"BLACK HOLES" IN DEFOE'S *ROXANA*

Secrets shou'd never be open'd, without evident Utility. (*Roxana* 326)

I remember reading *Roxana* once, then twice, then once more, and being left repeatedly perplexed by some of its episodes – or to be more accurate, some of its conspicuously vague, allusive and even sometimes "missing" episodes. Not so much, of course, as to what they meant, but rather regarding their role and function in the whole narrative and dramatic economy of the text, maybe somewhat like a "dispositif"[1] as understood by Giorgio Agamben. While pondering over the announced and promised "History of this Beautiful Lady", I think I became one of those "virtuous readers" from the preface. I remembered the "Relator" had promised me both "Profit and Delight" (*R* 4), but also, more teasingly, "wicked Action[s]" and "Scenes of Crime" (*R* 3). Thus, I trusted I was to be entertained and instructed, as William Hogarth would have probably put it if he had, a few years later, in the 1730s, produced a serialized "modern moral subject" aptly entitled *Roxana's Progress*. In reality, as I was mostly left with questions, I started looking for answers in order to fill what I viewed, and still view, as some of the disturbing and telling blanks in Roxana's narrative – the suppressed and maybe sometimes repressed "unsaid" of the text.

My initial intuition when I first read *Roxana* could be rephrased as an opening assumption – one could claim that Defoe used the

1. « Tout ce qui a, d'une manière ou une autre, la capacité de capturer, d'orienter, de déterminer, d'intercepter, de modeler, de contrôler et d'assurer les gestes, les conduites, les opinions et les discours des êtres vivants. […] Pas seulement les prisons donc, […] mais aussi le stylo, l'écriture, la littérature […] et, pourquoi pas, le langage lui-même, peut-être le plus ancien dispositif dans lequel, il y a plusieurs milliers d'années déjà, primate, probablement incapable de se rendre compte des conséquences qui l'attendaient, eut l'inconscience de se faire prendre » (Agamben 31-32).

fictitious figure of the Relator, in the Preface, to deceive his readers, and make them believe that, although "it was necessary to conceal Names and Persons" (*R* 2) and though it was "dressed up", this "History" "is to speak for itself" (*R* 2). In fact, Roxana's confessional narrative is not merely purged of "Indecencies, and immodest Expressions" (*R* 3) as claimed in the Preface. There are bigger, conspicuous omissions, longer gaps and deeper blind spots – moments and places in Roxana's thick, multi-layered narrative, where, to paraphrase Robert Browning's famous expression in his dramatic monologue "Andrea del Sarto; Called 'The Faultless Painter'" of 1855, "less is more" (l. 78). Indeed, to unfold further this relevant metaphor, one could say that, on a number of meaningful occasions, Roxana – and the so-called Relator – do hold back the brush, especially when it comes to "painting" vice "in its Low-priz'd Colours" (*R* 3) as explicitly stated in the Preface.

One last introductory point – *Roxana* does have an ending. Granted, it is, to some extent, abrupt and unexpected; it first reads as narratively clumsy and (but that's hardly relevant), psychologically unconvincing. But the "History" does end at one point, at one stage, and on one word – the word "Crime." More precisely "my Crime". This final, late repentant acknowledgment, which also sounds like quite the opposite, that is some ultimate and intimate embrace with vice ("*my* Crime", emphasis mine), is interestingly expressed in a puzzling singular. One contention here is that, having by then fallen into "a dreadful course of calamiti*es*" (*R* 329; emphasis mine), Roxana has, and the readers know it, committed more than one single crime. And yet, till the end, she proves reluctant or maybe even unable to admit, avow and confess more than her most apparent crime, which is her inexhaustible lustful greediness. One could therefore read this long-delayed, partial repentance and guilty confession as a final but incomplete return of the repressed – and therefore a closing but little needed proof that Roxana has indeed kept other crimes hidden from her "virtuous readers". Without turning her story into a "whodunnit?" plot, one may take a closer look at some instances, some "Scenes" as she sometimes calls them, when and where Roxana's confessional narrative teasingly plays a game of criminal and sometimes erotic hide and seek which echoes Roland Barthes' luminous statement in *Le Plaisir du Texte*: "c'est l'intermittence, comme l'a bien dit la psychanalyse, qui est érotique : […] la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition" (19).

As often, the best is to start with the beginning, especially when dealing with such a digressive, convoluted and twisted narrative. When trying to grasp Roxana's ability or inability to tell "everything" to her readers, one of the key sentences is to be found in the opening pages: here, claiming to "give [her] own Character […] as impartially as possible", she states she will do so "as if I was speaking of another-body" (*R* 6). This statement is of course meant to resonate with the Relator's well-known profession that "the Foundation of This is laid in Truth of Fact" (*R* 2). But more tellingly, given the fact that Roxana's relation of her past life is retrospective, one may read this statement as her disguised avowal of some troubling form of out-of-body narrative experience. Positing herself, from the very onset, as the *object* of her narrative does not simply point at some illusory form of unbiased objectivity – a necessary condition to turn an otherwise fictitious story into one perceived as a truthful "History". One could claim that it more fundamentally reveals the potential extent of Roxana's dissociated personality – a mental condition whereby repressed and suppressed traumatic memories lodge themselves deep into the mind, and more importantly deep into the narrative's fabric and pop up or surface here and there, in highly meaningful "Scenes", dressed up sometimes as mere passing references and veiled allusions, sometimes as dreams and visions and sometimes as partial avowals of shameful episodes.

Having been left alone by her first foolish husband, with her five little children and "not one Farthing Subsistance for them" (*R* 12), Roxana claims she then found herself on the verge of utter material distress and absolute famine, hence her decision to abandon her progeny, for their own sake, since their very lives were endangered: "little remain'd, unless, like one of the pitiful Women of *Jerusalem*, I should eat up my very Children themselves" (*R* 18). The Israelites had been blind to the warning signs sent to them by Moses, and had therefore been cruelly castigated by Yahve, and it seems that just like them, Roxana was unable to see in time the Brewer as the "unbearable Creature" (*R* 9) he truly was, and was punished and made to pay a very dear price for that. This seemingly incidental comparison could be read as one early example of what may be called Roxana's "flash" digressions: despite its minimal length, this quick reference projects the narrative into another time and another place, even merely for a fugacious moment. Doing so, it operates like similar, longer narrative outgrowths or loops, and acts like some sort

of a micro Omega letter (Ω), to take up Bernard Pingaud's luminous analogy in *Comme un Chemin en automne* (Pingaud 91-109; something which, of course, should also remind us of Laurence Sterne and Tristram Shandy's well-known attempt at visually rendering the highly convoluted lines followed by his even bumpier narrative). Applying Pingaud's analysis, one could say that this minute allusion to the "pitiful Women of Jerusalem" forces Roxana's "History" to be slightly twisted into a tiny little digressive curve, what he calls "la courbure du sens" – with "sens" both as meaning and direction. Since this biblical reference from the book of *Lamentations* was probably clear to most 18th-century, educated and literate readers, they were thus meant to be shocked by the gory violence of this fantasized scene – a deadly mother turned Cronos and thus committing the twice traumatizing taboo of family cannibalism, even passingly painted as an Old Testament episode. And, more importantly, Pingaud would argue that this short-lived detour opens up onto the darker, traumatizing unconscious of the text, into which we may thus fleetingly peep. If one regards this single, short but startling comparison with Biblical cannibalism as opening onto a vaster, deeper and darker unconscious traumatizing territory, one can more easily make sense of the long and otherwise puzzling obliteration of Roxana's progeny from her narrative. Indeed, being now rid of her children, she enters "a new Scene of Life" (*R* 25) and systematically blacks them out for hundreds of pages. My assumption is that when doing so, she successfully, but only for a while, contains and keeps at bay this initial trauma (almost eating up her children and then deliberately abandoning them) until Susan, whose memory has been repressed, returns as an equally frightening vision, both haunting and hunting her guilt-ridden mother, "as if, *like a Hound*, she had had a hot Scent" (*R* 317).

Now a second point: sight is essential in *Roxana*. To exist, to fill the stage, the heroine must sometimes paradoxically conceal herself and hide from intruding gazes, and sometimes be fully seen, viewed and even exposed to lustful stares. Either way, her narrative is repeatedly, almost obsessively concerned with visions – some of them visions of splendor and wealth, others somber, deeper and possibly more traumatizing – maybe the "Scenes of Crime" (*R* 3) promised to us by a somewhat teasing Relator. Indeed, "Murder, she

wrote" could have been the title of two key episodes from Roxana's narrative. Except that, on these two occasions, Roxana does not exactly *write* about murders; rather, she sees them, she pictures them and has graphic, ghostly, bloody visions popping up before her guilty eyes. Without sending Roxana to the gallows (something she herself explicitly dreads), one may question the conspicuous fact that the Jeweler who first turned her into a rich mistress and Susan who could have exposed her as a "sham lady" (*R* 307) both end up silenced and dead.

In one case – the Jeweler's murder – she claims to have had flashing visions, or "strange Notices" (*R* 55) as she calls them. The term "Second-Sight" she uses may equally refer to her ability to foresee events – that would be precognition – or to picture them despite their remoteness in space – something called remote viewing. In both cases, these are indeed puzzling visions, in particular the second set of such visions on page 55: "*First*, as a Skeleton, not Dead only, but rotten and wasted; *Secondly*, as kill'd, and his Face bloody; and, *Thirdly*, his Cloaths bloody" (*R* 55). The striking feature here is not so much the very graphic goriness of these successive "terrible Shapes" (*R* 55), but rather the order in which they appear. They materialize "all within the Space of one Minute, or indeed, of a very few Moments" (*R* 55) and in some sort of a reversed sequence. The Jeweler's decomposed body is first seen, followed by a close-up on his fresher bloody face and only then a medium shot, less physical, on his equally bloody clothes, his mere outside appearance – as if Roxana's mind could both rewind time, thus playing with narrative sequentiality, and zoom out, thus playing with physical distance. Freudian psychoanalysis says little more when describing the productions of dream-work as series of disorganized – or rather reorganized – flashing visions, both distinct (she uses the word "plainly") and distanced, where a traumatizing episode emerges under the guise of reconnected "terrible Shapes." Here, whether "Second-Sight" enabled her to foretell or to relive in retrospect the Jeweler's murder, Roxana-the-visionary-dreamer makes her readers glimpse at the maybe all too plain symbolic meaning of these criminal "strange Notices." We readers would witness her forbidden wish (to have the Jeweler killed and inherit his fortune) which had been so far kept at bay by unconscious repression. Under the semblance of chronologically re-ordered, visually more and more distanced "Shapes", it would materialize as a less threatening secondary

elaboration, altogether fleeting and dream-like. Indeed, to confirm this assumption, one simply needs to look at the text and witness how Roxana awakes and recovers from these gory visions, gets back on her feet and regains a safe and firm control of her narrative:

> These things amaz'd me, and I was a good-while as one stupid. However, after some time, I began to recover, and look into my Affairs; I had the Satisfaction not to be left in Distress, or in Danger of Poverty. […] in a Word, I found myself possess'd of almost ten Thousand Pounds Sterling, in a very few Days after the Disaster. (*R* 55)

So it seems that Roxana has just teasingly, dangerously and maybe even perversely allowed her readers to glimpse at this fantasized "Scene of Crime", like into some unconscious black hole. And as this murder and its "strange Notices" then simply become equated with some etymological "bad star", she soon emerges from the so-called "Disaster" richer than ever and, more meaningfully, with yet another identity, as "*La Belle veuve du Poictou*" (*R* 57). One possible contention is therefore that the progress, or rather descent, into vice of this equally black widow starts with a highly profitable killing whose repressed memory escaped her guilty mind on one occasion and was fugitively unveiled as a "terrifying Appearance" (*R* 325).

This expression – "terrifying Appearance" – is an intentional quote from Roxana's narrative a few hundred pages further down – the second moment, or "Scene", when her mind is the prey of the bloody images of yet another crime, this time Susan's "foul and most unnatural murder" (*Hamlet* 1.5.25) as the Ghost in *Hamlet* puts it.

To enable Roxana's guilty awareness as a mother – if not her guilty responsibility – to find a much-needed safety valve in the form of sanguinary "Shapes and Postures" (*R* 325), Roxana, clearly acting as the narrator, first sets up an impressive and safe "dispositif" of narrative filters and relays: she only learns of her daughter's death by means of a letter sent to her by the Quaker, a letter which relates the Quaker's oral conversations with Amy about Susan's disappearance – in a few, concise words, the way Amy had "put an End to it" (*R* 323). This is not simply a clever means to confuse the reader by blurring and covering the tracks possibly connecting Susan, Amy and Roxana. One could claim that it also serves as series of screens and arras (*Hamlet* again…), obscuring both the narrative (as to who did what to

whom and who knew of it) as well as the readers' access to Roxana's own anxious mind, which is by then ceaselessly peopled with haunting visions of her dead, dismembered daughter. This time, it is no longer *Hamlet* but *Macbeth* one may turn to, as Susan's murder has indeed "murdered sleep", "the innocent sleep" (*Macbeth* 2.2.36). Indeed, Roxana confesses that Susan's many bloody ghosts come back "ever before [her] Eyes, […] by-Night and by-Day" (*R* 325) in a graphic succession of imagined gory deaths: "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*" (*R* 325). This unique passage is a key moment to understand the workings of what Roxana's death-driven, necrophobiac mind has become. She is obviously the prey of a pattern of repetitive compulsion, under the specific form of ever haunting guilty dreams and visions. But still, she must also make sure that her growing madness-like mental disorder does not prevent her from narrating the rest of her "History." This could be the "useful" reason why she partly opens up and discloses that burdensome traumatizing episode, even if only under the guise of fancied shapes. Indeed, having rapidly regained narrative control, she aptly states a few lines further down: "*Secrets shou'd never be open'd, without evident Utility*" (*R* 326).

So far, we have seen how, in two highly different ways – a passing biblical allusion to cannibalism and the more obsessive presence of haunting deadly visions – Roxana tried to give her readers some sort of sideways, oblique glimpses into the dark, black depths of her anxious, feverish mind. There is a third (and final) strategy, both mental and narrative, which enables her to approach, circumscribe and delineate the painful contours of yet another traumatizing scene, without burning too much the embroidered wings of her infamous Turkish dress. Here, denial, one of the mind's apparently most potent defense mechanisms, seems to be at work – quite aptly so, since the following "scene" is possibly one of the most obscure and darkest of all.

Immediately following the long, flourished descriptions of the two "Turkish dress balls", the insistent, flirting, lustful gazes of the "Masks" on her and the vast amount of money she got from dancing for the gathered, mostly male, assembly, Roxana states: "I was now

in my Element" (*R* 181). Being maybe more fully than ever the exposed center of attention, Roxana has her narrative revolve almost exclusively on herself for a couple of lines: "*I* was as much talk'd of […] *I* did not doubt but […] *my* being so rich […] *my* View." (*R* 181, emphasis mine) And then, accounting for her newly acquired market value, as if abruptly distancing herself from her very own self and becoming a mere valuable commodity, she writes: "for *Roxana* was too high for them" (*R* 181). Instantly, and at first paradoxically, she therefore seems to take up and apply, word for word, what she had announced on page 6: she, indeed, speaks "of another-body" (*R* 6) for the following two teasingly allusive sentences:

> There is a Scene which came in here, which I must cover from humane Eyes or Ears; For three Years and about a Month, Roxana liv'd retir'd, having been oblig'd to make an Excursion, in a Manner, and with a Person, which Duty, and private Vows, obliges her not to reveal, at least not yet. (*R* 181)

Considering Roxana calls this her "Time of Retreat" (*R* 181), and given the etymology of that word "retreat", the necessary question is "what danger did Roxana try to dodge and where did she seek refuge?" One answer would be that, regardless of whom she eloped with (that's only the titillating surface mystery), she did recoil and shrink back into the safer world of mental repression. When stating that this "Scene" cannot be articulated, and may neither be seen nor heard, Roxana clearly does more than simply echo and assume the Relator's opening claim that "*it was necessary to conceal Names and Persons*" (*R* 2). The readers know she could have easily done so by referring, as she constantly does, to "my Lord –" or "the Duke of –", or even "the K–". Having shrouded the name of this "Person" into luring secrecy, she could have narrated this new stage of her moral decay, as yet another means to expose her descent into vice. Since she does not do so, one possible contention is that Roxana is now faced with the uniquely traumatizing, therefore partial memory of some forced, highly shameful retirement. As such, she deals with what Freud called a "pathogenetic experience" by defensively dissociating herself from its past reality, hence the usual features of such a mental state: its sudden irruption and almost equally sudden disappearance, its obsessive lexical field ("I must *cover* […] Roxana liv'd *retir'd* […] *not to reveal*" [emphasis mine]) and its shielding vagueness ("a Scene…, an Excursion…, a Manner…, a Person…"). No longer the *subject* of her own narrative, she becomes a mere *object* for a couple

of lines, safely divested of its painful physical existence. This conspicuous reification thus reveals a state of self-protective psychic numbness which casts a necessary obscuring veil over a scene from which, because of its repressed violence, she finally emerges "not with the same lustre" (*R* 181), tainted and stained, "like an old Piece of Plate, that had been hoarded up some Years, and comes out tarnish'd and discolour'd" (*R* 182).

In fact, to conclude this point, it is interesting to note that Roxana does not easily leave that state of mental self-defense, as if the intrinsic violent of the self-censored "Scene" still lingered for a while and affected her narrative voice. Granted, by means of a safe closing remark, she grasps back the narrative thread and with her "at least, not yet", baits the readers into hoping – quite in vain – that there are more *risqué* details to come. Still, a few lines further down, when mentioning again the where and who of this "Retreat", it seems that the same dissociative defense mechanism is triggered as she states: "it began to be publick, that *Roxana* was, in short, a mere *Roxana*" (*R* 182). Once again, Defoe has her distancing herself from that "other body", turning a personal first name into an impersonal, common noun, a generic noun and yet, one which is inevitably branded by her shameful infamy.

In his essay on "Vanity", Michel de Montaigne makes this well-known, enlightening statement about his use of digressions: "Cette farcissure est un peu hors de mon thème. Je m'égare, mais plutôt par licence que par mégarde. Mes fantaisies se suivent, mais parfois c'est de loin, et se regardent, mais d'une vue oblique" (*Essais* III, 9). The four "Scenes" which have been analyzed may be regarded as "farcissures" of some sort, outgrowths or misgrowths departing and meandering away from what the readers are meant to believe is the main steady narrative; they seem to be moments when the "History of this beautiful Lady" hardly progresses, but they may also be regarded as fleeting insights into Roxana's painful "fantasies." They are also those dark places, those somber areas, those black mental holes which can be neither spoken of nor read frontally. Roxana must step aside from her more factual narrative and use a passing, morbid comparison, haunting dream-like visions or a highly allusive evocation to gain partial access to her traumatized mind; the readers must likewise stand a little away ("de loin"), or in some sideways,

oblique position to apprehend some of the violent emotional shocks "Buried in the Dark" (*R* 2), as the Preface had stated, maybe obliquely as well. In all four circumstances, a form of death anxiety is a work – be it the fantasized cannibalistic death of her children, the two violent murders of the Jeweler and of Susan, or, more metaphorically, the momentary death of the subject, when Roxana is reduced to an object, the mere topic of her narrative.

To fully conclude, a final oblique wink at Laurence Sterne's masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*: it is well known that Tristram, the narrator, devastated by Yorick's painful death, pushes sentimental inexpressibility to its utmost limit, by resorting in volume I, chapter XII, to the famous black page, a witty case of absolute visual and narrative opacity. Conversely, Defoe does not let Roxana resort to such black mourning pages whenever faced with her recurrent symptoms of thanatophobia. Instead, he seems to force her repeatedly into an even more tormenting introspection of her many shameful crimes: "Alas, poor ROXANA."

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