

## DEFOE'S *ROXANA*: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF A HEROINE

Nothing, at first glance, seems a more unlikely point of departure for a discussion of Defoe's *Roxana* than his *Journal of the Plague Year*. They seem to belong to different poles of his artistic instinct—the one so obviously inspired by the here-and-now of plague-fear, and consciously evoking the fear of the Great Plague in order to support a government policy,<sup>1</sup> the other entirely a fictional creation, springing from Defoe's private consciousness as his last, strange (and female) voice. The narrator of the *Journal*, H. F., is a gentleman of moderate habits, Whiggist opinions, and a calm observant way of registering and describing the horror by which he is surrounded; Roxana is an increasingly tortured character whose circumstances eventually defeat her, an over-ambitious fantasist who concocts for herself an aristocratic romance and destroys herself in the process.

Yet H. F. can be seen as a significant precursor for this arguably wildest of all Defoe's creations. The plague he records and endures can be felt in a transmuted form to linger into the later novel. Both speakers are beset by the fear of oblivion. Both are recorders of histories, burying in the heart of their accounts smaller, complete stories which they are loath to dispense with. Both are obsessed with speech, with those who can speak and those who cannot, and with the peculiar tugs between allegory and realistic fiction. H. F.'s narrative is made possible because he stays in London; Roxana's is scattered over different countries, but she returns to London at a crucial stage in her career. H. F.'s name is denoted by initials, and also hidden by them. Roxana's name is hidden also, but differently: the name 'Roxana' which is shouted out at the height of her triumph is later the name she must shroud in secrecy; it is both her name and not; it is the name of her novel and yet it is not her.

Where the two speakers differ most interestingly is where we find, perhaps, some of Defoe's most crucial concerns as he embarked on the making of his last heroine. Where the narrator of the *Journal* is subdued and elusive, Roxana is ever-present and passionate. Where the narrator has the task of reporting a common calamity, Roxana has the more exacting problem of how to place herself, afflicted as she is, within a world which is as sanguine and content as though the word 'plague' had never been. Her London is a city sound, pleased with itself, confident; and she alone is 'afflicted'. H. F. depicts a city, at the end of his account, which he can confidently describe as recovering from a horror; the city has been, as it were, remade (as it was literally to be remade after the Great Fire of the following year). At the end of the *Journal* the formerly hopeless city is left recovering; in *Roxana* the heroine is left to face certain ruin. 'Poor recovering Creatures' (*Journal*, p. 192),<sup>2</sup> says the narrator of his fellow citizens at the end of his account, with all the achieved compassion which the

<sup>1</sup> See Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: His Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 489.

<sup>2</sup> The edition used in this article is Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, ed. by Paula R. Backscheider, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1992).

*Journal* has worked towards. But in *Roxana*, with a more complicated narrator and a more difficult narrative procedure, Defoe makes and then unmakes his heroine.

At the height of Roxana's success she holds a ball in her London house, and after dancing for the courtly company in the dress of a Turkish princess—a piece of exotic finery acquired in an earlier part of her story and now coming into its own—she is acclaimed by the designation 'Roxana' for the first time in the novel. Hearing her name thus shouted out in this most public way takes the quiet reader by surprise: one thinks, on some level, yes, here she is, she has made it, she has arrived; and on another level one realizes with a slight jolt that this is the first time the name 'Roxana' has found utterance in the novel (we are about half-way through), and so the mysteriousness of the heroine is somehow emphasized at her most public and triumphant moment; also the precariousness of her fortunes, which are intimately bound up with her name, her reputation, and her brittle, fragile sense of who and what she is:

At the finishing the Dance, the Company clapp'd, and almost shouted; and one of the Gentlemen cry'd out, *Roxana! Roxana!* by ———, with an Oath; upon which foolish Accident I had the Name of *Roxana* presently fix'd upon me all over the Court End of Town, as effectually as if I had been Christen'd *Roxana*. (*Roxana*, p. 176)<sup>3</sup>

But she has not been christened Roxana: her real name, we learn later, is Susan, the same as her ill-fated daughter's—though even that must be an Anglicized pronouncing of a name more fitting one who 'WAS BORN, *as my Friends told me*, at the City of POICTIERS [. . .] in *France*' (*Roxana*, p. 5). The qualification '*as my Friends told me*' might be—as on one level it certainly is—a mere convention, casting no doubt upon a sound enough assertion of ancestry; yet who can tell, in retrospect, where Roxana came from? She is the most hidden, the most tragic, and the most solitary of all Defoe's characters, not excluding Crusoe. The first, casual naming of Roxana suits the anxious elusiveness which pervades her narrative. Nothing, by contrast, could be more solid than Crusoe's opening words: 'I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of *York*' (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 4)<sup>4</sup> etc., with its clearly cited date and place and the attendant history of the fortunes of the name of Crusoe as it wandered from its original Kreutznaar. Roxana's name and history slide into her narrative as the result of exile, persecution, a history which she both knows and is indifferent to; and her father, rather than being, as for Crusoe, a significant authority to be defied or revered throughout, is dead before her story gets under way, leaving her to an unsatisfactory marriage and the making of her own history.

The ball, then, at which the name 'Roxana' is conferred upon her, is on one level the apex of her 'fortunes'. But we read Defoe with a double consciousness, and never more so than in this novel, where such a consciousness is shared so closely with the narrator. And so it happens that the ball, the toast of 'Roxana', the arrival of the narrator in the 'high life' for which she has longed, is a passage which marks both her social triumph and her moral ruin. As with the solidier,

<sup>3</sup> The edition used in this article is Daniel Defoe, *Roxana, the Fortunate Mistress*, ed. by John Mullan, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The edition used in this article is Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. by Michael Shinagel, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1975).

more resilient, less dependent Crusoe, Roxana's desire is not to do the gradually built-up, sensible middle-class thing: just as for him, 'the upper Station of *Low Life*' (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 5) is not enough: she longs for the aristocratic grand gesture, the consciously made self, and here she seems to achieve it. A further ball is ordered, and after this one there is so much money swept into Amy, the servant's, lap that she is stunned by the sudden influx of such riches:

and in the Morning, when they broke-up, they swept the Box into her Lap, when she counted out to me, sixty two Guineas and a half; and the other Servants got very well too: *Amy* came to me when they were all gone, *Law—Madam*, says *Amy*, with a long gaping Cry, what shall I do with all this Money? And indeed, the poor Creature was half-mad with Joy. (*Roxana*, p. 181)

This is the suddenly acquired, bewitchingly bestowed money of Romance, as opposed to the hard-earned, painstaking reward of industry and middle-class thrift; and, typically, the 'half-mad' state of mind of Roxana when she receives this largesse, this magical fortune, is expressed through the person of Amy, who is, among other things, Roxana's alter ego,<sup>5</sup> her second voice, the consciousness which, mundane in itself, brings to the surface and puts into ordinary, coarse, everyday language the words which Roxana herself cannot speak—'what shall I do with all this Money?' That 'long gaping Cry' is one of Defoe's horribly effective, swiftly evoked pictures: the description of something between a sound and a facial gesture, it captures the terrible, mawkish greed of the two women as they gloat over the money; it reveals, as though in a suddenly illuminated and as suddenly extinguished tableau, the hideous nature of the greed which underpins Roxana's other, more delicate tableaux—the dance, the mask, and the graceful disguises.

Partly the story of Roxana does belong to the tradition of Romance, which can go anywhere and do anything. Roxana is a character who is continually making and remaking herself. Yet she is also one who comes up, again and again, against the harsh forces which determine her life, and against the consequences of her own actions. The magic begins to evaporate at the height of its effect: Defoe will not let us escape from Roxana's intelligence—her restless, turbulent, desperate energy as a thinking being. Triumphant though she is, the aristocratic romance begins at its most effective moment to escape her control: after the first successful ball,<sup>6</sup> Roxana ponders on the personage who danced with her, and her ruminations as to whether it was the King himself behind the mask hover around speculations as to age and attitude: 'to this Hour I never knew positively who it was; and by his Behaviour I thought he was too young, His Majesty being at that time in an Age that might be discover'd from a young

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the function of Amy in the novel, and Defoe's concern about the destabilizing of the master-servant relationship, see David Blewett, *Defoe's Art of Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> See Blewett, p. 124, for an account of the 'masquerades' of the period in which Defoe was writing. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe*, p. 484, notes that masquerades were curbed by the Act against Prophaneness and Immorality of 1721. This first ball is successful not only in personal but also in financial terms, financial success being as important for Roxana, or indeed being the same thing, as social success. Bram Dijkstra, *Defoe and Economics: The Fortunes of 'Roxana' in the History of Interpretation* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), p. 7, comments on the 'feverish pursuit of gain' which characterized the English middle classes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Person, even in his Dancing' (*Roxana*, p. 176). The messenger who arrives the following day to wait upon this jaded Cinderella will answer no questions: one of the constrictions of a fairy-tale existence is that not many questions may be asked. What the messenger does instead is turn himself momentarily into an allegorical figure. Like the half-allegorized sexton in the *Journal of the Plague Year*, he is suddenly not the lackey of a tawdry Court, but an austere, warning figure: 'the Messenger was silent as Death, as to that Point; and bowing always at my Enquiries, begg'd me to ask no Questions which he cou'd not give an obliging Answer to' (*Roxana*, pp. 176–77). It is not only Roxana who can change her shape. Events, chance personages, money itself, mean one thing and then another, make and remake and unmake themselves: this very ball which is the apogee of Roxana's success begins to change shape during its own making: and so does Roxana's consciousness in contemplating it. She is dazzled with her own success, but she retains some of the hard-headed intelligence which has paved her way to the moment. She is both elated by, and a shrewd judge of, the world of aristocratic artificial invention—into the midst of her sensuous enjoyment of her success with the Turkish costume slides a momentary sharpness, a tough middle-class derision:

being perfectly new, it pleas'd the Company exceedingly, and they all thought it had been *Turkish*; nay, one Gentleman had the Folly to expose himself so much, as to say, *and I think swore too*, that he had seen it danc'd at *Constantinople*; which was ridiculous enough. (*Roxana*, pp. 175–76)

Such a comment is worthy of Roxana's contempt, not only because it invites her sceptical enjoyment of a foppish lie, but because the comment, with its paucity of invention, intrudes upon her own history, that history we have been reminded of a page or two earlier (*Roxana*, pp. 173–74). The habit of the Turkish princess is also, ominously, the sign of slavery, a casualty of 'a *Turkish Vessel* going from *Constantinople* to *Alexandria*, in which were some Ladies bound for *Grand Cairo* in *Egypt*; and as the Ladies were made Slaves, so their fine Cloaths were thus expos'd' (*Roxana*, pp. 173–74). The picture of those ladies, ever voyaging towards their destination, which was not the one they had supposed or originally set out for, haunts the triumph of Roxana's dance, even though her account of it—a complete story—is short and succinct, stopping short of sympathy. True to Roxana's tonal ambiguity throughout, this story is both contemplated and dismissed, both a matter of anxiety and a thing of no consequence: Defoe makes use of the small, embedded story in the midst of the main narrative, which he earlier employed in the *Journal*. There, it embedded the horror of the plague; here it serves the function of both locking us into Roxana's story and going further, taking us into her anxious consciousness, where it both acknowledges the temporariness of all success and keeps such knowledge at bay. It is a moral story, a word of warning, at the same time as a mere reminder to the reader of a former moment of triumph, a casualty of her history.

The picture of the doomed Turkish galley of ladies is one of the many stories which hover around Roxana's own. Her narrative is full of stories clamouring to be written, which, for lack of space and because of an increasingly focused

narrative awareness, she is sorry not to be able to tell us. Many of these are part of her own history, which, for reasons of both narrative and moral decency, has to be skimmed over. When they are the stories of others, they have to be held at bay in order to allow her own story to predominate—and as the narrative proceeds, this domination is more anxiously worked for, and then, I want to argue, ultimately lost. It is as though Defoe gives up on this heroine, hands her over to her most hideous fears, the most terrible of which is that of sliding into obscurity, of being a half-forgotten story among others; and in so doing he makes his most developed heroine, and his least satisfying, his most interesting one, and the one who most appals us and who consistently escapes our affections. As has often been noted,<sup>7</sup> Defoe leaves his final heroine with an unresolved ending; he leaves her with a weary voice which does not suit the pulsating, questing inner probings we have heard all along. He gives her up, in the end, to Morality, to Conscience; he is defeated, as Roxana herself is defeated, by the complex web he has created; and he hands her over to a simplicity of shape which cannot contain her.

Roxana's triumph at the centre of the novel, as she dances for the courtly company in the habit of the defeated and silenced Turkish princess, is an outer picture of triumph. And her narrative is littered with such pictures, which she collects, recognizes, and remembers. The novel's opening section presents another picture, this time of ruin: when the kindly old aunt and gentlewoman visit Roxana after her desertion by her brewer husband, they come to witness such a picture:

The Truth was, there was no Need of much Discourse in the Case, the Thing spoke it self; they saw me in Rags and Dirt, who was but a little before riding in my Coach; thin, and looking almost like one Starv'd, who was before fat and beautiful: The House, that was before handsomely furnish'd with Pictures and Ornaments, Cabinets, Peir-Glasses, and every thing suitable, was now stripp'd, and naked, most of the Goods having been seiz'd by the Landlord for Rent, or sold to buy Necessaries; in a word, all was Misery and Distress, the Face of Ruin was every where to be seen. (*Roxana*, pp. 17–18)

'There was no Need of much Discourse in the Case': but the story of Roxana is the story of the need for discourse, and contending throughout with such pictures, of humiliation or triumph, is the inner voice which comments on them.

Roxana has a nervous acuteness to the significance of language. Partly this is conferred upon her by her own linguistic ambiguity: brought over from France as a child, she *learns* English and it *becomes* natural to her. 'I retain'd nothing of *France*, but the Language', she says at the opening of the novel, and, a little further on:

I went to *English* Schools, and being young, I learnt the *English* Tongue perfectly well, with all the Customs of the *English* Young-Women; so that I retain'd nothing of the

<sup>7</sup> See Robert D. Hume, 'The Conclusion of Defoe's *Roxana*: Fiasco or Tour de Force?', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 3 (1969–70), 475–90. Hume gives an account (pp. 487–90) of the history of censure of this ending, and defends it as evidence of Defoe's gathering skill and control of his art, rather than being, as previously sometimes argued, Defoe's uncertain relinquishing of his narrative. See also David Durant, 'Roxana's Fictions', in *Daniel Defoe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 157–68, where a convincing argument is made for the psychological plausibility of the ending.

*French*, but the Speech; nor did I so much as keep any Remains of the *French* Language tagg'd to my Way of Speaking, as most *Foreigners* do, but spoke what we call Natural *English*, as if I had been born here. (*Roxana*, p. 6)

Her pride here in having none of those give-away lapses that non-native speakers are prone to,<sup>8</sup> her desire to be thoroughly assimilated into her surroundings—her parents are not the usual kind of 'refugee', hers is not the usual kind of learnt English—prepare us for some of Roxana's most salient characteristics, and for her ultimate tragedy, which is partly a tragedy of language: her simultaneous desire to be both *known* and thoroughly assimilated; both *looked-upon* and disguised; to be both a 'speaker' and a 'Memorial [. . .] a standing Monument' (*Roxana*, p. 161). Her bilingual status means that she has a natural ability for languages—later on her ability to speak French is a great help during her career in Paris; she afterwards learns the Turkish language from her slave, and then she learns Italian—but her tragedy is that she has, ultimately, no voice.

From the beginning she is sensitive to the voices of others. In her description of her husband the brewer, the worst thing about marrying a 'fool' is his verbal ineptitude: she watches with scorn as the poor fool makes great claims which have no substantial force behind them:

*First*, and which, I must confess, is very unsufferable, he was a conceited Fool, *Tout Opiniâtre*, every thing he said, was Right, was Best, and was to the Purpose, whoever was in Company, and whatever was advanc'd by others, tho' with the greatest Modesty imaginable; and yet when he came to defend what he had said, by Argument and Reason, he would do it so weakly, so emptily, and so nothing to the Purpose, that it was enough to make any-body that heard him, sick and asham'd of him. (*Roxana*, p. 8)

Furthermore, this linguistic paucity takes place in a *public* arena: it is the judgement of others, of abler speech, which so marks this early passage with Roxana's helpless frustration and embarrassment. Lack of words, as well as lack of money, is the affliction of one who would 'marry a Fool' (*Roxana*, p. 8). And this early passage where Roxana steps forward and gives her word of warning to all ladies against marrying a fool is perhaps the first time in the novel where we feel her energy and her intelligence. Unfortunately, Roxana's choice of career as a courtesan is one which involves duplicity of speech, and ultimately silences this most verbally sensitive and acute of all Defoe's characters. 'I was as much talk'd of', says Roxana later in the novel, 'as anybody cou'd desire' (*Roxana*, p. 181). Her choice of profession means that she is talked *about* rather than a talker herself, and the story is so organized that such words about her have to be escaped from when Roxana's amatory powers are waning and she is presented with the possible judgement of her children. The very name 'Roxana', so much a matter of public triumph at the passage already cited, is transformed into a thing of shame: 'it began to be publick, that *Roxana* was, in short, a meer *Roxana*, neither better nor worse' (*Roxana*, p. 182), her acquired name<sup>9</sup> sliding

<sup>8</sup> Blewett, p. 134, points out that Roxana, after telling us that she has no 'Remains' of the French, actually litters her narrative with French phrases.

<sup>9</sup> See Leo Braudy, 'Daniel Defoe and the Anxieties of Autobiography', in *Daniel Defoe: Modern Critical Views*, p. 118, for a discussion of the importance, and elusiveness, in Defoe of names and identities.

easily from a proper to a common noun, like the 'old Piece of Plate' (*Roxana*, p. 182) she compares herself to.

To be overlooked in a general obscurity, to be a 'meer' creature of no vividness, no brilliance, no resonance, is Roxana's great fear and her final destiny; and it is a fate which Defoe partly chooses for her and partly shares. To be 'a meer *Roxana*', it becomes apparent, is a different thing from being a Moll or a Crusoe. These are *happily* tangential to the simple tradition which gave them birth—the tradition of spiritual autobiography and rogues' confessions. When Crusoe is called by his father 'one Morning into his Chamber' (*Robinson Crusoe*, p. 4) and receives his advice on how to live, both singularity and tradition are apparent: both the providential design of the novel and the seeds of particularity which the novel as a form will later develop sit happily side by side, and need no resolution. But Roxana's pull towards singularity is anguished and tragic, and Defoe creates a complicated heroine who becomes increasingly aware of her predicament, in her case the danger of being 'heard no more', like the riches, authority, and praise of which Johnson writes (*Rambler*, no. 54). This anxiety is apparent in her account of the life of her husband the brewer, whom Roxana appoints Amy to watch when he suddenly appears again, as a safeguard against his discovery of his former wife in her new career. Amy's reports on this man's 'most insignificant, unthinking Life' fill her with an appalled sense of what it is to be a nonentity, one who would leave no 'remembrance' behind him. Roxana, as reader of this unpromising 'Journal of his Life' as she calls it (*Roxana*, p. 95), merges her own anxiety with her contempt:

By this Management I found an Opportunity to see what a most insignificant, unthinking Life, the poor indolent Wretch, who by his unactive Temper had at first been my Ruin, now liv'd; how he only rose in the Morning, to go to-Bed at Night [. . .] that he seem'd to be one, who, tho' he was indeed, alive, had no manner of Business in Life, but to stay to be call'd out of it [. . .] that when he was gone, would leave no Remembrance behind him that ever he was here. (*Roxana*, p. 95)

Although she paints pictures, then, of triumph and of ruin, which are immediately impressed upon us—Roxana the deserted wife, half-starved and surrounded by her starving progeny; Roxana the courtesan, at the height of her allure and fortune—it is the slippage of language which determines her course, her loss of that gift—language itself—which Defoe takes as the shaping significance of her history. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Defoe's use of the maid Amy, whose voice fills in the spaces where Roxana cannot speak. Amy is a creature of Roxana's own making who finally surpasses her in vitality and guile. From the moment that Roxana thrusts Amy into bed with her lover the jeweller, this rather commonplace, loyal, pragmatic girl begins the ride to ruin with her mistress, echoing Roxana's depravities with her own, finally outdoing her in sinister worldliness, the more sinister for being part of a passionate servitude towards her mistress. It is one of the most compelling, and one of the strangest accounts of a mistress-maid relationship in literature.<sup>10</sup>

If Roxana finally loses her voice, Amy never stops speaking. She 'had but too much Rhetorick in this Cause' (*Roxana*, p. 39), says Roxana of Amy's urging her

<sup>10</sup> See above, n. 5.

towards prostitution rather than starvation; and Amy is frequently portrayed as the 'urger-on' of Roxana's worst tendencies: she is the Devil's spokeswoman against that other devil of starvation and disappearance. But Defoe's great skill in the placing of Amy is in the *freedom* of voice she is given; not in her representative role only, but in her ordinary delight in speaking. By remaining a maid rather than being a mistress, by being free to roam the streets and talk and question and look about her, by sleeping with the French prince's man rather than the French prince, by never incurring the need for 'confinement' (even her actual confinement—the birth of her daughter as a result of her alliance with the jeweller—is passed over and is never mentioned again), Amy keeps her voice intact, her spirits unwearied, and, until the end of the novel, when she finally, dreadfully, joins Roxana's disgrace, preserves a kind of pragmatic integrity. Her speech has the vigour which Defoe earlier depicted in the *Journal*, where, despite everything—despite terror and disease and calamity—the people of London, it seems, never stop talking.

When Roxana and Amy are caught in a storm between Rouen and Rotterdam, it is Amy who is given all the luxury, all the vociferous outpourings, of a 'Storm-Repentance' (*Roxana*, p. 128):

HEAVEN! Madam, *says she* [. . .] I go to HEAVEN! *No, no*, If I am drown'd, I am damn'd! *Don't you know what a wicked Creature I have been?* I have been a Whore to two Men, and have liv'd a wretched abominable Life of Vice and Wickedness for fourteen Years; *O Madam, you know it*, and GOD knows it; and now *I am to die; to be drown'd; O!* what will become of me? *I am undone for Ever!* ay, Madam, *for Ever! to all Eternity!* *O I am lost! I am lost! If I am drown'd, I am lost for Ever!* (*Roxana*, p. 125)

Such ease of language is the privilege of the underdeveloped character. It is as though Amy is remembering, here, all those gallows confessions which her freedom of movement has given her access to, all those heartfelt 'histories' recounted at the last hour, regretted when they were past regretting, which Defoe himself knew so well and probably composed.<sup>11</sup> It is a language easily accessible, instantly summoned, easily abandoned when all is well. Roxana's linguistic state during the storm is different, and she herself recognizes its difference:

every one of *Amy's* Cries sounded thus in my Ears: I am the wicked Cause of it all; I have been thy Ruin, *Amy*; I have brought thee to this, and now thou art to suffer for the Sin I have entic'd thee to; and if thou art lost for ever, *what must I be?* what must be my Portion?

It is true, this Difference was between us, that I said all these things within myself, and sigh'd, and mourn'd inwardly; but *Amy*, as her Temper was more violent, spoke aloud, and cry'd, and call'd out aloud, like one in an Agony. (*Roxana*, p. 126)

Such agony has its rewards when the storm has past: Amy is grateful for her 'deliverance', resolved to live a better life in future, and, although this mood too passes, it lasts for a little longer, and has a real sense of euphoria about it. Roxana is aware, always, of her darker embroilment in ruin, which no storm can alleviate, nor any repentance allay. Like Crusoe, she is the outcast, but there is

<sup>11</sup> See John J. Richetti, 'Rogues and Whores: Heroes and Anti-Heroes', in his *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700-1739* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 23-59.

no island to receive her, only the barren island of her own heart, from which, like a plague boil which will not break, no confession will break out. Amy is the standard storm-tossed repenting traveller, who makes all the standard responses, vocally and obviously; whereas Roxana is, as she puts it,

in a kind of Stupidity, I know not well what to call it [. . .] my Thoughts got no Vent, as *Amy's* did; I had a silent sullen kind of Grief, which cou'd not break out either in Words or Tears, and which was, therefore, much the worse to bear. (*Roxana*, p. 129)

The narrative is close to gallows repentance scenes here, and Roxana compares herself to that kind of hardened criminal who goes to the gallows with no hope of salvation, because he has no sense of the horror of the life he has lived or the sin he has committed that can give him energy to throw it off.<sup>12</sup> The episode is closed rather limply: 'It is true, *Amy's* Repentance wore off too, as well as mine, but not so soon; however, we were both very grave for a time' (*Roxana*, p. 129). That does not seem such a great claim for Amy's superiority in repentance and softness of heart as compared to Roxana's 'Stupidity'. Roxana, and Defoe himself, seems to give up on this problem, which is essentially what to do with the intelligence of a thinking character who cannot accept the easily offered solution. Defoe's art in discriminating between two temperaments is both emerging and in difficulties here. Roxana both sees Amy's 'Storm-Repentance' for what it is, and envies her the ease with which she enters it; and if this ease argues a kind of innocence, it is one which continues when the storm is over and the talk of the storm follows, where the people in the inn laugh at Amy's fears and Roxana is removed, not part of the 'inn talk', but her silence pregnant with her knowledge of her darker entanglement in ruin, which she confesses to the reader but never (as she might do, were she a warmer character) to Amy herself:

the People in the Inn laugh'd at her, and jested with her; ask'd her, if she had any Sins to confess, that she was asham'd shou'd be heard of? and that she was troubled with an evil Conscience; told her, if she came to Sea, and to be in a Storm, if she had lain with her Master, she wou'd certainly tell her Mistress of it; and that it was a common thing, for poor Maids to confess all the Young-Men they had lain with; that there was one poor Girl that went over with her Mistress, whose Husband was a — r, in — , in the City of *London*, who confess'd, in the Terror of a Storm, that she had lain with her Master, and all the Apprentices so often, and in such and such Places, and made the poor Mistress, when she return'd to *London*, fly at her Husband, and make such a Stir, as was indeed, the Ruin of the whole Family: *Amy* cou'd bear all that well enough; for tho' she had indeed, lain with her Master, it was with her Mistress's Knowledge and Consent, and which was worse, was her Mistress's own doing; *I record it to the Reproach of my own Vice*, and to expose the Excesses of such Wickedness, as they deserve to be expos'd. (*Roxana*, p. 130)

The story of the servant who ill-advisedly confesses all during a storm and lives to regret it is one of those which bow into this novel and bow out again. Its

<sup>12</sup> And Defoe's writing here, as elsewhere in *Roxana*, seems close to an attempt to change the world he describes (see *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, ed. by Deirdre Lynch and William B. Warner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), for a sense that the novel not only is but does). A more telling example of this would be the death of Jonathan Wild (see Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe*, p. 490) in Defoe's own *True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild* (1725).

function here is to emphasize, by its simplicity, Roxana's darker story, which is achieved with the help of Roxana's own, silent commentary, the ironic aside on the usual tale: Roxana's story is not at the curiously liberating mercy of exposure, and that is part of its horror. It is a story which Roxana must keep hidden, not merely on account of its enormity (it is not, until the very end, all that very terrible), but because of the growing complexity of the heroine, her developing inwardness, which as it grows becomes incommunicable. The novel is littered with voices and stories, complete and understandable; only Roxana's cannot be told. At this point, and at various other moments throughout her narrative, Roxana tries to claim the standard excuse for her tale: '*I record it to the Reproach of my own Vice*, and to expose the Excesses of such Wickedness.' But such claims have a limp feel—not, as elsewhere in Defoe, because the real purpose of the telling is the relish of the thing, and the other is a sop to Puritan sensibilities, but because there is, in fact, a real difficulty about where to place the narrative, how to bring this heroine, with all her intelligence and inner complexity, to her proper end: '*what must I be? what must be my Portion?*' becomes a *narrative* cry, a cry which Defoe is, finally, unable to answer.

If Roxana anxiously accommodates and keeps at bay the language of others, as the novel proceeds this becomes a more complicated matter to achieve; for the language of Amy, colourful though it is, vibrating with the life which Roxana cannot command, is not so overpowering as another kind of language which threatens her narrative voice: the language of goodness. The first time this language emerges as a threat to Roxana's progress is in the shape of that other symbolic motif, as powerful as that of storm: the deathbed scene. The French prince, powerful and devoted and generous, has a wife—or, as Roxana prefers to call her throughout, as though in awe of her as a symbolic being, a 'Princess' (just as she prefers for herself the equally symbolic term 'whore'). This wife, confined to the distant world of the Court (whose inner circle, it is implied, Roxana cannot penetrate, for all her flexibility), is an anxious rumour for Roxana, a rumour which she herself, in her account of her, endows with all the characteristics of the fairy tale, the unreachable fiction:

He had a Princess, a Wife, with whom he had liv'd several Years, and a Woman (*so the Voice of Fame reported*) the most valuable of her Sex; of Birth equal to him, if not superiour, and of Fortune proportionable; but in Beauty, Wit, and a thousand good Qualities, superiour not to most Women, but even to all her Sex; and as to her Virtue, the Character, which was most justly her due, was that of, not only the best of Princesses, but even the best of Women. (*Roxana*, p. 107)

The threat of goodness, at the end of this account, veers from the allegorical to the real: 'not only the best of Princesses, but even the best of Women'. It is the goodness of this 'Princess' which brings Roxana's affair with the French prince to an end; for the prince, though able, albeit at times anxiously, to withstand her goodness while she is alive, is helpless in the face of a deathbed plea. The language of Roxana, uneasy, increasingly tormented, is defeated by the simplicity and finality of the powerful language of the deathbed motif:

At this grievous Parting, she said so many passionate kind Things to him; lamented that she had left him no Children; she had had three, but they were dead; hinted to him, that

it was one of the chief things which gave her Satisfaction in Death, as to this World; that she should leave him room to have Heirs to his Family, by some Princess that should supply her Place; with all Humility, but with a Christian Earnestness, recommended to him to do Justice to such Princess, whoever it should be, from whom, *to be sure*, he would expect Justice; that is to say, to keep to her singly, according to the solemnest Part of the Marriage-Covenant; humbly ask'd his Highness Pardon, if she had any way offended him; and appealing to Heaven, before whose Tribunal she was to appear, that she had never violated her Honour, or her Duty to him; and praying to Jesus, and the Blessed Virgin, for his Highness; and thus with the most moving, and most passionate Expressions of her Affection to him, took her last Leave of him, and died the next Day. (*Roxana*, p. 109)

Roxana is the more surely excluded from this scene by being not mentioned, or mentioned only obliquely—as an evil which might afflict a *future* wife. It is the rhetoric of goodness at its most powerful, and it determines the end of this period of Roxana's fortunes. So effective is this 'Discourse' that it initiates change, making of the prince 'quite another Man' (*Roxana*, p. 109). After this the prince disappears from the narrative, repentant and changed. Unlike Amy's, his 'Storm-Repentance' is of a most powerful order, making for him a finality of story. He disappears, and Roxana, who cannot change, who is capable of no such neat finality, begins the next stage of her fortunes.

Decisive and threatening though the princess's deathbed 'sentence' on Roxana is, it belongs, nevertheless, to an allegorical aspect of the work: it is a mere forerunner of Roxana's final defeat by the language of virtue, a language not at her command and which confuses and threatens her. That it is merely a foreshadowing of darker days is apparent in the ensuing dangerous incident with the Dutch merchant and the Jew, which Roxana is frightened by but escapes. In the process she acquires her most worthy lover, the Dutch merchant, and it is in her dealings with him that we can see the process and extent of her solitude, her apartness from the ordinary feelings which the 'decency' of this man represents. He wants to marry her, but Roxana refuses, fired by a hatred of the institution of marriage which has so bound and fettered her, and which—more to the point—now threatens her fortune. The merchant assumes (ignorantly supposing her to be a virtuous widow) that her unwillingness will disappear after their sexual union, and he is bitterly disappointed, and astounded, at her stubborn insistence on remaining single even after she is pregnant with his child. The common female ploy, which we have come to associate with later novels, of bedding before marriage—a risk taken by the woman in the hopes that marriage will follow and salvage her reputation<sup>13</sup>—is reversed in the case of Roxana, who is in a darker world than that of the good-natured scheming of the amiable 'Merchant in *Paris*' (*Roxana*, p. 133). One of the ways in which Roxana's complexity is depicted is by setting her beside the standard article—the maid Amy, the moneymaking merchant. Whereas Robinson Crusoe and Moll hold in themselves both the standard response and the singular experience, Roxana begins to pull the two apart—her singularity of voice and

<sup>13</sup> See, however, Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: Ambition and Innovation* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), pp. 182–214, where she speculatively places *Roxana* in the popular conventional context of the 'woman's novel', it having a heroine more disposed to independence.

character tugs more forcefully than theirs against the standard, conventional world which accommodates her.

This works, with the merchant, a reversal of the ordinary roles and situations: it is the merchant who pins everything on the significance of the sexual act—Roxana nothing at all. For her, it is the *marital* act which is to be avoided—the thing so coveted, normally, by guileless girls who have surrendered their 'all'. Roxana's 'all' has become the riches she has acquired, and that darker 'all' which is her restless consciousness, and which she cannot confess to the merchant that she is guarding from marriage, and from the law which would take it from her. She mentions the possibility of a child in male language, which is wonderfully ironic in its echoing of the usual way in which the rake traditionally reassures his mistress: 'if I was with-Child by him, he shou'd see a Testimony of my Kindness to the Father, for that I wou'd settle all I had in the World upon the Child' (*Roxana*, p. 146).

Roxana cannot admit to the merchant that he is right—that she refuses marriage because she begrudges handing over her fortune—and so she makes of the matter a more heightened, *conscious* ideal than it actually is: she pretends to have a general objection to the the institution of marriage, which prompts an interesting debate between them, and leads to one of Roxana's most emphatic 'discourses', as rhetorically stirring as her earlier one against marrying a fool:

the Pretence of Affection, takes from a Woman every thing that can be call'd *herself*; she is to have no Interest; no Aim; no View; but all is the Interest, Aim, and View, of the Husband; she is to be the passive Creature you spoke of, *said I*; she is to lead a Life of perfect Indolence, and living by Faith (not in God, but) in her Husband, she sinks or swims, as he is either Fool or wise Man; unhappy or prosperous; and in the middle of what she thinks is her Happiness and Prosperity, she is ingulph'd in Misery and Beggary, which she had not the least Notice, Knowledge, or Suspicion of: How often have I seen a Woman living in all the Splendor that a plentiful Fortune ought to allow her? with her Coaches and Equipages; her Family, and rich Furniture; her Attendants and Friends; her Visitors, and good Company, all about her to-Day; to-Morrow surpriz'd with a Disaster; turn'd out of all by a Commission of Bankrupt; stripp'd to the Cloaths on her Back; her Jointure, *suppose she had it*, is sacrific'd to the Creditors, so long as her Husband liv'd, and she turn'd into the Street, and left to live on the Charity of her Friends, *if she has any*, or follow the Monarch, her Husband, into the *Mint*, and live there on the Wreck of his Fortunes, till he is forc'd to run away from her, even there; and then she sees her Children starve; herself miserable; breaks her Heart; and cries herself to Death? This, *says I*, is the State of many a Lady that has had ten Thousand Pound to her Portion. (*Roxana*, pp. 149–50)

And of those ladies, Roxana is one. As the passage proceeds, it moves from a general excuse to a deeply felt remembrance, a fear of poverty, but most of all, a fear of loss of self and of control. It contains her own history, masked. It is a history which cannot be confessed to the merchant, and so is a strange mixture of sincerity and artificiality; it inhabits a strange linguistic landscape, increasingly the fate of Roxana, of the powerful and utterly redundant; both a passionate account and the most commonplace of accounts; it is—like the masked ball later—both Roxana and not Roxana.

For all along, Roxana knows that this impassioned speech is a hypocritical manœuvre on her part. She has no idealized conviction of the barbarity of

marriage; she is, like all Defoe's characters, out for survival in a catch-as-catch-can world. But this episode in the novel prompts more in the reader than a knowing enjoyment of her manœuvre, more than a satisfaction in seeing her wriggle out of a difficult situation with cunning and skill; it prompts also our sense of her loneliness, her apartness from the workings of another's mind—in this case the more innocent workings of mind of the merchant, who is merely worldly and affectionate. This is reiterated by the constant bewilderment of the merchant, his increasing sense that the woman he thought he knew is forever eluding him: 'Where had I liv'd? and what dreadful Families had I liv'd among, that had frighted me into such terrible Apprehensions of things?' (*Roxana*, p. 150), and later, 'you go upon different Notions', says the merchant, 'from all the World' (*Roxana*, p. 156); and it is the merchant's habit of being 'confounded' by Roxana's speech, and his obvious satisfaction with the ways of the 'World', which works to tie her into the lost space of darkness and deepening apprehension which she dreads but comes increasingly to inhabit.

It is in an effort to escape from this impending darkness and dislocation that Roxana removes herself from the scene of her increasingly jaded amours. London has its pockets, its different worlds; one can be the toast of one, invisible in another. The city is the receptacle for many imaginings, many voices, and the part that Roxana chooses, to hide her from her past and from her role as 'a meer *Roxana*' to the judging eyes of her children, is 'the Minories' (*Roxana*, p. 210), and, in assuming the habit—and aping the language—of her Quaker friend, Roxana places her trust in this transformative power. And partly the narrative complies: when the Dutch merchant returns to London, he cannot find Roxana until she is in the retired part of London, for he is not of the court, and cannot recognize those within it. By removing from the grand part of town to the Minories, one can be sure (or so Roxana thinks) that that world can be as if one had never lived in it. But it is not for Roxana as for Moll—she will not be allowed to leave the past behind. As Robinson Crusoe has to account to a father, so Roxana has to account to her grown-up children. It is the realization of how she must appear to her son and daughter—as a scandalous woman from the grand part of town—that makes Roxana decide that she must change her mode of life. Despite the strong pull of Romance in her story, her narrative insists, in the end, upon accountability to reality, to the facts of one's past, one's former actions impinging on the present: one cannot, after all, especially if one is a woman, scatter oneself over the world. Roxana's earlier argument with the merchant, against the finality of action (*Roxana*, pp. 152–53), is proved wrong. When, impatient, and sickened with her mode of life, Roxana exclaims to Amy, 'we cannot put off Servants, and Coach and Horses, and every-thing; leave off House-keeping, and transform ourselves into a new Shape, all in a Moment' (*Roxana*, p. 209), the practical Amy proceeds to organize matters, but Roxana's fears are instinctively correct: she both can and cannot 'transform herself' at this point—the narrative's magic is evaporating, and Roxana is about to be submerged in its reality; or rather, she is poised between its locations, its refusal to decide between Romance and realism, and its refusal to pretend that no choice is required. Roxana is left stranded.

Which brings us to the much-noted, unsatisfactory ending. Roxana's final

collision with the language of goodness comes with the re-emergence of her own daughter. Desperate as Roxana is to shake off her former history, to pursue the transforming magic of Romance, she is faced with the workings of reality in the inescapable form of a daughter who has been growing to womanhood as she has been ageing, and who is ready to ask the most basic questions of origin, and assert the predominance of natural affection, as by contrast Roxana is desperate to escape her past and refuses—indeed, has put herself beyond the reach of—all natural human feeling. The unsettling account of Roxana's daughter's longing for her mother, for human affection, the need for parental acknowledgement, swamps the narrative after all the usual Defoe-like confusion about children. Susan's passionate pursuit of Roxana puts one in mind of Savage in Johnson's *Life*, lurking night after night outside the window of another fashionable lady who wanted none of him.

The search for origin, which came to be, after all, one of the major devices and concerns of the novel form as it developed, becomes in *Roxana* the alternative plot, the device threatening Roxana's own plot of escape from origins, just as her daughter Susan is the alternative heroine. It is Susan's demands and voice which one hears, sharpened and polished, in later novels—in *Jane Eyre*, in *Bleak House*. Such a heroine's neediness, lifted to the forefront of the novel's concerns and often given a first-person narrative voice, is transmuted into vitality, and the lost child becomes, not merely a spectre who invites our sympathy, but a serious vehicle for the novel's concerns and wisdom—and one who, in the case of Esther in *Bleak House*, will survive and transform the transgressions of her mother.

The end of *Roxana* is dominated by Roxana's attempts to silence this too truthful, too vitally emerging heroine. In the murder of Roxana's daughter by her devoted maid Amy, Roxana's hell is *uncertainty*. The irresolution of all Defoe's characters—whether to go or stay, whether to stand up or sit down, cry out or be silent—acquires in Roxana's case a peculiar, urgent force. Her desperate enquiries for her daughter's whereabouts impose upon her an imaginary landscape of alternative horrors: her daughter does not die a certain death: there is no body found, no public hue and cry, no suggestion that Amy and Roxana herself are in any danger of being hanged as a murderess and her accomplice. Rather, her daughter dies every conceivable death, and Roxana's torment is an inner one, tied to her sense of self and to her past and conscience:

As for the poor Girl herself, she was ever before my Eyes; I saw her by-Night, and by-Day; she haunted my Imagination, if she did not haunt the House; my Fancy show'd her me in a hundred Shapes and Postures; sleeping or waking, she was with me: Sometimes I thought I saw her with her Throat cut; sometimes with her Head cut, and her Brains knock'd-out; other-times hang'd up upon a Beam; another time drown'd in the Great Pond at *Camberwell*. (*Roxana*, p. 325)

The deed of the murder itself is curiously lodged between a fact in the narrative and a haunting fear of Roxana's imagination. Murder, generally in a novel a matter around which a plot settles or proceeds, is here a matter of *emptiness*: the girl merely disappears, and Amy disappears, and into the space which is left (a space perilously near the end of the novel) is poured all Roxana's anguish,

her sense of her remoteness from all healthy good feeling, her lostness in her own ruined character; and, because this is Defoe, this is finished off by a hasty account of her fall from financial prosperity too:

the Blast of Heaven seem'd to follow the Injury done the poor Girl, by us both; and I was brought so low again, that my Repentance seem'd to be only the Consequence of my Misery, as my Misery was of my Crime. (*Roxana*, p. 330)

This ending, often noted for its inconclusiveness, tries to make neat what is muddled and complex. In her account of her eventual ruin, Roxana tells us that any repentance she might indeed feel is hidden by the extent of her misfortunes: in other words, any gesture she made towards sincerity would not be attended to, as it would be taken for an automatic response, a mere 'Consequence' of her fallen circumstances. It would be a 'Storm-Repentance', and have the same status.

I have said that Roxana as a narrator has interesting links with the narrator of the *Journal of the Plague Year* of two years earlier. But in one respect, at least, H. F.'s task is easier: his London recovers naturally, providing for him a natural end. Roxana's torment is, she implies in her final words, yet fully to emerge: a second novel, it has been suggested,<sup>14</sup> is sketched out, which she cannot write. This advantage does not, however, prevent H. F. from a hesitant ending—'I can go no further here' (*Journal*, p. 192), he says, and, so as not to appear churlish—for what he really wants to do is complain about the continuance of Londoners in their wicked ways, despite their great deliverance—he ends with, as he puts it, 'a coarse but sincere Stanza of my own' (*Journal*, p. 193)—a kind of nursery rhyme, a standard ditty to be sung in the streets, which places the plague firmly back into the annals of 'happenings', so simplifying his account as he withdraws from it.

This simplification does not jar as Roxana's does: the curious status of the *Journal* between historical commentary and novel allows and makes easy such a withdrawal, even though much has happened in the midst of the *Journal* to make it more complex than mere commentary. But Roxana cannot retreat into an annal. Her story has been not that of a common calamity, but of the calamity of an individual life and psyche. This is confirmed by her final giving up on linguistic richness, which she has struggled to hold onto throughout. She succeeds, in her final words, in holding on to the idea of herself as a 'Memorial [. . .] a standing Monument', and it is the monumental word of warning which ends her narrative. 'I am a Memorial to all that shall read my Story' (*Roxana*, p. 161), she says earlier. But Roxana is nothing so simple or so static. She is both monument and a constant resister of monumental assertions. In narrative terms she would like to be, to adapt the words of the narrator of the *Journal of the Plague Year*, that provisional, paradoxical thing—a 'poor recovering Creature' (*Journal*, p. 192). But she is not London, and so cannot be that.

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<sup>14</sup> See Durant, p. 166.

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