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“That which exists not”:  
Collective and Individualistic Modes of Fictionality in the Works of Daniel Defoe and Captain

Charles Johnson

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## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>P. 3</b>
<b>Novelistic Fictions: An Overview</b>	<b>P. 6</b>
<b>Alternate Modes of Nonreferentiality</b>	<b>P. 10</b>
<b>Defoe and Radical Individualism</b>	<b>P. 21</b>
<b>The Road Less Traveled: Social Critique and Speculation in the <i>General History of the Pyrates</i></b>	<b>P. 25</b>
<b>The Pirate as Novelistic Hero: Reception and Adaptation of the <i>General History</i></b>	<b>P. 44</b>
<b>Defoe and Reintegration</b>	<b>P. 53</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>P. 60</b>

## Introduction

The novel, in its loosely-defined modern form—fictional prose narrative, realistic, with individual protagonist(s) and some level of psychological complexity—has long been the dominant genre of English fiction. Yet this has not always been the case. Its appearance is dated by present scholarship at around the beginning of the eighteenth century, though it is not

considered to have achieved its full emergence until about midcentury. Nor did the novel emerge in a vacuum. Rather, marginal works, which have often been excluded from later iterations of the literary canon but were extremely popular in the period, give us invaluable insight into the full spectrum of print production and into the kinds of narrative that the novel developed from.

This paper will focus on two aspects of novelistic form: the individual protagonist and the question of fictionality. I will begin by highlighting an often overlooked or dismissed early moment in the emergence of a fictional poetics in the early 1720's in a succession of the prefaces of Daniel Defoe's novels, arguing that the transition to what scholars today identify as novelistic fictionality could already be seen in motion at this early date, and exploring the poetics of fiction that Defoe creates to enable readerly identification with his individual protagonists. Then, I will compare Defoe's first two novels to another, older form of fictionality that was alive and well in the period, following from a subset of the genre of voyage narratives, the tradition of utopian narrative. I will attempt to show the ways in which Defoe's new fictionality diverges from this established form of narrative, embracing a new and more individualistic bent and a kind of imaginative speculation that aims at very different social ends. This case study will provide insight into the development of the kind of fictionality that the novel employed over the course of the century and in many cases still employs today; a verisimilar narrative with an individual protagonist through whom the reader vicariously experiences the events of the story.

In order to craft the clearest juxtaposition to Defoe's early novels, I have chosen a work which is believed to have been written by his onetime colleague and ideological opponent, Nathaniel Mist: the 1724/1728 *General History of the Pyrates*. Though ostensibly a factual work, the *General History* is also full of fanciful inaccuracies; as historian Arne Bialuschewski writes, "nobody has ever drawn a line between factual account and fiction in this book" ("Pirate Voyages" 258). Though the fictionalization of this text creates problems for historians, it opens

avenues of inquiry for the literary scholar: the opportunity to study the *History* as a work of popular literature. Like Defoe's novels, the *History* engages in imaginative speculation. Yet it embraces a different, more collectivist kind of fictionality than the novels do, one that follows collective protagonists and lends itself to wholesale social speculation and critique.

The *General History* presents itself as a how-to guide for privateers in avoiding charges of piracy as well as to shipmasters in general in avoiding the haunts of pirates (3). Marketed, however, as Lincoln Faller suggests, to both lower and upper middle-class audiences, the work was certainly not intended for scholars and historians or for shipmasters and shipowners alone, but for a popular audience (*Turned to Account* 47), and it appears in multiple octavo and duodecimo editions as well as in four lavishly illustrated folio editions. In fact, it went into at least 20 editions in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It was also serialized in at least one weekly paper.<sup>2</sup> This popularity makes the *General History* a comparable text to Defoe's popular first novels; it was immensely successful with the reading public during the same time period. Yet its reception, adaptation, and illustration tone down or ignore its political and social speculation.

Examining the two kinds of fictionality I outline above, their accompanying social and political speculation, and the patterns of their reception will, I believe, enable the reader to better understand some of the social and political tendencies that made the novel's individualistic fictionality so much more appealing to audiences over the course of the century than the more collectivist narratives that the *General History* exemplifies, and perhaps even shed light on the reasons why the novel evolved the way it did. Though it would be beyond the scope or the length of this paper to revise at large the history of the novel's emergence on the British literary scene, I

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Gosse's *Bibliography of the Works of Capt. Charles Johnson* lists 20 confirmed editions and five unconfirmed, and I have encountered seven more. These include: a 1725 edition held at the Library of Congress, a 1729 edition held at the British National Library, 1765 and 1788 editions also at the British Library, a 1769 edition at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, an undated edition at the Huntingdon Library, and an undated edition held at the Houghton Library at Harvard. All of these are available for viewing on *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.

<sup>2</sup> *Brice's Weekly Journal*, Exeter, starting with issue 24, Friday, October 22, 1725.

wish to highlight a specific moment in it, exploring important examples that will perhaps complicate and develop our understanding of the rich, chaotic process of the formulation and reception of the genre.

### Novelistic Fictions: An Overview

In examining the fictionality of the early novel one of the foremost critical voices to consider is that of Catherine Gallagher, who, in her excellent essay on the novel's "discovery" of verisimilar fictionality, points out that the idea of a verisimilar fictional narrative was virtually unknown until the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This, she argues, was because invented narratives were characterized and recognized by their impossibility: by being unrealistic, they made it clear that they had no claim to truth, and avoided charges of libel or deception. This *unrealistic* fiction is the kind of narrative that, according to Sir Philip Sidney, "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth" (qtd. Gallagher 337). It was the mid-eighteenth-century novel, on the other hand, that first allowed invented verisimilar narration—"fiction"—to avoid an indictment of deception. The reason for this, Gallagher explains, is because nonreferential<sup>4</sup> narrative could still be seen to reveal truth: by not referring to any specific person, it could refer to humanity as a whole and, by extension, the reader in particular, enabling the reader to engage in an experimental, vicarious experience that created genuine knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Gallagher dates the acceptance of the idea of credible fictional narrative to the time of Fielding, whose novels in the early 1740's assert their ability to "refer to a whole class of people in general (as well as in private) because its proper names do not refer to persons in particular"

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3 Here Gallagher represents the current critical consensus. See Bender (43) and McKeon (110).

4 Gallagher discusses the referentiality of the novel's proper names; here she follows Ian Watt, though Watt raises the concern only briefly (18). I will use the terms "referent" and "referentiality" in a slightly larger sense, as many elements within a story may or may not have historical, factual referents: characters, events, settings, and objects. This broader kind of referentiality and its binary opposition to nonreferentiality is to be distinguished from the other binary this paper will explore, that of historicity and fictionality. Thus it is possible to tell a fictional tale with referential characters—a libel—or a historical tale with nonreferential characters, as we will see that *Robinson Crusoe* claims to do.

5 "Truth," for the purposes of this paper, will mean a general or larger fact about the reader or about the world, whether a religious or universal truth, a truth about the particular efficacy of a political system, or a personal realization about one's own self. Knowledge, on the other hand, is the quality of knowing a particular truth. Thus a story *creates* knowledge by *revealing* a particular fact or truth to the reader.

(Gallagher 342). Before Fielding, she tells us, the eighteenth-century novel “was still shackled by outmoded criteria”: namely, the culturally perceived responsibility of verisimilar narrative to adhere to strict factuality (341). Thus the 1720’s, when Defoe’s novels (1719-1724) were written, was a transitional period for the emerging category of fiction. It had not yet given up its claims to referentiality.

Yet the rise of fictionality was a less straightforward and more complex process than Gallagher seems to suggest. In fact, verisimilar fiction’s ability to investigate general truths was already known and being exploited decades before the novel’s complete public emergence as a fictional genre. Even ostensibly factual works clearly extended their individual characters’ experiences to apply to mankind as a whole. The *General History of the Pyrates* (1724), for example, opens with the following statement of purpose:

this Book may fall into the Hands of some Masters of Ships, and other honest Mariners, who . . . find themselves reduced to great Distresses . . . it may be a Direction to such as those, what Lengths they may venture to go, without violating the Law of Nations, in case they should meet other Ships at Sea . . . which should refuse to trade with them for such Things as are absolutely necessary for the Preservation of their Lives” (3).

Here the *History* explicitly invites readers to imagine, inhabiting the perspective of the book’s characters to see to what point they may safely go without engaging in a criminal act. This is exactly the kind of knowledge-making power that Gallagher describes in fiction: “One thinks immediately of merchants and insurers calculating risks . . . but no enterprise could prosper without some degree of imaginative play” (346).

The mechanics of this narrative phenomenon have been explored at length by John Bender, who in his 2012 book *Ends of Enlightenment* highlights the similarity between novelistic plot and planned experiment (31). Bender describes ways in which the formal realism and other narrative techniques that the early novel employed mimicked those of scientific exploration and experimental reporting in the period (as documented by historians of science Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer) and created a sense of “virtual witness”: readers evaluating and drawing



conclusions from the events, actions, and outcomes of a story (40). This technical apparatus of experience-making became the foundation for the epistemological function that Gallagher describes. Yet though Bender sees early writers like Defoe employing the technique, he, like Gallagher, is careful to remind us that it was not an overt or widely accepted practice before midcentury (43). Up until that point, invented narratives lacked “the readerly identification that manifest fictionality strangely enabled” (50). It is this identification, as we shall see, that nonreferentiality enabled.

However, even before they gave up their claims to referentiality (describing real-life people and events), early novels stressed their broader applicability as moral tales, and they developed this applicability as a feature able to stand entirely apart from referentiality. They did so by appeal to the long-standing traditions of fable, allegory, and parable. Thus Defoe says of his (ostensibly factual) 1722 *Colonel Jacque*, “Neither is it of the least Moment to enquire whether the Colonel hath told his own Story true or Not; if he has made it a History or a Parable, it will be equally Useful, and capable of doing Good” (14). Here, though the Colonel is a referential character, representing a real person, his story need not be true.

This statement is a later, and clearer, exposition of a concept that Defoe had already developed three years earlier in an introduction to the *Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Here, while still asserting *Robinson Crusoe*’s referentiality, he defends the work’s value on a completely independent basis: “The just Application of every Incident, the religious and useful Inferences drawn from every Part . . . must legitimate all the Part that may be called Invention, or Parable in the Story” (p. iv 1719 ed.). What kind of application Defoe intended is made very explicit in the 1724 abridged edition: “scarce any, who read it, but what may make some Application of it to themselves, and pleasingly be led to the Knowledge of the Divine Blessings” (iv-v, 1724 ed.). Here is clearly set out the concept of fiction’s value that Gallagher credits

Fielding with articulating 18 years later: individual applicability leads to new knowledge (in the case above, knowledge of a religious truth), which legitimates invention.

Before realistic fiction was widely accepted, then, in the 1720's and perhaps even earlier, the concept of gaining new knowledge from the experiences of others by imaginatively inhabiting their perspective was being proposed by popular writers. In the Biblical genre of parable, Defoe finds an authorizing analogue to the kind of truth-revealing through fiction that his narrative seeks to achieve. Notice that this technique of knowledge-creation, by Defoe's own attestation, does not depend (as Gallagher argues it does) on the explicit nonreferentiality of the story's characters. His stated purpose in writing is clearly to create moral knowledge, and that knowledge can still be widely applicable even if there still is an actual, historical Colonel Jacque or Robinson Crusoe.

### **Alternate Modes of Nonreferentiality**

Gallagher makes a valid point that the nonreferentiality of the midcentury novel's characters made it easier for the reader to identify with the protagonist, or as she puts it, "buy into the game" (346). If it referred to a specific person, a tale would be understood to tell us primarily about that person, and only secondarily about the reader in particular and the human species in general. A fictional character, on the other hand, functions as a ready-made, empty shell into whose shoes the reader can place his or herself without referential confusion. Yet there are other ways that the referentiality of a character can be diminished besides openly asserted fictionality.

Defoe's novels introduce one such innovative method of decreasing referentiality, one which develops from what I shall call the element of distance: an unknown character in an unknown place functions as an invitation to inhabit another perspective in a similar way as an overtly fictional character, because it has no familiar referent to which the reader may assign the new information he or she receives. If I have never seen a desert island, I must conjure in my own mind a kind of stand-in that enables me to visualize and follow a story that takes place on one. Ultimately, it is nearly impossible to engage in such a creative act without injecting an element of the self: the reader participates in the scene that he or she creates. Thus the diminished referentiality of the distant or unfamiliar has the potential to enable identification and vicarious participation. This element of distance in itself is present in most voyage narratives. Yet Defoe, as we shall see, creates this distance deliberately by fictionalizing the story, changing names, places, objects and people. In so doing, he moves beyond simple geographical distance—the distance from England to a Caribbean island—to an additional level of *conceptual* distance: fictionalization through transposition. Not only is the story separated from its audience, but from its original referents.

Defoe describes this process in the 1720 introduction to the *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe*. This preface defends *Robinson Crusoe* against its critics' accusations of falsehood. Yet it does so, not by asserting *Crusoe*'s factuality, but instead by defending the value of its peculiar brand of diminished referentiality. *Crusoe*, it asserts, did exist, but his shipwrecks were "more by Land than by Sea" (viii); he underwent a "forc'd Confinement, which in my real History is represented by a confin'd Retreat in an Island" and the events of the story were altered by "removing the Scene from one Place to another" (ix). *Crusoe* then goes on to explain the reason why he chooses to relocate the story to distant places: "facts that are formed to touch the mind must be done a great ways off, and by somebody never heard of" (xi). The extent to which

the reader can apply a story's events, its "facts," to him or herself is here posed in direct relation to their distance from an identifiable real-life referent. Crusoe draws a parallel to the tale of Christ, whose miracles were scorned "when it was reflected that they were done by the Carpenter's Son" (xi). In this example, previous knowledge of the referent and the setting robbed the tales of Jesus' life of their power to generate new knowledge in the hearer. It is in order to avoid this problem that Crusoe sets his tale in a far-distant place.<sup>6</sup>

This loss of referentiality is not a dismissal of verisimilitude. The quotidian detail so characteristic of Defoe—what Ian Watt calls his formal realism—is defended by the preface of

*Reflections*. Crusoe writes,

when . . . I speak of the Times and Circumstances of particular Actions done, or Incidents which happened in my Solitude and Island-Life . . . it is spoken or intended of that part of the real Story, which the Island-Life is a just Allusion to; and in this the Story is not only illustrated, but the real Part I think most justly approv'd . . . 'tis as reasonable to represent one kind of Imprisonment by another, as it is to represent any Thing that really exists, by that which exists not. (viii-ix)

The details (times, circumstances, particulars) of Crusoe's tale, then, serve as stand-ins for those of Crusoe's historical life. Representing this life in such a way "illustrates" it: a word that signifies aid to perception. The distinction here between merely "representing" something and illustrating it is an important one. The fact that individual, quotidian details are faithfully translated from the story *as it happened* into the story *as it is told* enables the reader to perceive it, to understand it, and, as critics have observed, to suspend disbelief.

The second word choice here, however, is even more important. We are told that the detailed, "illustrated" imaginary representation "approves" the real. This word in the early

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<sup>6</sup> Crusoe here references, in an allusion to Don Quixote, political satires which lampooned well-known political figures by creating characters with similar qualities, often in a foreign location: "The famous History of Don Quixot, a Work which thousands read with Pleasure, to one that knows the Meaning of it, was an emblematic History of, and a just Satyr upon the Duke de Medina Sidonia; a Person very remarkable as that time in Spain" (*Serious Reflections* iii). A later example might be the "Persian Letter" published in *Mist's Weekly Journal* on 24 August 1728, which was a libel against the king disguised as a tale about a monarch in Persia, or Delarivier Manley's *New Atalantis* in 1709. Certainly the concept of identity-obscuring transposition was not new, but previously it had been used primarily to enable satire to avoid charges of libel. What Defoe adds here is a justifying poetics that extends the epistemological scope to truth-making more generally: *Robinson Crusoe*, its prefaces claim, is not merely a case of thinly disguised political satire but an attempt to create moral knowledge by revealing truth.

eighteenth century carried multiple valences, but the most important for this passage indicate an epistemological function: “To show to be true, prove, demonstrate,” “To attest . . . corroborate, confirm,” and “To demonstrate practically to the experience of others, display, exhibit, make proof of” (“Approve”). Paradoxically, it is what in modern terms we would call *fictionalizing* the story—removing it, verisimilar detail and all, from its referent in an act of adroit transposition—that proves it to be true. The preface to *Reflections*, then, spells out not only a poetics of formal realism, but an epistemology of fiction: an argument that the very act of removing a story from its referent enables that story to participate in an act of knowledge-creation by proving a truth whose scope is beyond the immediate world of the referent.

In Defoe’s poetics, then, a historical tale may be able to give us knowledge about its referent, that is, the real-life people and events that it describes, but a tale separated from its original referent and “applied” by or to the reader reveals larger truths: in the case of *Crusoe*, specific truths about the nature and effects of solitude and the potential for moral rehabilitation. Fictionalization and publication subjects these “morals” of a tale to the experiment of individual application: an experiment that can only be performed by the readers. Through imaginative substitution, then, representing a thing that exists by *that which exists not*, truths about the real world are—in Defoe’s words—approved.

While none of Defoe’s other novels are as openly fictionalized, *Colonel Jacque*, as we have seen, operates in the shadow of *Crusoe*’s poetics, expressing indifference as to the historicity of the tale. Similarly, *Moll Flanders* (in its first three editions, 1721 and 1722) opens with the following disclaimer:

The World is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances, that it will be hard for a private History to be taken for Genuine, where the Names and Circumstances of the Person are concealed, and on this Account we must be content to leave the Reader to pass his own Opinion upon the ensuing Sheets, and take it just as he pleases.

Such an opening frankly acknowledges the possibility that the narrative might be invented, and (with a figurative shrug of the shoulder) leaves it up to the reader to decide—implying that it is a simply unimportant concern.<sup>7</sup> By the 1723 edition of the book, the preface has been completely omitted.

John Bender (following McKeon 315) suggests that Defoe was only forced into the position of defending the value of fictionality by the breakdown of his own devices of verisimilarity in the face of careful critics like Charles Gildon (*Ends of Enlightenment* 44).<sup>8</sup> This would seem to imply that Defoe preferred to deceive his reader into the supposition of a story's historicity, a suggestion that is supported by the fact that *Roxana*, Defoe's last novel (1724), opens with a stock-in-trade claim to historicity. And this is not surprising, given Defoe's elaborate and carefully articulated claims to historicity in earlier narratives like *The Storm* and *Mrs. Veal*, which seem to run directly counter to the preface to *Reflections*: Defoe's own accounts of miracles are hedged about by careful detail described with what McKeon calls "the neutral circumstantiality of a police blotter" (86). For such a man to say, as Defoe does in *Reflections*, that the miracles of Jesus "suffered scorn" because the details of Jesus' "ordinary" life were known, is a strange turn. It is a turn reminiscent of McKeon's portrait of the coalescence of the novel through the "proliferation of epistemological reversals" of the eighteenth century's inherently unstable skepticism (87), and it perhaps responds to the tension McKeon sees as inherent in the apparition narrative and the spiritual autobiography: "a materialist epistemology . . . given the task of demonstrating a truth that is ultimately spiritual (99).

Yet the case for Defoe as proponent of a coherent epistemological poetics that embraced at least partial fictionality is stronger than Bender seems willing to credit. He omits mention of

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<sup>7</sup> See McKeon (92).

<sup>8</sup> Here Gallagher agrees, describing Defoe's inconsistency under pressure (339).

the preface to *Reflections*, the clearest articulation of Defoe's theory of fiction, and of the fact that *Col. Jacque* and *Moll Flanders* both reflect that preface's conclusion. Even if Defoe is forced reluctantly to the conceptual innovation with which he defends the value of fictionality, he does afterwards continue to employ that conceptual innovation. If, as Gallagher suggests, it was with Fielding's prefaces that truly novelistic fictionality (with its unqualified admission of nonreferentiality and its defense of the epistemological usefulness that the wide applicability of a nonreferential character creates) came into its own, then Defoe's *diminished* referentiality forms the immediate legitimizing precedent, one which laid the conceptual groundwork more than twenty years before.

Though Defoe's fictionalization and transposition was an innovation, it is not the only way to achieve the same effect of increased identification and application through diminished referentiality. Another such way is what I shall call the element of group anonymity. A story that follows the actions of a group, leaving its members unnamed, creates a nonreferential space and allows the reader to insert his or herself into the group. Group anonymity also resolves one of the problems that Gallagher highlights in her essay: the tendency of the particulars and details of characters' description to reduce the referential scope. If a character is specifically defined, then his or her experiences are less applicable to humanity at large. As Gallagher puts it, "Novelistic personae, even when invented on purpose to exemplify classes of persons, quickly proved too specific to cover all the cases in a 'species'" (343). Given a *group* with which to identify,<sup>9</sup> however, any reader capable of imagining his or herself as a member would be able to vicariously experience the group's actions and situations.

Narrative that follows an entire group predates *Robinson Crusoe* (in the British canon) by hundreds of years. It is this group identity, the element of collective action, that often made

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<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, some groups might be easier to identify with than others. However, narratives that follow a collective protagonist often invite the audience to enter the social dynamics of the group through identification, as we have seen that the *General History* invites mariners to do and as we will see *Utopia* invite its audience to do as well.

voyage narrative particularly suited to the kind of readerly identification that Gallagher describes—in both historical and invented narratives—even before a discourse of fictionality had openly emerged. This is because voyage narratives often developed directly from the ship’s log itself, a document composed over time by multiple hands, and followed a kind of collective protagonist: the ship’s crew. One of the most salient such narratives is William Dampier’s 1697 *New Voyage around the World*. This book begins, like Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, with the first person singular pronoun: “I first set out of England on this Voyage at the beginning of the years 1679, in the *Loyal Merchant* of London, bound for Jamaica, Captain Knapman Commander” (7). Yet even here in the first sentence of the work, the initial “I” is immediately set in relation first to the ship and then to the commander: the social connections of the crew and the social spaces of the ship’s hull, a place where, save for perhaps the captain, there could never have been solitary action or a moment of isolation from the constant presence and observation of the crew.

In *Preserving the Self in the South Seas*, Jonathan Lamb identifies the appeal of the voyage narrative as an essentially individualist one. He posits that the primary appeal of voyage narrative for the eighteenth-century reader was a curiosity “about the singularities of self-preservation” (7), and that “the ego . . . shuts itself up with the narratives of troubled first persons” (10). However, what Lamb here does not consider is, first, the conditions on shipboard of communal action, and secondly, the linguistic mode of narration of these texts. Linguistically, this collectivist emphasis of the Dampier text is borne out in the work’s use of pronouns: in the edition I use, the plural pronoun “We” (including the ship’s crew) outnumbered the singular “I” 2570 to 1221, or over 210%. Though not subsumed, the protagonist’s identity is here a *subset* of the larger group, which acts, perceives, and even feels together: “We saw . . . we thought ourselves past danger . . . some Jealousy in us” (22-23). This raises important complications for Lamb’s assertion that the *je ne sais quoi*, or “incommunicable feeling” of the individual



protagonist was the primary allure of the text: “the self could enjoy a feeling peculiar to itself” (12). While Lamb may be correct about Romantic and even later eighteenth-century maritime texts like the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the dynamic of Dampier’s narrative is dominated by the presence of a collective imagination.

It is in a particular subset of early British voyage narrative, utopian fiction, that the voyage narrative reaches both its most fictional and its most deliberately speculative about social interactions and concerns. The element of the collective protagonist is a staple of this subgenre. Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, for example, published in 1627, opens “We sailed from Peru” (245); the “I” of the ship’s captain, who narrates the story, appears only 30 times throughout (counting 8 appearances of the object pronoun, “me”), while the plural pronouns “we” and “us” reference the ship’s crew collectively no less than 234 times. The crew acts together, thinks together (“and we thinking every minute long, till we were on land, came close to the shore,” p. 246) and, improbably, speaks together: “We bowed ourselves towards him, and answered, ‘We were his humble servants’” (249). Not only does the “we” of the ship’s crew enable the reader to vicariously travel to Bensalem, but the “we” of the Governor and other Bensalemite characters (appearing 202 times) enables the reader to imaginatively experience the social spaces of Bensalem.

Though Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia* does not employ the plural protagonist, it is narrated by Raphael Hythlodæus, a traveler whose personal experiences are given in the barest minimum of detail. The first-person singular pronoun, Raphael’s “I,” appears approximately fifty times during the entire description of Utopia, a description brimming with the plural anonymity of “they.” Christine Rees describes this dynamic as a systematic elision of the individual: “Individual consciousness is erased from utopia itself” (76). Rees sees this as a barrier to identification. She says, “neither (Socrates nor Thomas More) so much as ask, let alone imagine,

what it would be like to inhabit the mind of a single citizen and experience everyday utopian living on that basis” (76). Lamb, by contrast, sees the utopian narrative as being thoroughly an individualistic endeavor: “a voluptuous egoism projects its pleasure as an imagined society” (12). Here, I argue that even More’s text, though it weaves a representation on the grand scale, does not neglect the felt experience of the individual. Yet it involves not the individual *character* but the individual *reader*. It closes its description of Utopia with an invitation to the audience, and by extension the reader, to imaginatively inhabit this foreign place:

in Utopia . . . no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution . . . what can make a man so rich as to lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties; neither apprehending want himself, nor vexed with the endless complaints of his wife? He . . . is secure in this, that both he and his wife, his children and grand-children, to as many generations as he can fancy, will all live both plentifully and happily. (169)

Here More’s choice of word (“fancy”) implies the power of imaginative speculation: in the case of the Utopian citizen, the source for his happiness is his capacity to imagine a plentiful and happy life for his progeny and know that society will provide them such a life. Implicitly, we too are invited by the rhetorical question (“what can make a man so rich . . . ?”) to imagine in turn, putting ourselves in the position of the Utopian man. This is a diminished referentiality, but it is not diminished referentiality for the protagonist Hythlodæus, who retains his claims to historicity: instead, the reader enters the tale through identification with the nonreferential anonymity of the Utopian group member.

Worth noting here is the question of utopian texts’ fictionality. No one who had read Plato’s *Republic* would have been likely to read *Utopia* and credit it with historicity, because it assumes the same formal characteristics of the Socratic dialogue. Yet the same clue that would have highlighted its fictionality would also have provided an authorizing analogue by which to understand its epistemic function: like *Republic*, *Utopia* is an experiment in speculative thought. Years later, *New Atlantis*’ title also recalls the tradition of the genre, referencing Plato. However,

it adds the formal characteristics of an empirical voyage of discovery: constant references to precise details that ground the narrative and make it seem believable. Take for example the description of the Stranger's House, where the narrator and his companions are lodged in

Bensalem:

The Strangers' House is a fair and spacious house, built of brick, of somewhat a bluer colour than our brick; and with handsome windows, some of glass, some of a kind of cambric oiled. . . We were in all, (sick and whole,) one and fifty persons, whereof our sick were seventeen. (251)

Here specific, sensory detail, and a quantitative accounting of the ship's crew and its condition create a formal realism that gives this text the gritty immediacy of lived experience. Yet given that the text's appeal to Plato gives us a clue that it is to be taken purely as a thought experiment, the inclusion of the "truth-effect" of quotidian detail signifies not a claim to historicity but a different end: the facilitation of vicarious experience through verisimilitude, what modern criticism terms suspension of disbelief.

These utopian narratives, their referentiality reduced through the use of collective protagonists, form the literary precedent for the tales of the *General History of the Pyrates*.

While it was a contemporary of Defoe's early novels, published about five years after *Robinson Crusoe* (with the second edition added four years later) and covering a similar topicality, it is a fascinating example of a collection of voyage narratives that both follows collective protagonists and includes utopian narratives. Though the *General History* claims historical accuracy and thus does not, like *Utopia* and *New Atlantis*, own the fictionality of its invented stories, it employs, as we shall see, similar techniques of formal realism to create a vicarious experience by which the reader can observe and learn from its social critique and speculation. What sets the *General History*'s collectivity apart from the utopian and voyage narratives we have considered, however, is its use of third-person narration. While Dampier's text does feature a predominantly plural protagonist, it is ever mediated by the "I". Though the composition of the ship's crew changes

with deaths and new recruits, the “I” remains Dampier, and if he leaves the group or changes groups the narrative point-of-view must of necessity follow him. In the *General History*, however, in ten out of the work’s thirty-five narratives the captain, or title character, dies, is captured, or is marooned by his crew, but the crew survives: and in these cases, the narrative continues, following not the captain but the crew.<sup>10</sup>

Before the arrival of the fully-fledged novel upon the literary scene of Great Britain in the 1740’s, then, two conditions were at work. First, despite the absence of a widely accepted conceptual framework to separate false but potentially instructive, useful, or entertaining narrative from the lie, libel, and deceit with which it had been (until the 1740’s) lumped together under the term “fiction,” the epistemological function of fictionality to stage social experiments was known and employed by the utopian genre. Secondly, though fictions written before the 1740’s mostly claimed historicity and thus lacked the overt nonreferentiality of character and event possessed by openly fictive narrative, authors employed alternate modes of non- or diminished referentiality to give readers ease of access into the vicarious experience of the tale and enable their witness of its experiment and result. Without these preliminary modes of nonreferential narrative, the fully developed novel with all its epistemological possibilities might never have emerged.

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10 “Of Captain Avery and his Crew,” “Of Captain Edward England and his Crew,” “Of Captain John Rackham and his Crew,” “Of Captain Howel Davis and his Crew” (in this case, Davis dies, and the next tale resumes with his crew under their new captain), “Of Captain Bartholomew Roberts and his Crew,” “Of Captain Anstis and his Crew,” “Of Captain Misson,” “Of Captain Tew and his Crew,” “Of Captain Bellamy and his Crew.” I have also included in this number “A Relation of five men going a Pyrating,” which has no captain or single protagonist.

### Defoe and Radical Individualism

Both McKeon (326) and, more strongly, Christine Rees (73-102) classify *Robinson Crusoe* as a utopian narrative. Yet Defoe moves away from the group anonymity of voyage narrative and the collective experience of large-scale utopian social fictions such as *New Atlantis* and *Utopia*. In the move to an individual protagonist whose referentiality has been diminished by transposition of the tale rather than group anonymity, Defoe takes the developing novel emphatically into the realm of individualism: it embraces the perspective, the concerns, the outcomes of the individual protagonist and the individual character. The move succeeds: over the course of the century, the novel continues to develop the concern of the individual by employing individual protagonists and individual, three-dimensional characters. Even epistolary works like *Humphry Clinker*, which employs multiple perspectives and multiple storytellers, making it difficult (aside from the hint given by the title) for the reader to decide who is the protagonist, employ individual voices throughout, prioritizing individual consciousness and perspective. Christine Rees suggests that this movement to individualism, heavily influenced by the novel, shapes the development of eighteenth-century utopia as well. She says, “the political and constitutional dimension tends to become less prominent . . . social relationships [are represented] on a personal rather than institutional level” (71).<sup>11</sup> Yet it is strange that, as Rees herself notes, Defoe was quite capable of inventing institutional solutions to social problems. His *Essay on Projects*, for example, explores solutions to problems of education and to poverty, unemployment, and crime. It is in his utopian *fiction* that Defoe turns to radical individualism.

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<sup>11</sup> This characterization also dovetails nicely with Lamb’s of the utopian and voyage narrative as an inherently individualistic endeavor. I believe that Lamb’s generalizations about the genres fit better with later-century texts than they do with Dampier’s *New Voyage* and Johnson’s *General History*, but much more work will be needed to prove such an assertion than is within the scope of this paper.

This shift to the individual is partly to take advantage of the empirical truth-effect of the eyewitness account, which tends to authorize a text. Yet, as we shall see in the *General History of the Pyrates*, it is also possible for a text that prioritizes the concerns of the collective to employ the device of the eyewitness: the *General History* authorizes its historicity by the inclusion of legal depositions, letters, and other paratextual evidence written in the first person. There are also other possible reasons to shift to an individual protagonist. The turn to individualism is a central concern of Ian Watt's influential work on the novel. He, too, locates it at Defoe, but he suggests reasons of historical context: the individualism of English Enlightenment philosophy, both in its political and epistemological thought; the economic individualism of England's burgeoning capitalism, with its new possibilities for individual social mobility; and the Puritan individualism of eighteenth-century religious life.

Yet none of these factors necessitate a turn to the individual protagonist and storyteller in the way that we will see in the eighteenth-century novel and in the radical individualism of *Crusoe*. As Ian Watt notes, this individualism is so extreme that "Defoe's heroes either have no family . . . or leave it at an early age never to return" (65). While recent critics—such as Jody Greene, whose work we shall examine presently—have put pressure on this generalization and identified an important counterpoint in *Captain Singleton*, individualism remains a startling and defining feature of Defoe's work. Yet Watt's explanations, while they can help us to understand some of the social trends that influenced the novel's individualism, do not seem sufficient to explain the novel's abrupt individual turn. Enlightenment philosophy may have embraced more individualistic modes of thought, but it remained concerned about the social. Both Locke and Hobbes depict the state of nature in inherently social terms: it (the state of nature) is a construct of social interactions in the absence of any limitations to human freedom. To Hobbes, the state of nature is a state of war, "nasty, brutish, and short" (64), and to Locke, whose view of human

nature is more optimistic, it is “men living together according to reason” (15). Both of these are states of being defined by human interactions. It is a surprising move, then, to represent the state of nature by isolating one man to himself, as Rees argues that Defoe does (78). Why not simply maroon him with a few companions, as Henry Neville had done to George Pine in his 1668 *Isle of Pines*?

In the same way, it does not follow from the economic individualism of the period that Defoe should find it necessary to so isolate his characters as to separate them from the family unit. As Watt himself admits (66), this tendency of Defoe’s fiction directly contradicts the emphasis that many of his other works place upon family and national ties. Indeed, in the *Journal of the Plague Year*, the narrator displays a much greater concern for social and familial connections than Defoe’s novelistic protagonists—here again with the exception of Singleton, which I shall discuss at greater length in a later section of this paper.

A much more potent and resilient argument is Watt’s discussion of Puritan spirituality as a reason for Defoe’s turn to individualism. Puritan religion had placed an emphasis on individual responsibility before God. As Watt puts it, “If there is one element which all forms of Protestantism have in common, it is the replacement of the role of the Church as the mediator between man and God by another view . . . in which it is the individual who is entrusted with the primary responsibility for his own spiritual direction” (74). There is, however, not only a general correlation to be found here, but a traceable pattern in the literary history: spiritual autobiography, whose influence on Defoe has been well-known since George Starr’s 1965 book, and which Defoe himself invokes in his references to parable and allegory. Even Watt, though he treats it somewhat dismissively, notes the connection between Crusoe and John Bunyan’s individual protagonist on his spiritual journey. Yet though it provides a clue to one powerful influence behind Defoe’s radical individualism, Puritan individualism alone does not suffice to

explain the near complete separation of the protagonist from his or her social context. *Crusoe* is not simply a religious text. As both a voyage narrative and a work of utopian fiction, it develops not only the protagonist's spiritual journey but questions of governance, economics, and basic human social needs, questions which would, it seems, have been much better treated by placing *Crusoe* in his social context. The question of why Defoe abandons group anonymity, embraces a singular protagonist separated from its referent, and makes the turn to individualism as sharply as he does remains a puzzling one. To better understand this turn, it will help to examine more closely a contemporaneous example of the kind of narrative that Defoe's novels did *not* adopt: the utopian and dystopian<sup>12</sup> narratives of the *General History*.

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12 In this paper, I shall use the word "dystopian" merely to refer to any narrative that employs the same techniques of partial nonreferentiality through collective action as a utopian narrative, but uses them to speculate about or explore the *negative* outcomes of particular social configurations.



## **The Road Less Traveled: Social Critique and Speculation in the *General History of the Pirates***

A comparison between the *General History of the Pirates* as an example of utopian narrative and collective action and Defoe's *Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* as examples of individual protagonists and novelistic fictions will help eliminate differences of topicality, of time period, of audience, and even perhaps of influences. Looking more closely not just at form but at content will highlight the different kinds of speculation that these two genres lend themselves to. Now, the *General History* does contain many individualistic elements. Not only does each tale within the work open with a brief description of the individual title character, with his or her background, birth, and education, but often it follows this character through the events of his or her life to death, revealing startling facts and personal details along the way. Yet most of the tales of the *General History* also focus on or follow a particular social group: the crew of the pirate ship. The tales of Misson and Tew are generally classified as utopian fiction, and are discussed as such by Rees (102). And, as in any voyage narrative, the captain can go nowhere without his ship and crew. As a result, these narratives provide a remarkable case study in speculation about the social. In fact, as we shall see, they employ the imaginative power of fiction (specifically, collective-focused fiction that enables readerly identification through group anonymity) to question, and propose an alternative to, the unjust and plunder-driven economic and sociopolitical structures of the European colonial empires.

The narrative of piracy was particularly suited to this task. European legal traditions considered pirates, as the *General History* puts it, "*hostis humani generis*": enemies of all

mankind (377).<sup>13</sup> Their status as enemies of every government made them stateless individuals. In order to make decisions aboard ship and organize the kind of collective action that navigation required, however, they had to create their own structures of authority and their own codes of action. These tiny constructed collectivities, free from the control of any larger government, recalled Enlightenment theories of social contract and of state formation. Thus, as Joel Baer notes, pirate crews were seen as microcosms of the state: “a community in the first stages of political evolution” (viii). This liminal social and political status made the pirate life-narrative a genre heavily engaged with political and economic ideas. By applying the speculative possibilities of fictionality to such a genre, a work like the *General History* could enable possible new forms of government and hitherto unseen modalities of economic life to be “played” out. As we shall see, this is exactly the kind of content that the fictional sections of the *General History* explore.

The most intriguing area of fictionalization in the *General History* is the conceit of the pirate as a revolutionary figure. Though some historians have treated this conceit more or less as fact,<sup>14</sup> Bialuschewski (using primary evidence rather than literary accounts) identifies the primary motive for piracy not as political or ideological, but as acquisitive: “the driving force behind robbery was greed, and justifications for crime were easily replaceable” (“Jacobite Pirates” 164). This conclusion is supported by the evidence. The British *Calendar of State Papers*, which has recently been digitized and is available through *British History Online*, contains letters from colonial officials, court documents, and depositions that establish that Colonial merchants bankrolled the expeditions of many of the pirates whose stories are told in

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13 Though in times of war governments licensed private sea-raiders, called privateers, the name “pirate” was reserved for sailors who engaged in robbery on the high seas without the sanction of any state. The *General History* treats this specific group. See the extended definition of piracy, *General History* p. 377.

14 E.g. Rediker, *Villains of all Nations*, and Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates*.

the *General History*.<sup>15</sup> With trade made less lucrative by British tariffs and restrictions and gold bullion for currency in short supply, Colonial merchants from New York, Boston and other port cities would purchase and outfit ships for famous pirates in return for a major share of the spoils.<sup>16</sup> They would sail with letters of marque provided by colonial authorities, though it was known that they were bent on the plunder of ships of nations with which Great Britain was not at war, and they were protected and concealed upon their return. New York Governor Benjamin Fletcher in 1698, in fact, was accused of having protected hundreds of pirates from prosecution.<sup>17</sup> Pirates, as businessmen who needed the capital and supplies these merchants provided and a fence through whom to dispose of diamonds and other stolen goods, would return to the colonies dependably<sup>18</sup> and pay the merchants their share of the proceeds. In fact, colonial merchants would regularly outfit ships bound for Madagascar with supplies to trade for pirate treasure.<sup>19</sup> Samuel Baldrige and others even established bases on Madagascar itself to resupply and victual pirate ships.<sup>20</sup>

Where employed by actual pirates, then, political rhetoric served merely as a front to justify violence. Yet the *General History* takes this rhetoric seriously. The tale of the French Captain Misson and his pirate settlement on Madagascar, which appears in the second volume of

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15 Pringle p. 150 See also, Governor the Earl of Bellomont to Council of Trade and Plantations, May 18, 1698.

16 Pringle p. 150, 137, see also, Letter, Governor the Earl of Bellomont to Council of Trade and Plantations, June 22, 1698.

17 *Calendar of State Papers*, Sept. 27 and 29, 1698. Fletcher had given commissions to Thomas Tew, Rich Glover, John Hore, and Thomas Moston (and possibly more) between 1694 and 1696. A pirate named Coates paid Fletcher 1,300 pounds for protection from prosecution. See also Copy of a report from the Attorney-General of New York to Lord Bellomont, 20 April, 1698, *Calendar of Treasury Papers*: Coates' crew paid \$100 each for protection.

18 Patrick Pringle (134) C.f. Report from the Attorney-General of New York to Governor Lord Bellomont, May 4, 1698.

19 C.f. Letter, Edward Randolph to Council of Trade and Plantations, August 25, 1698. Letter, Governor the Earl of Bellomont to Council of Trade and Plantations, June 22, 1698. Deposition of John Pantree, *Calendar of State Papers*, June 8, 1698. This trade continued through the next two decades, as evinced by the Oct. 2, 1721 Order in Council, *Calendar of Treasury Papers*.

20 Deposition of Samuel Perkins, *Calendar of State Papers*, August 25, 1698

the *General History* (a 1728 addition to the work), provides the best example. Where other narratives in the book are at least partially based on historical pirates, the tale of Misson is entirely invented. (It should be noted, however, that the text does not anywhere identify this as a fictional tale.) The tale of Misson is also the most clear example of a utopian narrative in the *General History*, and as such it (with its sequel, the tale of Captain Tew) is a key moment for examining the kind of fictional speculation the work employs. It is juxtaposed, as we shall see, with the somewhat differing kind of collective fictions that the rest of the *General History* develops.

Misson and his men are political dissidents motivated by the theories of a passenger on the ship named Caraccioli, who preaches a radical political message. In a tale written nearly fifty years before the American Revolution, Caraccioli calls for a representative government, the abolition of slavery, and the redistribution of wealth to establish a more equitable economic system: truly radical concepts for the period. The social configuration that results is novel on several levels. First, and perhaps most importantly, Misson's colony presents an alternative economic vision to that of Europe's burgeoning capitalism, one based on equal distribution of resources. At the beginning of the narrative, Caraccioli asserts that rather than belonging to any particular state, the world is common property of all mankind. When he expounds his theory of government, he begins by saying, "Every man was born free, and had as much Right to what would support him, as the Air he respired . . . our natural Right . . . is such a Share of Earth as is necessary for our Support" (389-90). Reasoning outward from this basic principle, Caraccioli outlines the actions of a good government leader:

Suffer[ing] none on the one Hand to grow immensely rich, either by his own or his Ancestor's Encroachments; nor on the other, any to be wretchedly miserable, either by falling into the Hands of Villains, unmerciful Creditors, or other Misfortunes . . . and instead of being a Burthen to the People by his luxurious Life he was by his Care for, and Protection of them. (392-393)

Thus the concept of a right to the means of supporting one's self establishes a principle of ethical property ownership, to be enforced by government, in which no man has a right to waste resources that others need. The implication of this rule, however, is that the wealth and profits accumulated by the exorbitantly wealthy are unjust acquisitions. In their redistribution of this wealth, Misson and his men become the administrators of a kind of vigilante justice. Whenever they encounter a "Governor" who spends "his Days in Pomp and Luxury," Misson and his men employ a basis of natural law to attack: "the Law of Nature empowers us not only to be on the defensive but also on the offensive Part" (393). This, then, is the motive for Misson's acts of piracy: violent protest of a corrupt social and economic order. Because he believes the profits of corrupt European powers to be unjust gains, he is able to justify his own confiscation of their goods.

The redistribution of the unjustly acquired wealth of European merchants and states is only the first step for Misson. What develops in Misson's pirate colony is a society that prioritizes the creation of wealth by labor rather than plunder, giving every person the resources they need to support themselves. Specifically, livestock and land are portioned out equally to the settlers. This settled labor force quickly becomes the most important aspect of the community. Instead of building up a naval force to engage in more piracy, as Captain Tew suggests, the colony focuses on the work of economic production: "should they all be employed in the Sea Service, the Husbandry would be neglected, which would be of fatal Consequence to the growing Colony" (434). Because Misson's men settle and stay, becoming part of the new pirate state, their labor creates wealth: "every one began either to enclose Land for himself or his Neighbor, who would hire his Assistance" (434). Here, in a phrase that recalls Locke's ("He by his labour does, as it were, inclose it from the common," p. 21) it is labor that creates entitlement to property, rather than plunder.

As a tale that follows a collective and aggressively posits radical new arrangements of society, this narrative is firmly within the tradition of utopian narrative both in terms of form and of content. Yet it also goes one step farther than many utopias. Where *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* describe a static ideal society observed over a short period by the visitor, “Of Captain Misson” follows the entire development and construction of the island utopia. It suggests not merely what an ideal society might look like, but how it might be constructed. This is the benefit of following the entire pirate colony as a kind of group protagonist: it enables the utopia *as narrative*, society as story. Such a process is key to the kind of knowledge-creation that Bender outlines: it is the presence of plot, whose process of problem, experiment, and results mimics deliberate experimentation, which enables the reader to evaluate adequately the way that the utopian society functions (Bender 31).

As a result of this narrative structure, Misson’s community frequently encounters obstacles and challenges, and it creates innovative responses to these problems. For example, if Libertalia’s economy is to be based on labor rather than plunder, it needs workers to create wealth. From almost the beginning of the tale, this is a problem Misson seems to be aware of. As his men capture ships, he is more interested in the kinds of men that he can recruit than in the plunder that the ship might offer. These men, in the spirit of the colony, are invited to join it rather than forced or enslaved, and their recruitment is discussed in a way that gives linguistic signals to the kind of value they bring to the community. When Misson captures an English ship on its way to London from Jamaica, “what he valued most in this Prize was the Men he got, for she was carrying to Europe twelve French Prisoners, two of which were necessary hands, being a Carpenter and his Mate” (400). Now, “hands” is a metonymical reference to sailors, which notes the physical labor they do aboard ship. It is used throughout the *General History*. By contrast, the term “necessary hands” is not used elsewhere in the *History*. It only appears in the tale of

Libertalia. It is used again when Misson takes a Dutch ship off the coast of Angola: “Eleven Dutch came into him, two of which were Sailmakers, one an Armourer, and one a Carpenter, necessary hands” (406). What distinguishes these men as “necessary” hands is the technical ability, skill, or training that they possess. They are capable of creating goods and providing services that are essential to the community.

By contrast, when freed slaves join the group, they receive a different kind of terminology: “The 17 Negroes began to understand a little French, and to be useful Hands” (407). The phrase “useful hands” is used again of the Africans on page 428, where we are told, “The Negroes growing useful hands, Misson resolved on a Cruise.” “Useful hands,” like “necessary hands,” does not appear in any other narratives in the *General History*. The difference between the two terms highlights a kind of class distinction based on the different kinds of value that the two groups have to offer to the community; African slaves were unskilled laborers and rarely trained to the same degree as carpenters, tailors, and armorers. Thus they are merely “useful” hands.

This distinction seems oddly prophetic of the lingering economic inequalities that still marginalize formerly enslaved people-groups today. It is not, however, a static categorization. Instead, Misson treats it, too, as a problem to be solved. Newly freed slaves are placed in an accelerated track of education: “A white Man, or one of the old standing Negroes, wrought with every four, and made them understand the *French* words . . . used in their Works” (427). The clarifying phrase “used in their Works” here seems to imply not linguistic domination—the imposition of the French tongue—but the transmission of professional jargon. By the time Tew leaves on his first cruise in the *Bijoux*, the original 17 Africans have become “expert sailors” (426). Thus the Misson narrative describes a society in which constructive wealth creation replaces plunder, and economic inequalities are eliminated rather than perpetuated.

In addressing the problems of labor, social inequality, and education, Libertalia provides alternate and even radical ways of solving basic problems of social organization. Yet Misson's community does not merely offer an alternative economic vision but also an alternative to the European concept of nationhood. Though Misson's crew is originally French, the rhetoric that underwrites their revolt is a rhetoric that can be equally applied to any one of the monarchies of Europe. Indeed, Misson's men apply it indiscriminately: they declare war "against all such as should refuse the Entry of their Ports . . . but in a more particular Manner against all *European* Ships and Vessels, as concluded implacable Enemies" (395). The very first ship that Misson takes is a British sloop, and his crew comes before long to include Englishmen, Dutch, Portuguese, and freed African slaves. Misson calls his settlement on Madagascar Libertalia, and "gave the Name of *Liberi* to his People, desiring [that] in that [name] might be drown'd the distinguish'd Names of *French, English, Dutch, Africans, &c.*" (417). In fact, once they settle, his men attempt to create their own creole tongue out of the various languages represented (433). They unite around an ideal of liberty rather than a narrative of shared national identity. Not only so, but they refrain from creating a rhetoric that unifies by magnifying the alterity of the "other." This is true of European enemies, as Misson and his men show kindness to their prisoners instead of killing those who will not join the colony. It is also true of native peoples. Misson states that though such "Men were distinguish'd from the Europeans by their Colour, Customs, or religious Rites, they were the Work of the same omnipotent Being, and endued [sic] with equal Reason" (403). Thus, instead of attempting to conquer the native kingdoms of Mohilla and Johanna, Misson preserves the balance of power so that both will keep the peace with him; he forms alliances with native tribes, and actively recruits from all nations and people-groups.

Misson and his men also critique the infringements of European governments on basic human freedom. They found their own state in order to "live a Life of Liberty" (391). As we



have seen, where European monarchs authorize a trade in human slaves, Misson's new

government abolishes it, making all captured slaves free men. Misson declares,

while those who profess'd a more enlightened Knowledge of the Deity, sold Men like Beasts; they prov'd that their Religion was no more than Grimace, and that they differ'd from the Barbarians in Name only. . . For his Part, and he hop'd, he spoke the Sentiments of all his brave Companions, he had not exempted his Neck from the galling Yoak of Slavery, and asserted his own Liberty, to enslave others. (403)

Here, Misson's criticism operates on two levels. First, he condemns chattel slavery, arguing that by dehumanizing enslaved people, the trade in slaves in fact dehumanizes the slave traders themselves. The slave traders, for all their pretensions to Christian conviction, are barbaric, and their religion is hypocrisy. Secondly, by saying that his men themselves have escaped from slavery, Misson hints that monarchical government enslaves its people.

Finally, Captain Misson's state administers justice and punishment in a fair and humane manner. For example, when Misson must deal with a large number of prisoners, he calls a council that sets them free, despite the fact that their knowledge of the colony's location could betray all the colonists to their deaths. Of the alternative—killing all the prisoners—Misson says: “[it was] a Barbarity by which he would not purchase his Security” (425). Accordingly, the prisoners are given a ship and sent away. In the same tradition of representative leadership and humane administration of justice, when a number of dissolute Dutchmen join the crew of the *Victoire* and prove to be a poor influence on the crew, spreading profanity and drunkenness, Misson threatens to use force to punish the next offender. However, mindful of the representative nature of his government, he delegates further punishments to the judgment of the crew itself, instructing them to “make a Law for the Suppression of what would otherwise estrange them from the Source of Life” (405). It is not the captain but the crew itself, then, that determines ongoing policies of governorship: “a Democratical Form, where the People were themselves the

Makers and Judges of their own Laws” (432). Though this justice is administered by an authority figure, it is established and regulated by popular vote.

The kind of narrative imagination at work in the tale of Captain Misson, then, proposes an alternative sociopolitical structure that answers, point by point, many of the shortcomings of the European imperial state: human slavery, an economic system based on institutionalized plunder, a rhetoric that dehumanizes and demonizes the “other” to create a sense of national unity and superiority, and a hypocritical and arbitrarily brutal administration of justice.<sup>21</sup> The tale creates knowledge, not simply by suggesting an alternative, but by employing verisimilar narrative to develop that alternative and then following the actions of the collective protagonist. This element of collective action creates the nonreferential space of group anonymity that we traced earlier in the traditions of voyage and utopian narrative, enabling the reader to imagine him or herself as part of the community and experience vicariously a new configuration of society.

Though it is not openly fictive, the ability of fiction to offer suggestive new possibilities is clearly present in the *History*. In fact, it employs many of the mechanics of fiction’s speculative truth-making that John Bender describes in the early novelists. Using works by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding as examples, including *Robinson Crusoe*, he argues that (even before its broad acceptance as nonreferential) fiction created a dynamic akin to what Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer identify in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century genre of the scientific paper as “virtual witness” (Bender 28). According to Shapin and Schaffer, important experiments were observed and evaluated by an audience present in the laboratory itself, making the laboratory a “social space” (57). Then the experiments were published, employing the truth-effects of careful, prolix

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21 Strangely, though Misson does protest his crew’s kidnapping of Moorish women to be their wives (428) he is overruled. The failure of the *General History*’s thought-experiment in social reform to address the repression of women—especially considering its inclusion of the tales of Anne Bonny and Mary Read—is remarkable. For a thought-provoking discussion of possible reasons for this omission, see Lincoln Faller, “Captain Misson,” p. 6.

detail, and thus enabling the reading audience to virtually witness the proceedings. Their witness, along with that of the observers, established a fact by assent (Shapin & Schaffer 61). In emulating this process, fiction, too, created knowledge, revealing truths about human nature and society.

We can observe a similar dynamic to the social space of the laboratory in the *General History's* utopian fictions. As the narratives of Misson and Tew unfold, the narrator and the characters themselves repeatedly enter an evaluative linguistic mode, framing events in terms of a careful appraisal of Misson's governance and policies. This sense of evaluation and assertion of results reflects the experimental function of the tale. When neighboring natives visit Misson's budding colony, they "admired the Forts and growing Town in which all Hands were busied" (420), and later, when some settle in the colony, they express "a very advantageous Report to their Country Men of the Regularity and Harmony they observed in" it (428). This sense of more or less formal assessment and reporting is also present in the responses of Europeans who encounter Misson's men. When Misson lets a group of prisoners go, for example, they leave "not a little surprised at the Regularity, Tranquillity, and Humanity, which they found among these new-fashioned Pyrates," and a group of Englishmen join the crew because they are "charm'd with Misson's Humanity" (406). Each ruling of the colony's leaders is evaluated by the "satisfaction" of the citizens: "everyone returned satisfy'd to his private or the publick Affairs"; "this Affair was ended to the Satisfaction of both Parties" (432). Applause frequently signifies the approval of a particular decision as well, both from the crew itself (433, 415) and even from admiring enemies (425).

Such moments of appraisal and evaluation from voices within the text create a constant sense that the pirate colony is being reported in an evaluative sense: a linguistic signal to the rhetorical thrust of the narrative itself. By compiling and presenting the testimony of multiple

witnesses, the narrative employs a kind of truth-effect that recalls those used in scientific reporting. As Bender points out, an element of the “literary technology” of a scientific report is a voice in the text itself that “authenticates . . . findings for readers” (28). In the *General History*, such voices are not only present in the compiled testimony of the characters, but the voice of the narrator itself provides “facts” of Libertalia that corroborate their assent. Ships built at Libertalia’s dock, for example, “prov’d not only shapely Vessels, but excellent Sailers” (427), while a particular quarrel “proved the Necessity” of the scheme of arbitration that Misson sets up (432). The outcome of Misson’s state is “proved” by his narrative in more than one sense of the word: both by the assertion of the onlookers and by material particulars provided by the narrator. This sense of reporting, evaluating, and proving recalls the formal realism of Defoe and the poetics outlined in the preface to the *Serious Reflections*, where the detailed attention to “times and circumstances” that Defoe retains as he fictionalizes *Robinson Crusoe* help prove the truth of the story, creating vicarious experience for the reader. Here, however, instead of the individual identification that transports the reader of *Crusoe* to the island to judge facts from details for him or herself, the *General History* places the reader in the midst of a community of people who give witness to the effect of Misson’s policies on their lives. The egalitarian anonymity of the community lends itself very well to this kind of social speculation.

It should be noted that any reading of the Misson narrative as a straightforward alternative to the colonial endeavor is complicated by its ending. The natives attack Misson’s pirate state “without the least Provocation given, in the Dead of the Night” (437). They slaughter both men and women. Lincoln Faller attributes this failure of Misson’s pirate state to unavoidable violence in the human condition, as the colony ultimately succumbs to a breakdown in human relationships. Faller goes so far as to suggest that the Misson tale serves as a final vindication of colonial imperialism:

However well the Liberi can defend themselves against Europe, however well they can achieve an integrated, harmonious, multiracial, and anti-imperialist society . . . they are swallowed up in some terrible outburst from some unimaginable heart of darkness. . . if [there is] no imperialism, then [there is] still the need to keep indigenous peoples in awe of the metropole. (“Captain Misson” 6)

It is possible to read this tale as Faller does. It does not provide a straightforward vindication of democracy, or a straightforward condemnation of imperial greed. Yet the *General History* is not a straightforward text. It is ostensibly a historical narrative, and in concealing its fictionalization maintains its claim to strict referentiality. Since Capt. Johnson’s audience would likely know that there had been no Libertalia in Madagascar,<sup>22</sup> as an ostensibly truthful history the account of Misson must reconcile that discrepancy with fact in order to maintain the illusion of referential accuracy.

While the Misson narrative imagines new and more just forms of social organization, many of the other narratives in the *General History* develop a critique of existing forms through a relationship of analogy between pirates and European governments. From the very beginning of the work, there is a suggestion that the pirate is capable of entering a state of quasi-nationhood. Roman pirates, we are told, “made commodious Harbours, set up Watch-Towers and Beacons all along the Coasts of *Cilicia*,” (28) actions which are those of a landholding state. In fact, Rome itself (which the text suggests is also an analogue to European colonial empires) had roots in outlawry:

*Rome*, the Mistress of the World, was no more at first than a Refuge for Thieves and Outlaws; and if the Progress of our Pyrates had been equal to their Beginning; had they all united, and settled in some of those Islands, they might, by this Time, have been honoured with the Name of a Commonwealth, and no Power in those Parts of the World could have been able to dispute it with them. (7)

The word “Commonwealth,” it should be noted, is used both for the legitimate nation-state (26)

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<sup>22</sup> The explorer Woodes Rogers had made voyages to the area in 1708-1711 and 1713-1715. Also, Mist himself had reported in the *Weekly Journal* on Saturday, April 9, 1726—presumably not long before the second volume of the *General History* was written—that “all the Pyrates settled at Madagascar have been massacred by the Natives, except 12 who fled.”

and also, at least eleven times, for an organization of pirates (41, 85, 195, *et passim*), while the pirates' settlements on land are called colonies (38, 135). Now, from this lack of clear distinction between the nation-state and the organization of pirates arises the question of the nation-state's legitimacy. In fact, if the trajectory of the pirate is that of Rome, from outlawry to legitimacy, then there is no reason to suppose that the European nation-states are not themselves organizations of piracy who have achieved "legitimacy" simply by the passage of time.

The critique-by-analogy the *General History* develops between pirate crews and colonial empires appears to extend equally to commercial enterprises endorsed by those empires. In fact, throughout the social commentary of the work there is an elision of government and private enterprise. The first volume cites an order of King George, which gives as its reason for the suppression of piracy the protection of "*Trade from Great Britain*" (39); and the merchants who petition for government suppression of piracy refer to the trade of individual merchants metonymically as the trade of the crown of Great Britain itself. We are told, "they besought her Majesty to secure the same to the Crown of this Kingdom, and to the Security and Advantage of the Trade thereof" (38). This rhetoric reflects the nature of enterprise in the period; in England, for example, much overseas trade was conducted under the auspices of the crown itself.

This elision of private enterprise with the state forms an important key to understanding the critique that the *General History* develops. The suggestively-named Captain England, for example, burns or sinks entire ships and cargoes "out of Wantonness" (134), creating a sense of moral degradation and excess. Yet Captain England's men disperse easily into English and Spanish society, and one becomes a captain in the "legitimate" Spanish navy. In fact, while England and his men are enjoying their loot, we are told:

if they had known what was doing in England, at the same Time by the South-Sea Directors, and their Directors, they would certainly have had this Reflection for their Consolation, viz. That what ever Robberies they had committed, they might be pretty sure they were not the greatest Villains then living in the World. (134)

The text thus conveys the idea that the British and Spanish imperial states and their merchants alike are guilty, in their colonial spoils, of the same moral degradation as the pirates. In this light, the bizarre excesses of the pirates become a commentary on the nation-state itself, rather than a means by which to distinguish the pirate from it.

If this is so, then the same kind of communal action and social speculation that in the Misson and Tew narratives suggest new kinds of social organization and solutions to social problems can elsewhere function to play out the negative repercussions of a society governed and organized after the manner of the European states that Misson condemns. And, in fact, that is exactly what the other tales of the *General History* do. Nowhere does this fact appear more clearly than in the fictionalized tale of Captain Avery, which opens the first volume. It serves as a dystopian counterpoint to Misson's utopian vision, in which Avery and his men quickly become grotesque parodies of the monarchs of Europe. First of all, Avery himself is depicted as cowardly because, like the European monarchs, he rules from afar, not engaging in battle himself: "Avery only cannonaded at a distance, and some of his Men began to suspect that he was not the Hero they took him for" (53). Secondly, Avery betrays his own men once the Great Mogul's ship has been captured, making off with all the treasure. The terms used to describe his intrigues recall diplomatic or political agreements: "desiring the Chief of them to come on Board of him, in order to hold a Council; they did so, and he told them he had something to propose to them for the common Good" (54). Avery's betrayal highlights the sense in which the apparatus of government is as prone to serve as an instrument of theft and injustice as it is a means of mutual benefit.

After Avery's betrayal, the pirates he leaves behind settle on Madagascar. Made powerful by the firearms they possess, they "divide from one another, each living with his own Wives, Slaves and Dependants, like a separate Prince" (59). The pirates each become tyrannical leaders

of their own small nation-states, ruling the native people and selling their own subjects to European slavers so that they can purchase weapons, knives, and clothes. Yet the narrator asserts their legitimacy as kings (61). These kingdoms critique by analogy the same elements of the European colonial state that Misson's tale addresses: again, not only the problem of human slavery, but also the problems of a rhetoric that dehumanizes and demonizes the "other" to create a sense of unity, a hypocritical and arbitrarily brutal administration of justice, and an economic system based on institutionalized plunder.

For example, in order to protect themselves from rebellion, the "Kings of Madagascar" foster a national identity among their subjects by creating war and strife with other native tribes. By creating the image of a dangerous "other," the pirates are able to maintain a sense of unity that holds their individual kingdoms together (60). The Avery narrative also functions as a critique of the state's distinction between legitimate and illegitimate enterprise. After returning secretly to Britain to retire, Avery sells his diamonds to a group of merchants from Bristol in exchange for a regular living allowance. Instead of maintaining his allowance, however, the merchants rob and blackmail him. He dies penniless and hungry. "Our Merchants," writes the narrator, "were as good Pyrates at Land as he was at Sea" (57). This scathing comment highlights that there is often little difference between officially sanctioned, "legitimate" commercial enterprise and that of the pirates themselves. It is mainly the state, as we have seen, that determines the difference; and by virtue of its official blessing, the state, too, is complicit in crime. In fact, by the choice of pronoun even the writer and readers of the *General History* are implicated: the thieves are "Our Merchants." Their double-dealing serves as an example of the corruption that exists on all levels.

Where the first volume of the *General History* opens with the tale of Avery and his men, the second volume opens with the tale of Captain Misson. That this juxtaposition is deliberate



and important to the work seems apparent from even a cursory examination of the structure of the *General History*. The two tales are set in similar time-periods. Both Avery's men and Misson and his crew settle on Madagascar, founding colonies. Both narratives employ collective protagonists to involve the reader, engaging in social speculation that explores the outcomes of various social configurations. And, lastly, both tales employ high levels of fictionality.<sup>23</sup> These similarities point to the relationship of contrast between the narratives of Captain Misson and Captain Avery: a relationship in which the narrative of Avery critiques the shortcomings of colonial empire, and the narrative of Misson suggests an alternative mode of social life. Both tales, however, employ the possibilities of utopian fictionality; they follow the collective actions of fictional or fictionalized groups to create knowledge about statehood and social organization. While the *General History* does not wholeheartedly endorse the egalitarian state of Misson, it suggests that there may be a valid alternative to the violent tyranny of a state whose economic system is based on plunder. Even more importantly, in a fiction about people understood to be criminals, whose actions are explicitly not endorsed, such imaginative play could be carried out

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23 Though Johnson would have had many sources available for the life of Avery, the most certain is Captain Woodes Rogers' 1712 *A Cruising Voyage Around the World*, which the narrator quotes almost word-for-word. (The *Cruising Voyage* identifies the pirates at Madagascar as those "who had made such a Noise in the World" on p. 419; the *General History* says of Avery, "he made as great a Noise in the World as *Meriveis* does now" on p. 49.) This source, however, says of the pirates living in Madagascar, "those miserable Wretches . . . were now dwindled to between 60 and 70, most of them very poor and despicable, even to the Natives, among whom they had married" (Rogers 419). Far from being "Kings of Madagascar," the pirates were despised even by their indigenous neighbors. Johnson tells as the final anecdote of the story a tale from the second voyage of Woodes Rogers to the area in 1713-1715. Though Rogers did indeed sail to Madagascar at that time, and Johnson may have indeed heard from him the story of his journey, the anecdote in the *General History* is quite different from what we know of the actual voyage. Rogers did indeed meet former pirates at the island, but if they were Avery's men, they would have been on the island for only about fifteen years at the time, and would not have had children and grandchildren, as the *General History* tells us. Furthermore, quite apart from inhabiting inland fortresses, the pirates that Rogers encountered were living near the southeast side of the island, and they were anxious to return to England. They signed a petition that Rogers drew up seeking pardon from Queen Anne of England. By contrast, Johnson has the pirate "kings" of Madagascar attempt to capture Roger's ship.

Thus this part of the story, while loosely correlated with the facts—there were still pirates at Madagascar—is largely fictionalized. Secondly, nothing is known about how Avery's life actually ended (*General History* 667). It is likely that the tale is invented: were they real, the merchants who robbed him would have been most circumspect about the source of their diamonds, and Avery's family would have been equally reticent regarding their concealment of him. It is highly improbable that the writer would know their story. This invention, however, like that of the Misson tale with which it is juxtaposed, serves the *General History*'s critique.

without fear of censorship in an era in which open discussion of major social reorganization and reform was fraught with legal danger.<sup>24</sup> The *General History* enabled its author to engage, without fear of criminal charges, in a kind of social speculation that imagined a better social order.

If the *General History* is remarkable for its sweeping social critique and its pointed social speculation, it is all the more so in light of the timing of its publication: its first book, opening with the tale of Avery, was published the same year as Defoe's *Roxana*, and its second book, containing the tales of Misson and Tew, was published two years later, in 1726. Thus it had had ample opportunity to be influenced by the radical individualism of *Crusoe* and *Singleton*, and even of Defoe's later criminal life-narratives. Yet it maintains strict referentiality, and instead of focusing on individual protagonists, it follows the collective fortunes of a group.

The *General History*, then, in its initial form, was an instrument of keen social critique, and its tremendous popularity would seem to hint that there was a market for the kind of radical social speculation that its utopian and dystopian fictions develop. Yet the patterns of its reprinting and reception over the next several decades tell a different story. As it was reprinted and adapted, its social critique and speculation was blunted and, at times, completely eliminated.

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<sup>24</sup> Nathaniel Mist, a Jacobite extremist, was being prosecuted for seditious libel during the production of both the 1724 and 1728 editions (Bialuschewski, "Daniel Defoe"). Covert social critique would have been particularly appealing to a writer wary of further criminal charges.

### **The Pirate as Novelistic Hero: Reception and Adaptation of the *General History***

The adapted version of the *General History*, published first in 1725 (“with twenty beautiful Cuts”) omits entirely the tales of Misson and Tew (as do nearly all editions after 1728), and the tales retained take on a more conservative political rhetoric and a more conventional novelistic plotline. In the tale of Avery, for example, while the *General History*’s original account gives just one sentence about Avery’s origins and upbringing, the adaptation adds a three-page description of Avery’s innkeeper parents, his childhood abduction and destitution, his thieving ways, and his eventual going to sea to escape criminal prosecution. None of this appears in the original *General History*, and it serves to ground the tale emphatically in the story of Avery the individual, a story, in fact, with a certain amount of psychological depth: Avery, the rebellious child, emulating the coarse sailors that stayed at his parents’ inn, and the sailors, bitter at their landlady’s inflated prices and usury, stealing him away by way of revenge. Lastly, Avery’s concern for reintegration with society is amplified: he feels “the Horours and Dread of an awaken’d Conscience” (11) and returns home with a few companions.

Many details that contribute to the sense of social critique in the *General History* are muted in this adaptation. For example, when the English merchant whom Avery seeks to fence his stolen goods betrays him, the *General History*’s condemnation of merchants as “Pirates at Land” is put in Avery’s mouth and made specific to the merchant who betrayed him. He calls the merchant “a greater Pirate than himself” (14). Similarly, where the original *General History* comments (in the tale of Captain England) that the “South-Sea Directors, and their Directors” were greater villains than the pirates (134), the adapted version tones down the accusation and

puts it in the pirates' mouths, who swear "that . . . they are not the only Rogues in the World" (40).

Yet the most significant change in the adapted version of the *General History* is the complete absence of political theory and speculation. Where the original version opens with an introduction that compares the emergence of the Roman empire to the creation of pirate settlements and draws the analogous relationship between the European nation-state and the pirate crew, the adaptation's preface focuses on the individual pirate as criminal: "Thieves of all Sorts are villainous, but none to be compared to the Villany of a Pirate, who knows not what he is about till he finds himself going to be hanged; and then usually dies in such a desponding Condition, that the last Moment of his Life soures all the Relish of his inhumane Pleasures" (ix). The intended audience, too, is different. The preface opens with the following introduction: "The Design of Publishing this Book at so small a Price, is to caution the unwary Mariner against the Temptation he may meet with at Sea" (iv). The rhetorical thrust of the book is not a commentary on governments, politics or trade: it is a warning for the individual against the allures of crime, a project that defends rather than critiquing the social order.

Though it is doubtful that, as the preface suggests, any common sailor could have afforded this book, it is indeed both much shorter than the original *General History* (which is directed at "Masters of Ships", p. 1), and also printed in duodecimo rather than the original editions' octavo size. It is certainly a cheaper book. Why the editions marketed to a lower-income section of the reading public would have taken a more conservative bent is matter only for speculation. Perhaps it hints at a market for or interest in narratives of social mobility and reintegration. Clearly, however, the appeal of the adapted edition of the *General History* is what Joel Baer identifies as the classic narrative of the pirate figure: a novelistic tale of individual

social mobility and reintegration in which either the hero repents and retires with his wealth and with impunity, or he is punished for his transgressions (vi).

A similar trend appears quite consistently in the illustrations of the *General History* over the course of its reprinting history. It is a trend that applies the conventions of portraiture to single out the pirate captain as the individualistic hero of his story: a pattern of representation quite different from the text's own emphasis on collective activity and social speculation. This trend is visible from the very beginning of the work's history, in part because illustrators generally had no contact with the writers of the texts they illustrated. Instead, the publisher would purchase a manuscript from its author for a flat fee. Then, they would contract the work of illustrating the volume out to a professional. As an artist working independently of the author, the illustrator would not participate in the "writing" but rather in the "reading" of the text. Thus the illustration serves both as the first interpretation of the text and as a window into the broader visual culture of the period and the specific expectations that a public might have of the work as a whole.

The 1735 *Lives of the Highwaymen* lends itself particularly well to an examination of illustrations because it is a collection of pirate lives from the *General History* and criminal life-narratives from other texts, lavishly illustrated by the same artist, J. Nicholls. As one of the few instances of pirate and land-based criminal lives bound together in the same volume, this book limits hidden factors such as differences in taste between artists and publishers. Yet a clear difference is immediately apparent between the images of pirates and those of highwaymen. The illustration from the *Lives* that follows (Fig. 1) is an excellent example of the criminal portrait in the early eighteenth century.

Dramatic and realistic, this image frames one moment in the narrative, and exists in the same unbroken spatial and temporal framework. This sense is reinforced by the captions. In the

caption to Fig. 1, for example, we are told that we are being shown Colonel Jack robbing a Mrs. Smith “going to Kentish town.” This is a specific event in the narrative’s plot.



Fig. 1 Colonel Jack, *Lives of the Highwaymen*, Nathaniel Mist

This image is representative of the illustrations of almost every land-based criminal narrative in the period. The moments selected for depiction are from the climax of the story, usually the moment in which the crime occurs; they occupy a single, seamless spatial and temporal frame; and they show a group of people in a composition that is not hierarchical and does not focus the piece on one particular person. The illustrations printed in the pirate life-narratives, on the other hand, both in this volume and in other

reprintings of the *General History*, are strikingly different. Where in the illustrations of land-based criminals the focus of the engraving is on the action of the group, a kind of democratic organization of authority, the illustrations of pirates are, unequivocally, portraits. They are posed, focused visual representations of the pirate captain standing by himself, dressed in his finest clothes.

Reasons for this contrast can be found in the visual culture and the conventions of portraiture of the period. Collections of engravings, which were very popular over the course of the eighteenth century, were desired for their value as a visual cross-section of society, divided into specific classes.<sup>25</sup> Thus the discourse of the biographical illustration was a discourse of

<sup>25</sup> See Pointon, p. 84.

visual taxonomy. In fact, writers on plate collection, such as James Granger in 1769, published lists of the different classes of people that could be illustrated, including (in Granger's case) eleven social gradations from kings and queens all the way down to the common criminal (v).



Each image served the purpose of communicating to the viewer a rough classification of the person depicted into a particular social strata or type, and its stylistic conventions gave clues to the kind of person depicted.

Fig. 2 Captain Roberts, *Lives of the Highwaymen*, Nathaniel

Mist

Captain Roberts, for example, in Fig. 2, strikes a commanding pose with his hand on his hip and holding out his unsheathed sword in a gesture of confidence. His pistol belt and small- arms accoutrements bag are decorated with frills and

bows; ruffles appear at his wrists and elegant lace at his throat and chest. Last but not least, the feather-plume in his cap is so luxurious that it is almost larger than the hat itself. This visual interpretation is strikingly contrary to the text's own emphasis on collective action and social critique. It figures the pirate as individualistic hero and individual protagonist.

What makes the portrait's pose particularly startling in the case of Roberts is that he is posed in his finery in the foreground of the picture while, behind him, his ship appears to be locked in combat for control of the bay. That Captain Roberts is posing for a portrait in his finest clothes while his men fight behind him suggests already a disconnect that will become more pronounced upon examining the next illustration, figure 3. Here, there is both a narrative and a temporal break. This is explicitly stated in the caption: "Hen Morgan before Panama which he



took from the Spaniards.” While the foreground and the background appear both to be in the image’s present, with smoke rising from heated musket barrels, the caption switches from implied present tense (“Hen Morgan [is here depicted] before Panama”) to explicit past tense: “which he took.” In this picture, then, we are expected to see the battle in the background as a separate temporal frame with a causal narrative relationship to the foreground: the battle Morgan fought enables him to pose before Panama.

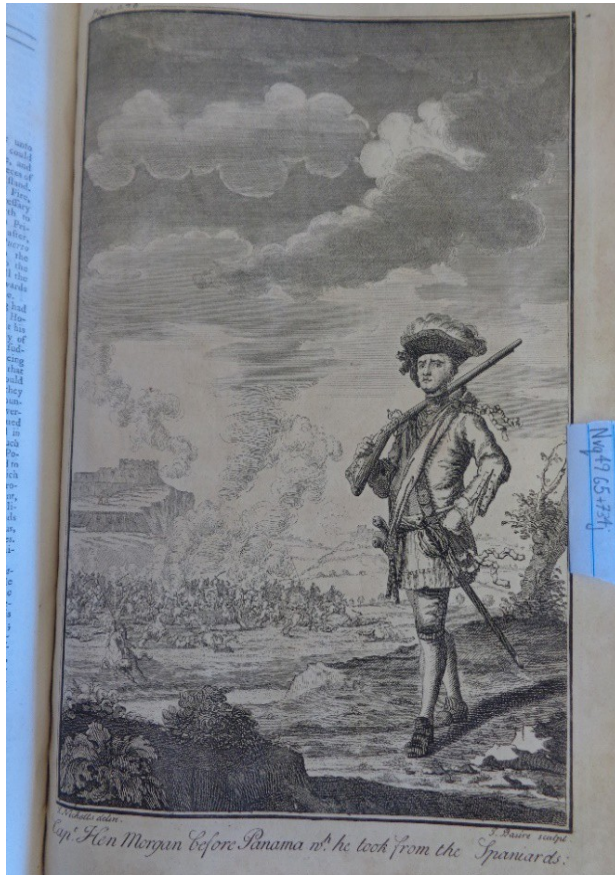


Fig. 3. Henry Morgan, *Lives of the Highwaymen*.

Nathaniel Mist

In this image, the elements of collective action and group anonymity that I have argued characterize the text of the *General History* are all but completely lost. Not only is it difficult for the viewer to identify with any of the anonymous figures in the background, who are just barely visible in the distance, but their very collective action has been subsumed under the superiority of Capt. Morgan. Literally, as the caption explains, this is Panama, which *he* took from the Spaniards.

There could be no more direct way of negating the agency of the crew.

In order to understand better the change that occurs between the collective protagonist of the text and the individual focus of the illustrations, it will be helpful to compare these images to an illustration from one of Defoe’s novels, *Colonel Jacque*, which appears in Fig. 4 below. This is a synoptic image, and as such, it is essentially a summary of the work, depicting several





narrative moments from the story

simultaneously.<sup>26</sup> As its caption indicates, this image has a diagrammatic quality. With the foreground, middle ground, and background of the picture labelled, it shows Jacques in three distinct conditions of life: “1. In adversity, 2. In prosperity, 3. His plantation in America.”

Fig. 4: Frontispiece, *Colonel Jacques*, Daniel Defoe.

The logic of this picture is similar to that of the portraits of pirates we have seen above.

Jacques is depicted in the foreground of the picture dressed in fine clothes and distinctly posing for a formal portrait. Behind him, we see his American plantation with his laborers at work and either himself or a foreman strutting confidently past them, issuing a command. While the causal

relationship is less clear than it is in the depiction of Henry Morgan above, here again it is the American plantation and the trade it supports that is the source of Jacques’s prosperity, the financial and social status that enables him to pose for this portrait.

Yet in the middle ground, we see a third, distinct narrative moment. Here, Jacques is flanked by an earlier, poorer image of himself wearing tattered clothes. The clothing of this second Jacques, however, is not the only difference between him and the more successful version of himself. He is here depicted engaged *in the narrative moment*; literally, he is in motion, with

<sup>26</sup> As David Blewitt explains, it was common practice in the eighteenth century for book illustrators to create what was called a synoptic illustration, which compressed “various elements into a single picture . . . in order to emphasize the work’s meaning and unity” (29).

his gaze fixed ahead of him out of the picture's visual frame. Arguably, this depiction is an analogue to those of highwaymen in criminal lives.

In these illustrations we can locate clues to some of the social and political frameworks that influence collectivist and individualistic trends in the narrative mode of the *General History*. The depictions of highwaymen and murderers are depictions of people in the lowest class of life; Class XII in the revised 1775 edition of Granger's *Biographical History*. As such, they are portrayed *in the moment*: their importance and interest comes solely from the story in which they play a role. In Granger's words, they "are remarkable from only one Circumstance in their Lives; . . . Convicts, &c." (viii). By contrast, the pirates, who by various means came to be captains of ships and of ship's crews, are fit into a higher class of individual. Since they are men of common birth and origins, however, the synoptic image must both depict them in a manner befitting their present dignity and explain the reason for their importance. In the tale of Colonel Jacque, originally a common pickpocket, remarkable only for the story he takes part in, Jacque is now a landowning individual worthy of the dignity of a posed portrait. The illustration—which, as a summary of the work, functions as an analogue to the narrative itself—takes the protagonist out of his position in society, enriches and enlarges him, and integrates him into the stylistic conventions of a higher class.

In the illustrations from the *General History* we have seen, the intervention and interpretation of the illustrator applies to the text the same individualistic mindset that is visible in the illustration of Colonel Jacque. The novel is, first and foremost, *his* story: the tale of his upward journey from the lowest class of people to find his place among the middle class. In the same way, the illustrations of the *General History* and *Lives of the Highwaymen* remove the pirate from the ship and place him or her *on land*, in a formal portrait, reintegrating him or her to the hierarchy and visual taxonomy of middle-class British society. Even though, as our reading

has shown, the pirates of the *General History* represent a critique of European social structures that advocates not reintegration but social change, and the tenure of pirate captains—almost always an elected position—was tentative at best, the illustrators depict them within the same framework of individualistic mindsets and perceived hierarchies as the characters of the novel. The illustrations that result are representative of almost every illustrated pirate life-narrative in the period, most of which, as Joel Baer points out, were, like novels, individualistic tales of social mobility (vi). If we read these images as participating in the reading and interpretation of the text, they suggest something about what the reading public of the time may have wished to read in a pirate story: the tale of a poor fellow who made “a noise in the world.”

### Defoe and Reintegration

If individual change, social mobility, and reintegration were what the reading public were looking for in a reading experience in the early eighteenth century, they found it in Defoe. As we have seen, where the *General History* speculates on a larger scale about the social, Defoe's narratives focus on the experiences of the individual consciousness, founding even the utopian vision of *Crusoe* in the solitary experience of a single man. Defoe's innovative poetics of fictionality make this possible by allowing for the diminished referentiality of the individual protagonist by a transposition that fictionalizes his story, and this diminished referentiality, a precursor to outright fictionality, enables the reader to identify directly with the protagonist himself. Now, these narratives do not necessarily celebrate solitude, nor do they denounce human relationships. Instead, as Jody Greene shows, they address human isolation as a fundamental problem requiring a solution, and the shared trajectory of their plots, like that of Homer's *Odyssey*, is an unceasing search for what Greene, borrowing the German of Heidegger, calls *Mitsein*: "being-with," or the essential human need for connection to other people (407). This observation, however, is revealing about the work of Defoe on multiple levels. While inherently concerned with the social—*mitsein* is by definition a social mode of life—it does not completely negate, as Lamb points out, the individualistic center of the narrative's endeavor, which is a search from the perspective of the individual to find its place of reintegration with the social body (18). However, this is a far cry from Watt's description of the early novel's *psychological* individualism; it casts light on the economic, political, and spiritual concerns of Defoe's fiction; and it will provide some insight into that fiction's formal choices. Specifically, Greene's thesis

will aid in understanding how and perhaps why Defoe's fictionality takes such a different turn from the utopian social speculation that the *General History* elects to employ.

Greene characterizes *Singleton* as an answer to the problems of individualism and solitude that *Crusoe* develops to such intensity: it "constitutes a direct response to *Robinson Crusoe's* cry" (410), a tale that "actively breaks with the first novel of the *Crusoe* trilogy" (409). Yet I suggest that Defoe had wrestled with these problems years before; that *Crusoe* and *Singleton* both reflect long-standing interests for Defoe that help to inspire the generic choice of criminal life-narrative, and which provide a springboard into inquiry for many of his novels.

One of the first times that Defoe toys with the idea of a pirate state on Madagascar and of the similarities between legitimate and illegitimate enterprise is in his periodical, the *Review of the State of the British Nation* in the October 18, 1707 issue. Here, more than ten years before the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe sets up the pirate and the legitimate merchant as analogues and compares their projects of capital accumulation. The ultimate end of both these figure's quests, he argues, is to make wealth or establish "estates" abroad and bring bullion home:

all these Sorts of People when they get Estates in Jamaica or Barbadoes, or any of our Colonies or Factories abroad; when they have got Estates, they seek to come home and spend them; in order to this, they soon lay off the Out-side, adjourn the Thief, and putting the Badge of Gravity on, they come home for great Merchants, and live unquestion'd. (426)

This passage provides a framework within which to approach and interpret Defoe's *homo economicus*. Within this framework, the capital accumulation of his characters becomes a kind of social disruption, a crisis that ruptures human connection and isolates the individual. It is also a moral conundrum. *Homo economicus*, in his acquisitive mode, is a thief: he may not directly steal the possessions of others, but his actions are a prioritization of capital accumulation above human relationship, and this is an ethical problem that places the theoretically legitimate merchant on the same treacherous moral ground as the pirate. The problem, for the merchant-

adventurer and the pirate alike, is the problem of reintegration: how to restore the social breach of a fundamentally antisocial mode of life.

This problem is illustrated by the original frontispiece image of *Robinson Crusoe* (shown on the next page), which David Blewett examines thoroughly in his book *The Illustration of Robinson Crusoe*. Here, Blewett astutely points out that the ship cannot be the ship on which Crusoe arrives on the island, because it is traveling in the wrong direction. Nor is it likely to be

the ship on which Crusoe escapes from the island.

Crusoe is looking in the wrong direction. Instead of gazing eagerly outward at the ship in hopes that it will stop to save him, Crusoe gazes pensively, even introspectively, at some invisible point in the right foreground of the picture. This, Blewett suggests, is because the ship is in Crusoe's *imagination*; he stands in his island domain, not focused on his surroundings, but dreaming of a voyage home (29).

Fig. 5 Frontispiece. *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe



Seen through this interpretive lens, *Singleton* and *Crusoe* are parallel narratives. In *Crusoe*, the dramatic question that must be solved to enable the

work's *dénouement* is the question of the return: will Crusoe ever be able to come back to England? Will he ever resolve the moral crisis of his "original sin," the refusal to live within his call to the "upper station of low life"? In his analysis of *Crusoe*, McKeon suggests that the ultimate goal of Crusoe's spiritual journey is the internalization of divinity, the process of learning the ability to define his own call in life and see it as the call of God (333). In making this suggestion, McKeon seems to imply that Crusoe's description of God's call implies a certain

necessary self-deception. Unlike McKeon, in reading *Robinson Crusoe* I find it difficult to rule out the possibility that, within the world of the text, Crusoe might, indeed, hear from God. Yet if so, this would be a God who seems to change his mind both about Crusoe's acquisition of wealth and about his social position. Once Crusoe does submit to God's will and embrace the decrees of providence, he becomes a king-like sovereign over others, which is hardly the "upper station of low life." With either reading, this story becomes an epic of reintegration: Crusoe's spiritual and physical journey concludes with his upwards social mobility and his re-assimilation into British society.

Thus the content and narrative trajectory of *Crusoe* complements its form. The formal choices Defoe employs, his focus on the isolated, individual protagonist, and his development of a poetics of fictionality to support identification with that protagonist, lend themselves to a very different kind of speculation than that of the *General History*. Instead of wholesale social critique or social change, Defoe's fictions speculate about the individual's position within that society, and their ultimate alienation or integration with it.

Greene's perspicuous reading of *Singleton* also reflects this concern for reintegration. Though I have suggested that the tale is a parallel and not a contrast to *Crusoe*, I otherwise follow her analysis. Indeed, though Greene does not make this point explicitly, I would suggest that her reading provides an explanation for the novel's odd two-part structure, often seen as a weakness of the work. If it is an "epic of *mitsein*," committed to solving the problem of "being-with" for *homo economicus*, then *Singleton* first presents one solution and its outcome—the constructed social bond of plunderers intent on wealth acquisition, and that wealth's unexpected inability to satisfy—and then presents a second solution: spiritual redemption born of William the Quaker's friendship, a relationship that is not only economic but emotional and spiritual, altering Bob Singleton's definition of "home."

At this point I must address a major concern created by my somewhat reductive classification of the narratives of Defoe and of the *General History* in binary opposition to each other along lines of individualism and collectivity. In *Singleton*, both in the first and second halves of the book, Defoe employs a collective protagonist: Singleton always travels with a band of dedicated followers. The plural first-person pronoun appears constantly, and the text depicts the decision-making processes and social arrangements of the group. This mode of narration seems almost identical to the emphasis on collective action and social organization that I have argued characterizes the narration of the *General History*. However, I would argue that it is at this point of greatest similarity that the difference in the narrative style of Defoe and that of Capt. Johnson becomes most apparent, and the point at which it is perhaps most possible to speculate about the reasons why the two styles diverge so sharply. The difference is, at its core, a political one.

Both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* are examples of what McKeon calls “internalized utopia” (335). They deal in the kind of personal experience and change that enables a person to successfully reintegrate into human connection and moral social interaction from the problematic life of capital accumulation. In a sense, then, the utopian society is Britain itself, and the utopian *condition* is the ability to find and enjoy one’s place within it. The text explores not how to improve society but how to better one’s self. Rees highlights this in her reading of *Crusoe*; Crusoe’s relinquishing of authority over his subjects she sees as his “renunciation of the utopian imagination in favor of the ‘real’ world” (101). Later, the inhabitants of Crusoe’s new island colony, as we learn in *Reflections*, scatter in hopes of seeing “their own Country again” (102). Even before its abandonment by Crusoe, however, Rees sees this new social order as essentially British: a recreation of the existing British sociopolitical system (98). Thus *Crusoe's*



fiction functions as an "experimental" affirmation of British social structure, class hierarchies, and organization.

For this reason, I distinguish between the kind of fictionality that *Crusoe* and *Singleton* employ and that which appears in the *General History*: the former, even when it explores social relationships, focuses on the individual consciousness, seeking to reconcile it and its desires to the world. Even in *Singleton*, where collective action seems to mitigate Bob's "singleness," the shared enterprise of acquisition fails to create a permanently satisfying "home." It is only through deep personal and spiritual connection to William the Quaker and reintegration to British society that Singleton finally achieves *mitsein*. This is a reflection of what McKeon calls Defoe's progressive ideology: reform and assimilationism rather than either conservatism or revolutionary change (326).

## Conclusion

The rhetorical thrust, towards *Mitsein* and reintegration with British society, of *Singleton* and *Crusoe* is in direct contrast to the *General History of the Pyrates*. The tale of Avery's men is fictionalized so that they remain defiant to the end instead of petitioning for pardon through Woodes Rogers' agency. As for Captains Misson and Tew, who found their own alternate state: though Libertia is destroyed, they resist reintegration to the very end. Misson wishes only to "visit" home and dies at sea, while Tew, though he is able to retire in Rhode Island without incident, instead chooses to go back to sea and dies fighting. Far from Defoe's reform progressivism, the rhetoric that the *General History* promotes is insistently critical of European sociopolitical structures, and the change that it explores is revolutionary. As a result, it fittingly adopts the collective, utopian modes of fictionality and nonreferentiality that I identify in the first section of this paper, in order to best imagine a complete rearrangement and reconstruction of society. For a man such as Nathaniel Mist, who (if he was the author of the *General History*) would have written the first volume after spending time in prison and in the pillory and the second volume while in exile in France, to be published in his absence the same year that the presses that produced his *Weekly Journal* were destroyed by the government, this radical message of social reorganization would perhaps have held a deep appeal.

Yet the project of personal change, rather than Johnson's radical social experimentation, became the template that the novel followed. Though both types of narrative involved experimental solutions to social problems, Defoe's enabled a closer identification with the individual protagonist and thus provided the formal resources to explore much more individual answers: answers centered around personal improvement, social mobility, and integration. These,

one may speculate, might have been much more adaptable to a sociopolitical situation in which the growing reading public was indeed the people in the "middle station of life" who conceivably would have welcomed a legitimizing narrative for the kind of social status that they enjoyed rather than one that speculated about its entire overthrow. As we have seen, while the *General History* was quite popular, abridgements and adaptations tended to tone down its political rhetoric and shift its narrative style to a more novelistic individual protagonist; the second volume, with the Misson and Tew narratives, was not included in many later editions; and as the illustrations suggest, the work was pressed almost from the beginning into a very similar individualistic framework of perception to that of the novel.

The conclusions of this study are necessarily limited by its breadth. While it is suggestive about the trends that shaped the novel's nonreferential individual protagonist, actually defining these trends in terms of the market forces that drove them and in terms of the larger print culture of the period will require much further study. Yet it is my hope that this paper will spark questions for further inquiries that will continue to enrich our understanding of the emergence of the novel: both as an agent of political and social speculation, and as a genre whose ongoing shape is limited and deeply affected by the vicissitudes of public taste, political climate, and market forces. Such inquiries, I believe, will tell us not just about the novel, but about the creation and spread of ideas and about the role that literature plays, sometimes reflective, sometimes active, never neutral, in the process of social change.

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