The Lyric of Narrative: Exile, Poetry, and Story in Saint-John Perse and Elizabeth Bishop

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This article examines two lyric rewritings of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Saint-John Perse’s *Images à Crusoé* focuses not on events or characters but on a series of physical objects that played a usually minor role in Defoe’s novel. Saint-John Perse transforms Defoe’s moral tale into meditations on the emotional turmoil of difference and exile, as the narrative past becomes a lyric present that mourns the loss of an idyllic temporal and geographical space. Bishop’s ‘Crusoe in England’ also recasts Defoe’s tale in a series of ‘poetic’ tropes that fill in gaps in the novel. Her first-person dramatic monologue – in contrast with Saint-John Perse’s prose poems in the second person – highlights the subjective experiences of fear, despair, and homoeroticism in the Crusoe story. Building from an analysis of the way books and texts themselves figure in both Saint-John Perse’s and Bishop’s poems, I argue that the interaction of lyric and narrative traditions can thus forge a new literary space, namely, narrative prose filtered through the lyric tradition, that allow the experience of exile to be retold.

From the very inception of writing in medieval Europe, narratives were cast in poetic forms, giving rise to a tradition known as narrative poetry, which distinguishes itself from the lyric by its impulse to convey a plot. But what happens when lyric poetry, traditionally outside the domain of narrative, serves as the vehicle for reflection on a fictional narrative originally cast in the form of a prose novel? In what follows, I explore two twentieth-century lyric poems that take up and rewrite the story of Robinson Crusoe in ways that illuminate the relationship of lyric to narrative, Saint-John Perse’s *Images à Crusoé*, and Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Crusoe in England.’

Saint-John Perse’s and Elizabeth Bishop’s choice of *Robinson Crusoe* as their poetic vehicle is, of course, certainly not an innocent one. From the time of Defoe’s novel’s publication in 1719, the Robinson Crusoe story has
been subject to a wide array of critical interpretations and creative rewritings. Viewed at first primarily as an action and adventure novel ‘based on a true story,’ the novel took on several new incarnations following Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s endorsement of it as the only novel he would permit his prototypical pupil Émile to read. Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novel, essentially reduced to the episodes involving Robinson alone with Friday on his island, became interpreted primarily as a moral tale involving the grave consequences of shirking one’s family duties and ignoring the will of one’s father. As many critics have pointed out, the publication and reception of *Robinson Crusoe* is also coterminous with the rise of the modern capitalist economic system and the golden age of European colonialism, both of which Crusoe reproduces in microcosm on the island.

It is only at the start of the twentieth century, however, that new Robinsons are discovered through direct literary engagements with Defoe’s foundational myth. As *Robinson Crusoe* is filtered through lyric poetry, several key transformations occur which will in turn affect the way *Robinson Crusoe* is rewritten and reread in both lyric and narrative genres throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. It is precisely lyric poetry’s refusal of narrative, or at least its unique perspective on traditional prose narrative, that enables and sets in motion these transformations driven by a reimagining of the Crusoe narrative. It is this faculty of imagination that, for some critics, defines the lyric enterprise and its relationship to narrative. Writing of the cross-currents between the lyric and narrative tendencies, Laurent Jenny (1976) explores the role of imagination with reference to a Baudelaire poem, which, like the Saint-John Perse poems I will examine here, is fueled by memory as it crystallizes around a near-random set of objects:

> The physical being distances itself by bottomless estimations. It says: ‘I am more imaginary than this imaginary self that one can dream up.’ And imaginary takes on a dynamic meaning: it is because the memory produces so many images that the self disappears into that memory, invaded by the fiction of memory. (p.442, my translation)

Jenny hints here at the auto-referential nature of lyrics that enter into a relationship with narrative, and this self-conscious storytelling is, for critics like Clare Regan Kinney (1992), a mark of sophisticated poetic storytell-
ing: ‘The more sophisticated the poetic fiction, the more aware of other kinds of storytelling it will be, and the more complicated its location of itself with respect to them. Indeed, this holds true even when a narrative explicitly declares itself to belong to a certain category of literary works’ (p.17). The works I shall examine here are particularly rich examples of an intensely self-aware textuality that complicates its own relationship to the Robinson Crusoe narrative from which it departs.

I begin with Images à Crusoe (Pictures for Crusoe) composed in 1904 by Saint-John Perse, a French poet who knew something of exile, having been born in Guadeloupe and brought to France at age twelve, and who would later live in exile from Vichy France in the United States. His ‘images’ consist of nine brief prose poems: ‘The Bells,’ ‘The Wall,’ ‘The City,’ ‘Friday,’ ‘The Parrot,’ ‘The Goat Umbrella,’ ‘The Ark,’ ‘The Seed’ and ‘The Book.’ As we see, with the exception of the one centered around Robinson’s companion Friday, each of the prose poems focuses on one of the objects that played an important role in Robinson’s adventures on the island. Narrative chronology is thus replaced with a series of meditations on the objects that become sites of reflection on the narrative, with which the reader is presumed to be familiar. The poems thus refuse the logic of chronological narrative, and with it the original Robinson Crusoe text itself. The adventure-story-cum-moral-tale is about to be replaced with more pressing lyric concerns. Significantly, Saint-John Perse writes in the second person, which creates a greater degree of intimacy between Crusoe and the reader than Defoe’s third-person narrative implied.

The fact that Images is constructed much like a catalogue or list of props is revealing, for the poems of which they consist operate as a sort of catalogue of images, vocabulary, and rhetorical devices traditionally labeled poetic. Here, for instance, is an excerpt from the first poem, ‘The Bells’:

You wept to remember the surf in the moonlight; the whistlings of the more distant shores; the strange music that is born and is muffled under the folded wing of the night,

like the linked circles that are the waves of a conch, or the amplifications of the clamours under the sea. (1971, p.59)

There is in these lines an overflowing of poetic imagery, such as the sob, the moon, the sea, strange music, and so on, and poetic rhetorical devices,
including apostrophe, anaphora, and simile. If the text of Defoe’s novel refutes any lyric impulse, often reading like a dry inventory of goods Robinson salvaged and principles he used to construct necessary items, the new Robinson filtered through the lyric presents an abundance of precisely what had been repressed or omitted from the novel as originally shaped. In this veritable catalogue of poetic tropes we can see that the Crusoe story is gradually reasserted within the literary tradition, after 150 years of rewriting as popular novels or school manuals, both destined to cast the story in moral terms.

There is an irony, however, in this reassertion of the Crusoe story for the literary – as opposed to the moral or pedagogical – tradition. While one of the marks of the lyric genre is usually said to be a heightened emphasis on the first-person subject, the thoughts, emotions, and transformations of a given ‘I,’ in Saint-John Perse the emphasis is not on the character of Crusoe as lyric subject but rather on the objects which surround him. His story, past and present, is revealed through the transformations, not only of his character, but also of the inanimate objects through which his story is told. The objects themselves thus abandon their utilitarian status and become once more infused with symbolic value, and even with anthropomorphic attributes, as we read in the second poem: ‘But the image cries out’ (p.59). In turn, Robinson Crusoe is revealed as lyric subject within and through these symbolic objects, as the second-person Robinson appears and disappears throughout the poems. In the first prose poem which I have cited, bells in Crusoe’s native England inspire his tears, as he longs for his island home and prefers the natural sounds that surrounded him there to the sound of the bells, seen here as products of the Western culture he had hoped to abandon.

This spatial disjunction between England and the island also implies a temporal opposition between his past on the island and present, many years later. Chronological time, however, is disrupted in this poem by a refusal to adhere to the narrative’s chronology, in place of which is substituted the series of objects through which Robinson is constituted. I have argued that these poems are about a return from Crusoe as utilitarian moral tale to Crusoe as literary subject. So, too, is the idea of return inscribed in the poems in the sense of a temporal regression from an unspecified present moment to the past, accompanied by the geographical shift from England back to the island. The temporal network of the poem
is complex, as the present moment is never defined with reference to the past of Robinson’s life on the island or to a projected return, via the imagination, to the island. The voice speaking in the poem ‘The City’ urges Robinson to draw the curtains and imagine himself back to the island: ‘It is evening on your Island and all around, here and there, wherever arches the faultless vase of the sea; it is evening the colour of eyelids, on roads woven of sky and of sea’ (p.63). All of this imagery contrasts sharply with the city, represented prior to this in the poem by the ‘odour of men in crowds, like the stale smell of a slaughter-house! Sour bodies of women under their skirts!’ (p.61). Robinson’s ecstasy upon his abandoning of the lurid city and regaining of the island paradise is clear at the end of the poem: ‘Joy! O joy set free in the heights of the sky! …Crusoe! You are there! And your face is proffered to the signs of the night like an upturned palm’ (p.65). It is significant that this journey takes place entirely within the imagination of the main character of the poem, and, of course, by extension, within the imagination of the reader. This imaginative return also takes the reader back textually to the origins of the fiction that generated the poem.

The representation of Robinson’s memory is idealized in the poem, where the island is transformed from a place of exile, suffering, and punishment, as it had been portrayed by Defoe, to an idyllic paradise more in line with Baudelaire’s nonspecific là, where tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, luxe, calme et volupté (1975, p.53). The disjunction between the purity of the remembered island and the original ‘truth’ of the fiction where the island was a source of torment reminds us that origins, in fiction or otherwise, are never pure, unsullied, or, most importantly, uninterpreted. The purity of the images in Saint-John Perse’s poem is purposefully at odds both with Defoe’s foundational text and the myriad rewritings of that text through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is through an act of memory in this case that Saint-John Perse in fact creates an entirely new fiction, an emerging Robinson for the twentieth century.

Advancing to the final poems of the Images, we arrive at the penultimate and shortest poem, ‘The Seed’: ‘You buried it in a flowerpot, the purple seed that had stuck to your goatskin jacket. It has not sprouted’ (p.67). After a series of poems about the despair of exile and the sadness of loss, it comes as no surprise to encounter this image of sterility, the fruitful exotic plant which refuses to grow once it is transported out of its native
environment and back to what has been represented as the cold, sterile lands of England.

The series of images in the poem does not, however, ultimately end in exile and sterility. I would like to turn briefly to the final poem, ‘The Book,’ which places Crusoe in a walk through the city in the rain, when there ‘stirred in [his] heart the obscure birth of speech’ (p.67). This poem returns us to the origins of language which, unlike the seed, will in fact germinate and prove to be fruitful. Crusoe flips through ‘the Book,’ which might seem to be the Bible, given the reference in the poem to the book of prophecies it contains: ‘letting your worn finger wander among the prophecies, your gaze far away, you awaited the moment of departure, the rising of the great wind that would suddenly tear you away, like the typhoon, parting the clouds before your waiting eyes’ (p.69). The poem ends with Robinson awaiting this new departure and flight from the pitiless skies of England to what is for him a purer space of nature.

Given the history of rewritings of Robinson Crusoe, I would like to propose an alternate, albeit anachronistic, interpretation of these final images and symbols. The book containing prophecies of future changes and triumphs changes identity when we consider this poem in a context larger than the immediate ‘plot’ of the unhappy Robinson in England. When we read this poem in light of the metamorphoses the Robinson Crusoe story was to undergo throughout the twentieth century, this final image of Saint-John Perse’s poem of 1904 becomes not a book of divine prophecy but the novel Robinson Crusoe itself. In fact, the metaphorical voyage that Robinson Crusoe the character was to take throughout the twentieth century, in which he is represented variously as a man and a woman, a homo- and heterosexual, as choosing to remain on the island and electing to leave it, is prefigured in this image of Robinson awaiting the coming of the strong winds that would blow him, willingly, far off course. In this sense, Perse’s Images, with all of their backward-looking nostalgia for a lost island paradise, become a forward-looking text that anticipates much of the ground that twentieth-century rewritings of Robinson Crusoe in prose and verse will tread. In the light of literary history, we may consider this text, written at the end of Perse’s adolescence, as itself the adolescent period of the Robinson Crusoe myth, an intermediary stage between its birth and early history as a moral tale and the subsequent
emphasis that twentieth-century versions will place on the philosophical and sexual aspects of the myth.

I turn now to another lyric Robinson, created nearly seventy years later, Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Crusoe in England’ (1971). Bishop presents, in contrast to Saint-John Perse, a narrative-lyric poem in the first person, a sort of dramatic monologue. The first-person writing further collapses the distance that Defoe’s third-person narrative and Saint-John Perse’s second-person writing had placed between the speaker and the reader, and between the past and present. Bishop, writing near the end of her career, seems to pick up where the adolescent Saint-John Perse had left off, that is, with scenes of a disenchanted Robinson Crusoe in England reading. At the outset of Bishop’s poem, Crusoe has abandoned the Bible in favor of the newspapers:

A new volcano has erupted,
the papers say, and last week I was reading
where some ship saw an island being born. (p.162)

Bishop’s Robinson is less given to rhetorical flourishes and traditional poetic devices such as the rich imagery and apostrophes of Saint-John Perse’s character. Her Robinson speaks in conversational rhythms and uses less poetically loaded words, lending an air that could be described more as narrative than lyric. In fact, one critic expresses the importance of the emphasis on physical objects in terms of generic distinctions:

In examining his life in terms of the physical artifacts, one of the questions Crusoe must resolve is whether his narrative is the stuff of poetry. The problem seems less one of an inability to express [...] than one pertaining to a sense of decorum. A stern aesthetic forbids the inclusion of tropes of sentimentality or, worse, formless abstraction. (Doreski, 1993:133–134)

The initial reference to newspapers prepares the essential concern of Crusoe with truth in this version: he speaks or writes in this poem to correct the record about his experiences on the island: ‘None of the books has ever gotten it right’ (p.162). Later in the poem, Crusoe speaks of his reading life beyond newspapers: ‘The books/I’d read were full of blanks’ (p.164). With the book we have an image common to both Saint-John Perse and Bishop, although the contrast is striking between Perse’s book of prophecies and Bishop’s book of blanks. At the most literal level of meaning, Crusoe alludes here to the books that would have survived the
shipwreck, which would have been water-damaged and thus full of passages whose words had literally been washed away. Beyond that, of course, ‘Crusoe in England’ is a poem which tries to fill in some of those metaphorical ‘blanks’ in the Crusoe story, as many commentators on this poem have pointed out. Bonnie Costello writes of the negative function of memory in this poem: ‘Memory erases more than it fills in. The afterimage leads one into a labyrinth where life and memory become confused and the future looks like the past’ (1991, p.205). It is perhaps in this confused space that poetic invention is born.

Bishop’s image of books whose words have been washed away encourages the reader to see the aporia that all texts contain, the blanks that create room for more writing. Bishop literalizes these blanks by transferring them to gaps in Crusoe’s memory, as he tries to recall once-memorized verses:

the poems – well, I tried reciting to my iris-beds,
‘They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss...’ The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up. (p.164)

Where Saint-John Perse’s book and its prophecies allow Crusoe to look forward, Bishop’s Crusoe is intent on looking back. Crusoe is perpetually condemned to reverting to another text to make his fragmented history whole. Furthermore, the temporal disjunction between Defoe’s hero and his twentieth-century counterparts is highlighted by the purposeful anachronism of Crusoe trying to recall this fragment of a Wordsworth poem that was published when Crusoe would have been 175 years old. Looking up a long-forgotten (but actually not-yet-written) verse in order to fill in the gaps becomes analogous to nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers’ quests to retell Crusoe’s tale, to reinvent him each time he is recast in a play, poem, or novel. Each time the story is repeated, it is, rather, transformed in a way that alters both the tale itself and our memory of the precursor texts. The story of Robinson Crusoe becomes, essentially, the story of the writing and rewriting of Robinson Crusoe across borders of space and time.

The fragility of reliance on textual memory comes to the fore in the following section of the poem, where Robinson’s language, which
had hovered between conversational prose and a more ‘poetic’ register, is reduced to the much more literal, mimetic level of animal sounds:

The island smelled of goat and guano.
The goats were white, so were the gulls, and both too tame, or else they thought
I was a goat, too, or a gull.
_baa, baa, baa_ and _shriek, shriek, shriek_,
_baa...shriek...baar..._I still can’t shake
them from my ears; they’re hurting now. (p.164)

It turns out that one of the most vivid and reliable memories from the island is the one divorced from concepts and their mediation through language. Robinson is haunted, even more than he had been by the poem in which his memory had left holes, by the all-too-literal cries of the animals that mirror his own feelings of despair and remain ringing in his ears for many years to come.

In contrast to the reliability of the primal animal sounds reproduced faithfully in the poem, references to other efforts at the preservation of memory through written texts highlight their unreliability. As I have noted, Robinson complains near the start of the poem that all accounts of his stay on the island are incorrect, an assertion he repeats in a parenthetical remark near the close of the poem:

_Just when I thought I couldn’t stand it_
another minute longer, Friday came.
(Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)
_Friday was nice._
_Friday was nice, and we were friends. (p.165)_

The cries and shrieks of the animals give way here to Robinson’s cliché-ridden attempts to tell his story adequately, attempts that further demonstrate the failure of language accurately to represent immediate sensory or emotional experience. The accounts have gotten the story wrong, but, in light of the poetic Robinson’s own failure to represent his experience faithfully in language, the reader comes to see that such efforts to reproduce the past in language are doomed to failure, or at least to inadequacy. The other linguistic register within which Robinson operates is conversational, as in this excerpt from the middle of the poem:
And I had waterspouts. Oh,
half a dozen at a time, far out,
they’d come and go, advancing and retreating,
their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches
of scuffed-up white. (p.163)

In passages such as this, Robinson does succeed in painting a detailed and, presumably, accurate portrait of his experience. But it is crucial to note that in this passage, Robinson is describing, not his emotions, but his physical surroundings in vivid terms. Bonnie Costello notes the variety of expressive potential in Crusoe’s poetic voice: ‘The same voice can speak of waterspouts as “sacerdotal beings of glass” and yet lack any word for Friday but nice and pretty. These shifts become signs for an inverted ratio of language to feeling’ (2003, p.356). Robinson’s experience of his physical environment, as opposed to his emotional turmoil, is what comes through most strongly in Defoe’s original novel, where in lieu of descriptions of the inner torments of the Crusoe character, we have painstaking descriptions of his physical surroundings and the projects he undertook in order to survive. The polyphony within Bishop’s ‘Crusoe’ points to the multiplicity of kinds of narrative and poetic voices among the various Crusoes between Defoe’s day and our own.

The conversational mode in Bishop’s poem does succeed in conveying a rather vivid sense of the island experience, but, significantly, the subject about which it transmits information was one that had not been a gap in Defoe’s text to begin with, and the original aporia remain, despite Bishop’s Robinson’s hints at the subjective experience of fear, despair, and homoeroticism that preoccupied him on the island. Bishop’s poem, like Saint-John Perse’s, includes near its end several images of sterility. Crusoe laments that the ‘living soul’ of the knife he had used on the island, which had ‘reeked of meaning, like a crucifix,’ has ‘dribbled away’ (p.17). Crusoe invokes a museum that has asked him to donate this knife, along with the other famous objects of his story, the flute, the goatskin trousers, the parasol, and so on. As he prepares to lock these objects away on display, Crusoe ends the poem with the observation that Friday ‘died of measles/seventeen years ago come March’ (p.18). Robinson remains the only creature imbued with life among this museum collection of lifeless objects and the memory of a companion long dead. The text, inadequate though it may seem, is in fact the true repository of Robinson’s memory and
experiences, the locus of constant transformation that renews, via the imagination, the vitality of the memory as it creates it anew.

As I hope to have shown, the privileged attention that lyric poetry accords to both language and to subjectivity allows us to see, with a clarity not always present in prose narratives, the gaps in a given story and their relationship to gaps in language itself, and, by extension, the relationship of those gaps to the particular culture, the specific moment in time and space, which produced the rewritten text. In both the Francophone and Anglophone literary traditions, major novels retelling the Crusoe story in radically different ways followed these lyric rewritings. Jean Giraudoux’s *Suzanne et le Pacifique* (1921) and Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967) reclaimed the Crusoe story for the novel from poets such as Saint-John Perse and Paul Valéry in the early twentieth century. Likewise, J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986) recast in novel form the definitive twentieth-century adaptations of the Crusoe story that displace the story in both space and time, just as the text is itself thus displaced. Is it any coincidence that these novels follow on the heels of versions cast in the form of the lyric, where the tormented, despairing, angst-ridden, and sexualized Robinson was first given his modern voice? By exposing the gaps lurking in the Crusoe story, the lyric tradition sets in motion the variety of ways in which both poets and novelists of the twentieth century have tried to write across those gaps, highlighting them, if not filling them in, and forging new literary spaces that allow the experience of exile to be told in all of its complexity.

NOTES

1. The Romantic period, of course, produced many poems, including William Cowper’s ‘The Castaway’ (1799), featuring solitary figures that in some ways resemble Robinson Crusoe. Such texts are, however, not specifically concerned with the rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* but rather with the general figure of the solitary or castaway.

2. Kinney 17. Kinney distinguishes between novels that would ‘wish us to forget we are dealing with imaginative constructions rather than faithful transcriptions of reality’ and poetic narrative, which ‘is less likely (and less able) to deflect our attention from the fact that it is a “making”: its reordering of language into a discourse that is emphatically artificial and other emphasizes its separateness from the normal continuum of experience’ (24).

3. Roger Caillois points to this classificatory urge in Perse’s poetry and its relation to lyric subjectivity: ‘Saint-John Perse founds something like a botany of the soul,
where things and beings are classified according to the way in which they once affected the soul and which guarantees the same mysterious power in the future. Here we have an extraordinary innovation, the poetic genius proving to be essentially classificatory’ (Caillois, p.88, my translation).

4. Gretchen Schultz articulates the way the lyric subject is inscribed and elaborated, not through chronological narration, but rather through the totality of the elements of a poem, which collectively become the ‘story’ of that subject: ‘The manner of expression of lyricism is to inscribe the drama of the subject, not in the temporal framework of historical narration, but in another way: to experience the “devenir du sujet” through the “devenir du poème.” The stuff of the poem, its rhythms and its décor, conspire to situate the subject. Its unfolding images strive to shape the experience of subjectivity. Lyricism traces a certain story of the subject as it weaves itself into the fabric of its discourse’ (pp.143–144).

5. Carol Rigolot notes that in earlier versions of the poem, the book was specified to be the Bible: ‘Later it became simply the Book, continuing to evoke the scriptures with its capital letter, but suggestively extending to other texts the potential for revelation’ (p.29). Rigolot also notes (p.21) the psalm-like character of the praises of the island in this poem. See also her analysis (pp.36–39) of Perse’s techniques of erasure with respect to an excerpt from Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘A Dream within a Dream’ that had served as an epigraph to earlier versions of Images.

6. Sebastian Neumeister sees in this conflation of the divine and the natural a return to a Petrarchan mode of contemplation of nature for its own sake, as opposed to a Rousseauian contemplation of nature in order better to understand human nature, or the utility of nature to be found in Defoe’s text. Rather, humanity disappears into Saint-John Perse’s ideal landscapes: ‘The dense and concrete sensuality of these sentences [at the end of ‘The Book’] leaves no place for man, and it is only normal that [Images] finishes by a total consecration to nature’ (Neumeister, p.72, my translation).

7. In this respect there is a parallel to Saint-John Perse’s early experience of seeing his father’s water-logged and thus destroyed library arrive from Guadeloupe to metropolitan France. Carol Rigolot discusses the importance of this episode with reference to Images (p.33).

8. See Ferry pp. 201–204 for a discussion of Bishop’s use of anachronism here. Bonnie Costello also comments on this passage, claiming that Crusoe ultimately rejects romantic memory because it ‘depends upon the power of metaphor, which Crusoe finds extremely limited’ (1991, 203–204).

REFERENCES


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