

‘Einzig’ presents herself as inheriting two dominant traditions. She compares herself to the offspring of two different lovebirds who have to choose between carrying nest material in the beak or in the rump feathers. ‘Einzig’ presents her choice as between the Kabbalah and the Eastern European oral story-telling tradition, which Rabbi Nachmann exemplifies, and the English ‘classical’ and feminine tradition represented as ‘the Brontës’, which, in turn, related to Defoe’s work. ‘Spinning a tale’ is the phrase Einzig plays with to show the important differences and similarities between the two traditions. Rabbi Nachmann’s tales are depicted as having a sonic quality; they transcend boundaries, and ring throughout ‘the spinning globe’. In comparison, the Brontës’ narratives ‘had to be spun in underground caverns where the atmosphere was sufficiently moist’. Nachman’s texts are associated with the air and with lofty ideals—‘the heights made me dizzy’—while the tradition of literary women is below ground and suggestive of materiality and of women’s domestic and hidden labour. As Einzig writes, ‘grandmother made little hats’. Just as Einzig describes the feminine literary tradition as powerful, though enclosed and confined, so she refers to the voice of Rabbi Nachman as tiny but ‘soaring’. Just as Nachmann’s tiny voice soars, so the Brontës make lace, suggesting textual connections and productive aporias. In these descriptions, Einzig effectively embraces both traditions as combining disclosure and enclosure. Her realisation that she has inherited both traditions nevertheless leads her to the knowledge that her work is ‘nothing but quotations’.

Einzig’s writing project situates the feminine as central to language. By refusing to directly oppose her text to Robinson Crusoe, Einzig shows the ‘new’ to be inextricable from history and language. In literary criticism, Robinson Crusoe is situated at the beginning of the ‘rise of the novel’, and an obsession with things ‘new’ characterised this early
eighteenth-century period. Einzig’s text situates her ‘new’ beginning by engaging with dominant values. Her text makes its ‘origins’ explicit, while drawing out different connections and associations in order to suggest its own integrity and to establish a ‘new’ tradition.

Many of the themes that are evident in Einzig’s critique of Robinson Crusoe were already presaged in that text. For example, Robinson Crusoe is popularly read as a text in which culture dominates nature. However, Defoe complicates this division by constructing Crusoe as ‘natural’ and Friday as ‘social’. This is done to create a likeness between the desiring Crusoe and Friday as a figure of avarice who represents Defoe’s consumer society. In this sense, Einzig’s blurring of the distinction between nature and history works in similar ways to Defoe’s text. Defoe also showed this as a process taking place in writing. Although Einzig challenges the ideology in which nature, race and the feminine are all dominated and controlled, like Defoe, Einzig’s challenge to dominant values occurs through the gendering of language. In this sense her text simultaneously emulates and criticises Robinson Crusoe.

Crusoe’s ultimate ‘desire’ is to remain safe, mobile, accessible and profitable; he becomes a rational figure of authority who is able to constantly return to sea (the sea of desire). In contrast, Einzig’s text refuses to either remain ‘at sea’—that is, to be dismissed as ‘mad’—or to remain on land. To stay on land is to be locked into a gendered modernity in which a masculine language ‘masters’ and controls the feminine and female subjectivity. Through her use of Robinson Crusoe Einzig’s writing emerges as neither feminine and ‘crazy’ nor as masculine and rational. Because of her location in a society in which modern subjectivity is dominant, ‘Einzig’ ends the text as a productive but ‘anxious’ subject. However, her writing remains a productive ‘feminine’ state in which a ‘new’ story can come into existence.

1 Barbara Einzig, Robinson Crusoe: A New Fiction, Membrane Press, Brooklyn, Wisconsin, 1983 (referred to in the endnotes and chapter as A New Fiction).
2 A New Fiction, p. 2.
3 Although Einzig productively blurs her textual and actual selves, I have distinguished them where possible for the sake of clarity. That is, ‘Einzig’ (with quotes) indicates the figure in the text.
Einzig is an American-born author who has produced prize-winning short fiction and poetry, as well as translations from Russian. She works as an editor in the publishing industry and her publicity material states that she is university educated and ‘twice divorced with one child’. The description effectively delineates her difference from women of the early eighteenth century. Her text is a short prose piece published by an alternative press. In its paper edition it resembles a chap book, the periodical form in which Robinson Crusoe was later serialised. A New Fiction was also published as an electronic text and at time of writing was available on the Internet at http://www.thing.net/~grist/1&d/leinzig2.htm. The piece is seventeen pages long.


A New Fiction, p. 1.
Ibid., p. 1.
Ibid.
Ibid., p. 5.
Ibid., p. 9.
Ibid., p. 10.
Ibid.
Ibid., p. 11.
Ibid.
Ibid., p. 12.
Ibid., p. 9.
Ibid., p. 1.

Einzig’s work echoes that of Benjamin, who has been described as confronting the ‘cosy comfort of bourgeois life’. Graeme Gilloch, Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 173.

A New Fiction, p. 3.
Ibid., p. 1.
Ibid.


A New Fiction, p. 10.
Ibid., p. 1.
Ibid., p. 5, for example.

A New Fiction, p. 1.
Robinson Crusoe, p. 3.
A New Fiction, p. 1.

Gender ‘forms the basis for some of Benjamin’s most important conceptual moves’ (Rey Chow, ‘Benjamin’s Love Affair with Death’, New German

See specifically Walter Benjamin, ‘Theories of German Fascism’, New German Critique, 17, Spring, 1979. Arendt’s works on totalitarianism and the Holocaust include: Men in Dark Times; Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil; and The Origins of Totalitarianism.

A New Fiction, p. 1.

Kisvarda is discussed in The Children of the Holocaust website at www.wiesenthal.com (2 April, 1997). To show that the Internet complements the text’s intertextuality and theoretical premises, I have given an Internet site rather than a library reference, where possible.


Ibid., pp. 78–9.

My understanding of Benjamin’s work on translation has been enhanced by Paul de Man, The Resistance to Theory, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1986; by the critique of De Man’s discussion by E. San Juan Jr. in Ch. 1 of Hegemony and Strategies of Transgression, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1995; by Gilloch, Myth and Metropolis (see endnote 20); and by Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, MIT Press, Massachusetts and London, 1989.


Ibid., p. 325.

Ibid., p. 314.

Ibid., p. 320.


Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, Reflections, p. 325.

Gilloch, p. 119.

Quotations are from Hannah Arendt (no publishing details) and Robinson Crusoe cited in the preface to A New Fiction.

Papers which discuss Benjamin and feminism include Christine Buci-Glucksmann, who states that in Benjamin’s work, ‘the motif of the woman imposes, by its constancy, its persistence and wealth of meanings, all its interpretative radicality’ (‘Catastrophic Utopia: The “feminine” as Allegory of the Modern’, Representations, 4, Spring, 1986, pp. 220–9). Eva Geuven suggests Benjamin’s work ‘... might provide insights for feminism’s
current dilemma, Benjamin also sought alternatives ... to the idealistic
dialectic of subjective and objective, particular and universal’ (‘Toward a
Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin’s Writing, The German Quarterly,
Affair with Death’, New German Critique, No. 48, Fall, 1989; Buck-Morss,
Hernando De Soto travelled through what became Florida, Georgia,
Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas in the years 1539–43.
A New Fiction, p. 13.
Ibid.
Ibid., p. 10.
Ibid., p. 6.
Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, Reflections,
p. 331.
Lisa Jane Disch, Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy, Cornell
Adorno states that Benjamin had: ‘as no one else, the ability to regard
historical things, manifestations of the objectified spirit, “culture” as if they
were nature ... His entire thought could be characterised as ‘natural-
historical’. Quoted by Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, MIT Press,
Walter Benjamin, One Way Street and Other Writings, Verso, London, 1985,
p. 111.
Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding,
My PhD thesis explores the significance of credit and luxury (determined in
the period as feminine) to Robinson Crusoe and traces this theme in the
writing of female castaway narratives in the wake of Robinson Crusoe.
Christine Owen, The Female Crusoe, or the Story of the Island In-Between:
Feminine Transformations of Identity and Value in the Castaway Narrative,
Gershom Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin’, On Jews and Judaism in Crisis:
Selected Essays, ed., Werner J. Dannhauser, Schocken Books, 1976; quoted by
Susan Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, the MIT Press, Massachusetts
Ibid., p. 3.
Ibid., p. 4.
Ibid., p. 17.
Arendt, The Human Condition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958,
p. 64.
Ibid., p. 63.
Ibid., p. 51.
Lisa Jane Disch, Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy, Cornell
Disch, p. 79.
Robinson Crusoe

Ibid., p. 5.


A New Fiction, p. 10.

Ibid., pp. 8–9.

Ibid., p. 3.

Ibid., p. 2.


A New Fiction, p. 12.

Martin Buber, The Tales of Rabbi Nachmann, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1956. Rabbi Nachmann is the founder of Hasidism, or Chassidism, to which Einzig also makes reference. Harold Bloom says that 'Hasidism was the ultimate descendent of Kabbalah', Kabbalah and Criticism, p. 34.

A New Fiction, p. 11. Nachmann is named by Arendt as the only writer Kafka would read. Kafka's work is described by Arendt as 'making decisive changes in traditional parables or inventing new ones in traditional style'. See Hannah Arendt's Introduction to Illuminations, p. 41.

A New Fiction, p. 11.

Ibid., p. 11.

Ibid., p. 12.

As Margaret Sankey points out, 'The process of civilising the island and Friday is paralleled by the process by which the writer-Robinson creates an order in his life through the recording of his spiritual and mental states'. Margaret Sankey, 'Meaning through Intertextuality: Isomorphism of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Tournier's Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique', Australian Journal of French Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1981, p. 82.

Her work is like that of Benjamin, who describes translation in biological and familial terms as 'the [literary form] ... charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own'. Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', Illuminations, p. 73.
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