

Monarch of All I Can Sway: “Crusoeing” Alongside Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”

Val Czerny

Pursuing the terms, “remaking” and “eroding,” this exploration celebrates the fictional lie inherent in every backward search—in any overwriting of a construct conceived of as “original.” Because the search for origins inevitably involves mystery, the disclosure of earlier layers of “reality” is not always easily achieved, for when reality is “remade,” the “truth” of its source material—its foundation—necessarily involves a certain masking through the erosion of accepted constructs. Beginning with Robert Louis Stevenson, moving to Daniel Defoe, and concluding with Alexander Selkirk, I illustrate how the claim of Oscar Wilde’s character, Vivian, in “The Decay of Lying,” that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” upholds the palimpsestic narrative, which, giving more credit to the re-envisioned account than to the historical one, exaggerates the truth of the mask so spiritedly and indefatigably that the dematerialized life under the mask reveals itself as uninspiringly life-less.

The topic, “Remaking Reality: Eroding the Palimpsest,” for this issue of the *FACS literary* journal speaks most clearly through two terms: “remaking” and “eroding.” Those two concepts together announce the joyous creation of the exaggerated lie—that is, of the fictional lie that is inherent in every backward search, in any overwriting of a construct conceived of as “original.” Because the search for origins inevitably involves mystery, the disclosure of earlier layers of “reality” is not always very easily achieved, for when reality is “remade,” the “truth” of its source material—of its foundation—necessarily involves a certain masking through the erosion of accepted constructs.

The idea of cultural “erosion,” in particular, figures notably in Jan Walsh Hokenson’s study of comparative literature. In “The Culture of the Context: Comparative Literature Past and Future” (2003), Hokenson draws our attention to what she calls “the mass evaporation of culture.” The concept of “culture,” she maintains, is rapidly coming to a desperate pass. She writes: “Even as the historically palimpsestic structures of culture are disaggregating around the world into discrete language groups and ethnic assertions . . . the electronic means of overarching all these

cultural groups are being perfected” (73). According to Hokenson, when literary histories are written in the language of the worldwide web, “the local vanishes into the global” (73). As culture evaporates, disaggregates and vanishes, the comparatist alone, she asserts, will “*really* know what happened” (73; emphasis added). However, in literature (comparative or not) and in life, can anyone *really* know what *really* happened? When “reality” is made, it is also unmade, and those two processes can sometimes merge in unexpected ways—for our “realities,” like dreams, are founded upon fictional constructs.

In her comprehensive comparative study of the genre of the novel, entitled *The True Story of the Novel* (1996), Margaret Anne Doody relates dreaming to the process of creating fictional narratives. Our subconscious, she says, cannot escape the desire to tell stories: “A dream (which in art *or* ‘real life’ can be known only through being narrated) is a kind of high compliment to narration; it raises the possibility that our very subconscious, the inner self, thinks narratively and that any glimmerings of personality or personhood cannot but be organized around narrative” (129; emphasis in original). Our identity, then—our very “personhood”—both thinks narratively and is defined by narrative. Thus, our pasts, present, and futures are shaped by the specific narratives that individualize us. When we *share* narratives, as a culture or cultures, we participate in agreeing that certain stories—certain myths—about our origins are more valid than others. To maintain a particular order of existence, then, patriarchal cultures, for example, search for their origins in stories that relate those desired narratives that appear to decipher constructions of power. Doody points out that “[i]t is Derrida who taught us that ‘Origin’ is a patriarchal concept, and that we should abandon the search for ‘origins.’ To undertake such a search is to comply with a plot of power; all origins are fictitious” (307). In the same way that origins are fictitious, so, too,

are the “truths” that assert that silence has defined the speech acts of subordinated—or “unhomed,” to use Homi K. Bhaba’s term¹—persons and cultures.

If the erosion of the palimpsest means that different voices are creating new narratives—remaking reality, as it were—and if we acknowledge the fictitious nature of origins, then our searching both for facts and for expression in the narratives of our lives must involve not so much *backward* looking, but immediate, present attentiveness. For example, in “Creolization as Agency in Woman-Centered Folktales” (2004), Lee Haring challenges Gayatri Spivak’s renowned question, “With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 27) by directing our attention to Spivak’s reference to the “words of Michel Foucault that neither critic fully understands. Criticism must turn ‘to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, political or historical value’” (Haring 176). That “layer of material,” says Haring, has been “speaking since the Stone Age” through “storytelling, singing, . . . and numerous other activities, which . . . are studied under the name of folklore. . . . The challenge today is not to the subaltern to find a voice but for those in dominant positions to develop ears” (176-77). Because storytelling and singing, for instance, are ever-present, the attempt to hear their narratives by searching under layers is one that will always frustrate—will invariably appear to have “no pertinence” or value for history—for with the ceaseless erosion of the palimpsest comes, necessarily, an original narrative apparently unconcerned with its origins. Appearing to mask its origins by scraping away its previous lives and remaking a new account, the “topmost” palimpsestic narrative gives more credit to the re-envisioned account than to the historical one—exaggerating the mask so colorfully and so completely that the life *under* the mask, although foundational to the new narrative—is life-less. In other words, although sustained by the earlier account, the “re-making” is not reliant upon the

“making.” Rather, the earlier “making”—which erodes as the re-making takes place—seeks, in fact, to be modeled after the re-making, and cannot help but be defined by the ink-slinging mask—the imaginative, colorful, “folklorish” narrative that sparks more interest than the dematerialized “life” underneath.

Oscar Wilde, in two of his essays, “The Truth of Masks” and “The Decay of Lying,” celebrates the superiority of the mask over the “truth”—or the “actual”—and provides the theoretical means for envisaging the worth of fictional constructs over factual “realities.”² For Wilde, what is normally considered “reality” is less significant than the superior illusion that art makes possible. In “The Truth of Masks,” he writes: “The facts of art are diverse, but the essence of artistic effect is unity” (1077). Thus, art—and principally, in this case, theatric art—is able to “combine in one exquisite presentation the illusion of actual life with the wonder of the unreal world” (1068). In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde presents a dialogue between two characters, Vivian and Cyril, in order to demonstrate the cultural impairment, through a reliance on concrete substantiality, of the wonder inherent in artistic effect. Referring to the literature emerging in France at the time, Vivian points out that certain works have lost their power “now that we have learned . . . that [the authors’] characters were taken directly from life. . . . In point of fact what is interesting about people . . . is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask” (975). Arguing accordingly for the preferred mask, Vivian then begins to read to Cyril his article, intended for the *Retrospective Review*, which Vivian has entitled, “The Decay of Lying: A Protest.” The “protest” emerges, he explains, from a perspective of “modern days,” where “the fashion of lying has almost fallen into disrepute” and where exaggeration—“if nurtured in congenial and sympathetic surroundings, or by the imitation of the best models, might grow into something really great and wonderful”—has been increasingly replaced with “careless

habits of accuracy” (972-73). As if to emphasize a nurtured sense of exaggeration, Vivian asserts: “The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations” (975).

In fact, many times authors do *not* reveal associations with life as inspiration for their works, but nonetheless, whenever a good work of fiction is produced, *littérateurs* begin searching either for its origins in life and in nature or for some “clue” in an author’s biography that might provide a source for the author’s inspiration—not recognizing, as Doody points out, that all origins are fictitious. If, instead, we follow Vivian’s line of reasoning—observing that he, like the artist he reveres, uses exaggeration—then the act of recognizing that the “only real people are the people who never existed” is a step forward in acknowledging not merely the *influence* of art in our lives, but its creative, often unconscious, but nevertheless material presence in the “real life” choices we make. Beginning with Robert Louis Stevenson, moving to Daniel Defoe, and then ending with Alexander Selkirk, I now mean to explore the interrelatedness between art and life in order to examine and advance Vivian’s hyperbolized claim that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (992), for Vivian’s assertion helps to clarify the lively eccentricities of the palimpsestic recountal. Giving more credit to the re-envisioned account than to the historical one, the palimpsestic narrative exaggerates the truth of the mask so spiritedly and so indefatigably that the dematerialized life *under* the mask, although perhaps substratal to the artistic narrative, is, in fact, uninspiringly life-less.

Although Vivian criticizes Robert Louis Stevenson for trying to make his stories “too true” (973), he focuses only on *The Black Arrow* and on Stevenson’s character, Dr. Jekyll, whose transformation, says Vivian, “reads dangerously like an experiment out of [the medical journal] the *Lancet*” (973). Vivian erroneously makes no reference to Stevenson’s highly imaginative

Treasure Island, a work that continues to live and affect children and adults alike—a tale susceptible to the drawing power of Daniel Defoe’s fictional characters. Explaining the proposition that life imitates art, Jeannette-Marie Mageo clarifies that what “Wilde meant was that the variety of experiences and modes of living depicted in art are often affected by people generally” (590); that is, people receive an impression from the “variety of experiences” that artistic renderings imagine and act upon them, producing some decisive, tangible alteration in their lives, in the lives of others, or even, by extension, in other disciplinary studies—such as the sciences, or in philosophy, for instance. Can figures, then, like the young Jim Hawkins or the pirate, Long John Silver, affect “life” outside of art? Certainly, perhaps in much the same way that Stevenson’s thought was affected by Defoe’s characters, who, according to John Robert Moore, managed to fashion, considerably, the very codes of behavior for Stevenson’s life.

Although Stevenson claimed that Long John Silver was based on his real-life friend, William Henley, Moore has claimed that “a far closer analogue for Silver is ‘Johnson’s’ [that is, Defoe’s] one-legged pirate, . . . who told the unfortunate Captain Mackra . . . that he would ‘stand by him’—the very words which Silver kept repeating to Jim Hawkins” (53-54). And although Stevenson, “annoyed by the suggestion that *Treasure Island* was inspired by Defoe,” referenced other texts for his source of inspiration, Moore points out that from “childhood to his last years Stevenson played at being a Crusoe,” for not only did he tell of “his boyhood ‘Crusoeing’ on the sands at North Berwick,” but having “heard the book in his infancy,” he “remained on terms of familiarity with it; and it colored his thought, his writing, and much of the conduct of his life” (41, 38). Thus, if Stevenson is to be criticized for being “too true,” it is because, at least in *Treasure Island*, he is “too true” to Crusoe, a real person who never existed.

If we agree with Moore that “much of the conduct” of Stevenson’s life was affected by the ubiquitous, “real life” presence of Crusoe, then we can begin to see how art is not merely influential, but how it elicits transformation. Summarizing the tenet behind “The Decay of Lying,” Lawrence Danson explains that its viewpoint is one which “imagines a world in which truth is what we make and unmake, a world where nature prevents us from seeing . . . the always *new forms* of human creation” (58-59; emphasis added). Even if the physical William Henley was the inspiration for the creative lie of Long John Silver, we are neither familiar with nor intrigued by Henley. We unequivocally know Long John Silver because he was “unmade” from Henley and most likely from Defoe’s one-legged pirate, and perhaps from some determined, self-sufficient trait of Crusoe’s. To wish to return to Henley as the source of Stevenson’s inspiration is to be unable to see Long John Silver for who he is, for the interrelatedness of life and art—bound together in an enduring, unified work of art—is a mystery of the creative imagination, a mystery which evolves out of the desire to create an exaggerated lie.

Stevenson could create a “new form” in *Treasure Island* because he enjoyed “Crusoeing,” and Defoe could create a “new form” in *Robinson Crusoe* because he enjoyed imaginative sojourning. When critics trace the real-life origins of *Robinson Crusoe*, they find Alexander Selkirk. But Selkirk’s four year, four month experience of being marooned on the island of Juan Fernandez was not initially chronicled in ink by the pen of Defoe. As Charles Wells pointed out in 1905, a certain Mr. Minto “—referring evidently to the accounts by Woodes Rogers [in *A Cruising Voyage Round the World*], of [Richard] Steele in the *Englishman*, and to the narrative by [Edward] Cook, one of the officers of the expedition—observes that the actual experience of Selkirk went floating about for several years until it finally settled and took root in the mind of the one man of his generation who was capable of working out its possibilities” (1358). Those

“possibilities,” in the form of *Robinson Crusoe*, have extended far and wide, so much so that “[e]conomists have found it the most direct analysis of their problems; . . . L.P. Jacks . . . declared that his adult life was shaped by its teaching,” and “Rousseau found in it a philosophy of society” (Moore 37-38). In *Emile*, his definitive work on the philosophy of education, Rousseau asserts that “the child who reads ceases to think,” so a child should have “no book but the world,” except, that is, for one book: *Robinson Crusoe* (qtd. in Sahakian 94). Rousseau may have been outwardly asserting that children should learn through their senses and distrust art since it appears to be the antithesis of nature, but by idealizing *Robinson Crusoe*, he helps to support Vivian’s claim that “the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression,” and life “realise[s] that energy” through art (992). Whether he consciously knew it or not, Rousseau, like Stevenson, enjoyed “Crusoeing,” for Crusoe, in Rousseau’s mind, must surely have been “real” enough to be admitted into his “world-only”-based curriculum.

There is a certain irony in searching for the life inspiration for a work like *Robinson Crusoe* that extends even beyond the outwardly contradictory curriculum of Rousseau, however, for—similar to Stevenson, the economists, L.P. Jacks, and Rousseau—the person most affected by the real life figure of Crusoe may have been Selkirk himself. Through the accounts of Woodes Rogers and Richard Steele, Selkirk became a public figure (Williams 87), but Defoe’s novel unmade a mere “account” into a real adventure. The first printing of one thousand copies of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was followed by a second, third, and fourth printing, and was translated into “French, Dutch, German, Spanish and Russian, making Crusoe one of the world’s most recognized fictional characters” (Selcraig 90). Part of Crusoe’s appeal is that his adventure is not four years and four months long, but twenty-eight years, two months, and nineteen days long (Defoe 211). In that extended, rather exaggerated period of time,

Crusoe becomes attached to his island. At one point, in the sixth year of his “reign,” Crusoe attempts to venture out in a boat but finds himself at the mercy of the sea and its currents, unable to return to the shore, and so he gives himself “over for lost” (96-97). Separated from his inaccessible refuge, Crusoe remarks: “I looked back upon my desolate solitary island as the most pleasant place in the world, and all the happiness my heart could wish for was to be but there again” (98). For Crusoe, the island, being *his*, signifies the freedom to reign. Woodes Rogers, in his account of his rescue of Selkirk from Juan Fernandez, calls Selkirk the “Governour (tho we might as well have nam’d him the Absolute Monarch of the Island)” (74). However, once rescued, brought back to London, and reestablished in Scotland, Selkirk finds that he is “Monarch” no more.³

Although Selkirk receives a sizeable share of plunder from his excursions at sea, when he returns to Scotland, he builds a cave for himself in the rocky piece of land behind his father’s house. “His consolation in the day,” writes Diana Southami, “was to be there alone and watch the sea. He watched perhaps for a passing sail. ‘O my beloved Island!’ he was supposed to have said. ‘I wish I had never left thee’” (190). However, according to Southami, Selkirk does attempt to live according to social conventions by agreeing to marry Sophia Bruce and by becoming a naval officer “on a wage, with a pension” while only traveling to and from the Royal Navy dockyards in England (193-94). It is only after *Robinson Crusoe* is published that Selkirk decides to abandon Sophia and his relatively riskless life of sailing between British ports. In November of 1720, explains Southami, Selkirk signs on “as First Mate of a naval warship HMS *Weymouth* which was to make a ‘Voyage to Guinea’” (201). Perhaps in Portsmouth, hearing of the *Weymouth*’s voyage to the Gold Coast, Selkirk figured he could find another ship off of the west coast of Africa bound for South America and its western remote islands. It would be the first step in a voyage back to,

as Crusoe describes it, “my old habitation, where I found everything safe and quiet, [and where] I began to repose myself, live after my old fashion, and take care of my family affairs” (138). Souhami points out, however, that the *Weymouth* takes him “far from the Island’s heart and to the sea’s bed” (203), where he dies of disease aboard ship—never making it even as far as Guinea. Not knowing he would so quickly meet up with death, Selkirk makes a decision to leave a non-solitary life in Britain only *after* Defoe’s novel had been printed and reprinted several times, quickly becoming the “quintessential survival story” (Souhami 195) of all time. Being inspired by Crusoe’s diligence, creativity, self-sufficiency, and absolute ruling power over his island, Selkirk, like Stevenson, could very well have wanted to go “Crusoeing” in order to attempt to find that lost sense of “repose” that eluded him in his life in Britain.

Even though Vivian in “The Decay of Lying” attacks Stevenson for his realism, what Stevenson does in *Treasure Island* and what Defoe does in *Robinson Crusoe* is to create the only real islands, for they are mystical islands of the imagination that are more real than the islands that inhabit our oceans. *Treasure Island* and Crusoe’s island are not Juan Fernandez, but their imaginative energy provides an island like Juan Fernandez with its life, so much so that a man who desired to be rescued from it, after seeing it in a new form—framed in an artful, romantic setting under an artist’s skillful pen—regrets his earlier leave-taking and takes action, when the opportunity is provided, in an attempt to return.

According to John Barnsley, the First Lieutenant of the *Weymouth* in December of 1721, Alexander Selkirk died at 8:00pm on Wednesday, December 13 (Souhami 205); however, Selkirk’s death—following his capricious decision to board the *Weymouth*—is most likely a result of his not being born late enough to know Vivian’s theory that before “romance, with her temper and wonder, [can] return to the land,” we must first “cultivate the lost art of lying” (991). In other

words, it's not enough to want to go "Crusoeing" in an attempt to make our lives imitate art, even if that attempt is a desire to imitate art that masquerades as an imitation of life. Our solitary thoughts must not merely be colored by art. Instead, we must, with exaggeration, color and create as well, necessarily scraping away at the underlying accepted "facts"—until what we create issues forth into existence, so that our invented "Crusoes" become more real, more large, and more true than any Selkirk or any Henley who has thoughtlessly claimed to have possessed flesh and blood.

NOTES

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 13

² Wilde's subtitle for "The Truth of Masks" is "A Note on Illusion," and his essay focuses on artistic effect in the theatre. He points out that the "aesthetic value" of the plays of Shakespeare "does not in the slightest degree, depend on their facts, but on their Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure" (1071). Thinking palimpsestically, we may interpret, then, that the layers beneath the topmost palimpsestic narrative are foundational not due to their specific *factual* accounts, but due to the erasure or evaporation of a reliance upon concrete constructs in favor of a larger narrational "Truth." See Oscar Wilde's "The Truth of Masks" in The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. Ed. J.B. Foreman. New York: HarperCollins, 1966. 1060-78.

³ The famous phrase, "I am monarch of all I survey," is the first line of the poem by William Cowper (1731-1800) entitled, "Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk," published in 1782, sixty-one years after Selkirk's death. Cowper writes: "I am monarch of all I survey, / My right there is none to dispute; / From the centre all round to the sea, / I am lord of the fowl and the brute." Although Cowper challenges the concept of "monarchy" on a lonely, deserted island ("When I think of my own native land / In a moment I seem to be there; / But, alas! recollection at hand / Soon hurries me back to despair"), he, like Defoe, celebrates in Romantic fashion, the "solitary abode" as a "season of rest," where mercy—"encouraging thought!"—provides grace in affliction. For the full text of the poem, see *Luminarium: Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Anniina Jokinen. 1996-2007. 28 Sept. 2007 <<http://www.luminarium.org/eightlit/cowper/selkirk.htm>>.

WORKS CITED

- Danson, Lawrence. Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997.
- Defoe, Daniel. The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe. 1719. London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1906.
- Doody, Margaret Anne. The True Story of the Novel. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1996.
- Haring, Lee. "Creolization as Agency in Woman-Centered Folktales." Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches. Ed. Donald Haase. Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2004. 169-77.
- Hokenson, Jan Walsh. "The Culture of the Context: Comparative Literature Past and Future." Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2003. 58-75.
- Mageo, Jeannette-Marie. "Samoa, on the Wilde Side: Male Transvestism, Oscar Wilde, and Liminality in Making Gender." Ethos 24.4 (December 1996): 588-627.
- Moore, John Robert. "Defoe, Stevenson, and the Pirates." ELH 10.1 (March 1943): 35-60.
- Rogers, Captain Woodes. A Cruising Voyage Round the World. 1712. Santa Barbara, CA: Narrative, 2004.
- Sahakian, Mabel Lewis and William S. Sahakian. Rousseau as Educator. New York: Twayne, 1974.
- Selcraig, Bruce. "The Real Robinson Crusoe." Smithsonian 36.4 (July 2005): 82-90.
- Souhami, Diana. Selkirk's Island: The True and Strange Adventures of the Real Robinson Crusoe. London: Harcourt, 2001.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 24-28.

Wells, Charles. "Defoe and Selkirk at Bristol." The Academy 69 (July/December 1905):
1357-58.

Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying: An Observation." 1891. In The Complete Works of Oscar
Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems & Essays. Ed. J.B. Foreman. New York: HarperCollins,
1966. 970-92.

---. "The Truth of Masks: A Note on Illusion." 1891. In The Complete Works of
Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems & Essays. Ed. J.B. Foreman. New York:
HarperCollins, 1966. 1060-78.

Williams, Ralph Olmsted. "Robinson Crusoe's Island." Modern Language Notes 23.3
(March 1908): 85-87.