

Defoe, Aesthetics, and the Craft of Writing

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WHAT IS THE FUTURE of Defoe studies? Defoe has often been considered from a historical or cultural perspective instead of a formalist one. This relative neglect of Defovian form stems in part from what Michael Newton has recently called the “tendency to see Defoe as a hack writer and only an unconscious genius” (41). Defoe wrote for pay, he wrote quickly, he was slovenly in execution—that’s how the traditional storyline goes, as if the dozens of times his protagonist Robinson Crusoe contradicts himself, sometimes on the same page, are evidence of nothing more than carelessness ... albeit in a book that is explicitly, overtly concerned with the protagonist’s business of transforming a life into a fabrication. To be sure, some of the scholars who have hewed close to this old truism about sloppy Defoe have written some of the best scholarship that there is on Defoe—that is, they’ve offered compelling arguments about *other* reasons to read him, despite his supposed stylistic indifference. As for me, I hope and expect that the future of Defoe studies will consist in part of literary scholars using their skills at close reading and formal analysis in order to take Defoe seriously as a *writer* who was not indifferent to the craft of writing.

Whether or not one embraces Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian’s claim that “when it comes to literary criticism, form explains everything” (37), one cannot deny—in the face of strong evidence to the contrary—that Defoe was forthrightly interested in how the workings of literary form could represent and even manifest the cultural and historical moments in which they were received. The fact is, Defoe says many serious things about the affective qualities of aesthetics in general

and prose aesthetics in particular, and, as I've discussed elsewhere, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is in my view most profitably read as a story about composing a story through acts of revision and omission that are carefully contrived at achieving an aesthetic whole. My remarks here and elsewhere are certainly *not* intended to suggest a dull teleology that imagines Defoe's novels as weak prototypes of "the nineteenth-century novel." To the contrary. But we do our subject little justice, nor ourselves justice as careful readers, if we decline to consider how Defoe openly laid bare in numerous pieces of writing an intense concern with storytelling as form, as aesthetics, as craft.

Crusoe and Aesthetics in General

There can no doubt Defoe had an eye for aesthetics, and one place we can trace this interest is through the eye of his protagonist Robinson Crusoe.¹ In *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist's many failed attempts at making clay pots see him cursing his efforts in forming such malformed and ugly creations. His inaugural pots are workable but unsightly. Their unfortunate aspect runs directly contrary to the beauty of Friday when he sleeps in the cave under Crusoe's acquisitional eye; Friday is very much *not* "ugly" but is instead "perfectly well made, with straight, strong limbs, not too large; tall, and well-shaped," with hair "long and black, not curled like wool," a "forehead very high and large," eyes of "vivacity and sparkling sharpness," skin of a "bright [...] dun olive colour," and teeth "white as ivory" (162). In Crusoe's lengthy and detailed catalogue, Friday's "stark naked" body is kind of an aesthetic masterpiece—a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—in part and whole (162).

Part II of the Crusoe story, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), gives rise to a similar concern with aesthetics, lengthily describing the ugly and the beautiful alike. In Tartar-Russian territory, Crusoe encounters an analogue to the ugly and misshapen clay pots of Part I: a "hideous" idol (329). "Vile, abominable," it was "about eight feet high, yet had no feet or legs, nor any other proportion of parts" (329). The so-called "celestial hedgehog" idol described in the meditative addendum *The Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe* (1720) is even worse:

[i]t had a thing instead of a head, but no head; it had a mouth distorted out of all manner of shape, and not to be described for a mouth, being only an unshapen chasm, neither representing the mouth of a man, beast, fowl, or fish; the thing was neither any of the four, but an incongruous monster; it had feet, hands, fingers, claws, legs, arms, wings, ears, horns, everything mixed one among another, neither in the shape or place that Nature appointed, but blended together and fixed to a bulk, not a body, formed of no just parts. 126

In contrast to his denunciation of these ugly and disproportionate monsters, Crusoe jealously admires in *Farther Adventures* the synthetic splendor of the house made from China ware; the unity of parts emerges as key to the aesthetic superiority of the fabric. The house is glazed blue and white on the outside, the inside “lined with hardened and painted tiles [...] all made of the finest china, and the figures exceeding fine indeed, with extraordinary variety of colours, mixed with gold, many tiles making but one figure, but joined so artificially [...] that it was very hard to see where the tiles met” (181). Unlike the monstrous idols, the China house is a synthetic marvel, of a piece with the surrounding “fountains and fishponds” and the “fine statues set up in rows on the walks,” all of which are “entirely formed” to form a “whole” (181).

Even judging by this limited set of examples (clay pots versus Friday’s body, pagan idols versus China warehouse), it would be folly to deny that Defoe was interested in aesthetics generally, and indeed cultivated a vision of selective-synthetic unity *as* aesthetics.

Defoe and Social/National Formalism

Did Defoe’s interest in aesthetics in general extend to the craft of writing in particular? Yes. And nowhere more so, perhaps, than in *Robinson Crusoe*. But before Defoe was a novelist he was a political writer, and in his political writing he fairly obsessed over the idea of the nation as an aesthetic object whose cultural and political unity could be achieved through its formal representation on the page and thus in the minds of readers—erstwhile Britons who perhaps had yet to see themselves as part of that whole. Defoe saw himself as a world-builder who was not merely writing “the story of Union” but authoring national unity into being by conveying the *aesthetic* as well as utilitarian rightness of Union (*History* 7:82). Defoe’s masterwork, according to him, was *The History of the Union of Great Britain* (1709). Advertised in 1706, before the Union had become a political reality on May 5, 1707, the *History* was understood plainly by him as a dedicated effort of prescriptive social/national formalism, and, as such, he clearly stated in personal correspondence his intention to *depart from real history* in order to construct an aesthetic whole that might “Naturaliz[e]” in readers’ minds an “entire and perfect” Union of England, Scotland, and Wales as Great Britain (*Letters* 230).²

Defoe expressed that the “story” was the key to forming a British unity in and among reader’s minds. The *History* fabricates a progressive trajectory, a Whig history, out of the chaos of real history, with the as-yet-unachieved Union as its seemingly inevitable end. As I’ve described elsewhere, Defoe contrived of a “national man” (i.e., the nation personified) who (with Defoe’s help) could be enabled, as Defoe described

in his *Essay at Removing National Prejudices*, to peer back into the abyss of time from a figurative high rock of hindsight and see how the course of his own progress toward this moment, how history itself had brought him “out of the Reach of the insulting Waves, by which he was in Danger of Shipwreck” to stand upon the precipice of almost-Union (*Essay* 25).³ With Defoe’s help, the reader can discern the linear path, can make a “clear Discovery of the Reality of the Hazards he had run, which perhaps he did not perfectly see before,” and thereby finally “be delivered” (*Essay* 25). In other words, by reading a highly selective story of synthetic development, by following a fictitious teleological thread, readers might become unified in hearts and minds as one nation.

National disunion, in Defoe’s telling, is rendered as bad aesthetics. Indeed, the disunited nation resembles nothing so much as the Pagan idols that Defoe’s protagonist Crusoe would later remark on with disgust. Copious anti-Union political pamphlets described the Union as a monster, but in Defoe’s telling, the anti-Unionists themselves were a monstrous body. He wrote that the diverse members of the opposition came together all “[t]wisted and all joyn’d” into “one Body”: “the most monstrous Sight in the World” (*History* 7:33, 23, 20). In Defoe’s telling, Jacobites, Presbyterians, Scots and the rest—“Parties as Opposite as the Elements, as Distant as the Poles”—amounted frankly to a “monstrous Conjunction” (*History* 7:12), a “perfect Chaos, a Mass of Absurdities which it would be impossible to Reconcile” (*History* 7:30).

Where the enemies of Union associated the very idea of Union with a range of monstrous events (monstrous births, unnatural animal behavior, uncanny weather patterns and more were all taken as divine prognostication/judgment) and even termed the Union itself “a Chimera” (part lion, part she-goat, part snake) “of the English Ministry” (*History* 7:167), Defoe recuperated the idea of Union as a thing of beauty and proportion. The opposition called Union “an ugly shape,” a thing that can “please neither Eye nor Taste” (*History* 8:12). In the *History*’s version of events, by contrast, Union is *not* the “Monster, as they called” it (*History* 7:151). What the *History* envisioned for readers was instead a phenomenal aesthetic object:

a most Beautiful Creature; Admirable in its Contexture, Agreeable in its Figure, Squar’d like a most Exquisite Piece of Architect[ure], both for Ornament, Strength and Usefulness; [...] a Compleat Circle, all the Lines of which were drawn from, and depended on upon one General Centre, the Publick Good, a Mighty Arch every Stone of which mutually contributed, not to its Private Support only, but to the Strength of the whole. (7:151)

The *History* thus conceives of the Union as a whole to which all the parts contribute: a well-proportioned and beautiful Baconian wonder for readers to locate themselves within. The *History* avowedly hopes to compel readers to find their way toward this beautiful Union through the otherwise “Confused Labyrinth” of raw history, along

the “Untrode Path” of becoming that he illuminates for them (*History* 7:150). The goal: to expose at the heart of things no “Monster,” no Minotaur, no Chimera, but instead a “Beautiful Creature” (*History* 7:151), a “Beautiful Thing” now “strip’d of all its Monstrous Figure” that it had formerly been given (*History* 7:167, 305).

Crucially, the *History* acknowledges that the *History* is a fiction. Defoe admits, “[i]n this Labyrinth of Untrode Paths, I may easily misplace some things, and omit others; and I cannot but introduce my account of it with this caution” (*History* 7:143). This “Narration,” as the *History* calls itself, may be viewed as a “true string” but not as the whole and complete truth (*History* 7:150). Making a “Path” through the “Confused Labyrinth” (*History* 7:150) means ignoring offshoots, disregarding details that do not contribute. The *History* concedes readily and unashamedly to its own prescriptive fabrication. The “String” is “true” because it leads to a desired conclusion; resistances to the story of Union are massaged, moved around to help “smooth” the “Thread of the Story” (*History* 7:127, 7:10), or are excised.

Defoe, Crusoe, and the Form of Fabrication

Defoe’s labor to fashion a compelling and therefore self-actualizing story of Union in *The History of the Union* prefigured the aesthetic labors that his protagonist Robinson Crusoe would later undertake in his own allegory of becoming. From one angle, *Robinson Crusoe* is certainly a story about how Crusoe fashions his own life story. One does not even have to view *Robinson Crusoe* or its sequel novel as an allegory of national becoming, or of the national man, or of Defoe-as-author-of-Union, in order to see that Crusoe similarly works forging a smooth thread of his own becoming—always worrying over what should be included (only that which contributes to the progress of the whole, he tells us, again and again). Like Defoe, Crusoe makes a path through a labyrinth.

Truth itself—the truth of the Journal, for instance—is not what Crusoe is after. Fictions are fine, if they work. One recalls Crusoe’s pleased apprehension of Will Atkins when the latter tells the island newcomers that Crusoe is the legal governor. A “mere lie,” Atkins’s story is admired by Crusoe because it produces a particular end (215). “[A]lthough it was but a fiction,” Crusoe observes, “it had its desired effect” (215). Like his own maker, Crusoe flagrantly collates multiple versions of reality, selecting from, omitting from, and generally revising the mess of real life, in full view, such that the reader can see Crusoe becoming the self-assured man who no longer has to confess to “losing” himself, to falling apart in the face of various existential threats and having to shore up his fragments after shipwreck (literal or psychological) again and again.

Crusoe expresses straightforwardly that a life not organized by a thread or string of intentional storytelling can only appear as a mess of flotsam, of jetsam, of shoes without fellows. Viewed *in situ*, without any revision, his life is a mere “collection of wonders” (203), something analogous to Defoe’s own sense of raw history as a tangled maze or chaotic ocean. In the telling, however, Crusoe transforms the motley crew of autobiographical facts into a selective-synthetic “chain of wonders” (215), something akin to Defoe’s freshly forged path through the labyrinth, through the waves. Along the way, in order to make the collection into a chain of consequence and connection, Crusoe makes changes blatantly. Crusoe ponders the crowded jumble of details that comprise his life, likening his mind to a “crowded thoroughfare,” and he vows to bring them into compass by rendering them “in miniature, or by abridgement” (155). The thread or string of the story is not real life, but fabrication.

The inclusion of Crusoe’s journal, which he states he copied from the original, gives rise to the novel’s chief sign of functional fabrication, the spirit of which drives the novel from beginning to end. There is no need to enumerate all the many contradictions here between the journal and the hindsight telling with which the novel begins (did he kill and skin a wildcat, as in the journal, or did he feed and shelter it? And so forth). The contradictions are almost incalculably prevalent, the better to call attention to the writer’s aggressive acts of revision. The journal does *not* repeat “all these particulars” that he has already given in his new version of events (56). And how boring it would be if it did. Instead, Crusoe is at pains to show how the old voice of the real and the new voice of revision are at odds with each other, and how the new voice eventually wins out. One of the best examples of this process is encompassed by the January 2 and 3 journal entries:

Jan. 2. Very hot still, but I went abroad early and late with my gun, and [...] I found there was plenty of goats, tho’ exceeding shy and hard to come at, however I resolv’d to try if I could not bring my dog to hunt them down.

Jan. 3. Accordingly, the next day, I went out with my dog. (61).

The new voice butts into the January 3 entry. The new voice changes what would have been “today, I went” into “the next day, I went” (61). As the journal proceeds, the revisionary voice becomes more and more prominent in this way, long before the time when Crusoe claims to have run out of ink, until finally the new voice subdues and cannibalizes the original version, which is overwritten to the extent that it fully disappears from view. Conveniently, crafty new Crusoe makes the death of his journal / the disappearance of ink coincide with the anniversary of both his birth and his island arrival. It is a kind of birth. The Defoe of *The History* would have been proud. Ultimately, conveying his transformed story to others, Crusoe makes his jumbly “collection of wonders” into a selective “chain of wonders” (215). In Crusoe’s own estimation, he has “order’d everything for the best” (87).

To conclude as I began, I hope that the future of Defoe studies will include plenty of taking him seriously as a writer. And *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel about a storyteller and writer, is an excellent place to begin. Note, although I often use the word “novel” as an easy shorthand to refer to eighteenth-century prose fictions (whether by Jane Barker, Eliza Haywood, or Daniel Defoe), I will not be mistaken for equating them with nineteenth-century prose fictions. But neither will I choose to apprehend a text like *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* as an aesthetic embarrassment whose author had no idea what he was doing. Doing so would mean ignoring (to my mind) much of what makes such a text interesting beyond (or in context of) its cultural and historical value. Defoe may have written quickly and often (most of us could only wish to be so productive), but his writing is not bereft of craft nor care and I expect that future readers, with access to new editions (print editions, and searchable online editions), will be enabled to examine what seems to me to be a consistent aesthetic program across Defoe’s writerly career. Content and form work together to generate, for this reader, and for my students, the special varieties of eighteenth-century aesthetics, Defovian and otherwise.

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Notes

¹ Some of the most interesting recent commentary from the last quarter century on Defoe’s aesthetic eye in the two Crusoe novels can be found in Lydia H. Liu, “Robinson Crusoe’s Earthenware Pot”; Christopher Loar, *Political Magic*; and Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600–1730*.

² Nicholas Seager’s and Marc Mierowski’s edition of Defoe’s letters, *The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Daniel Defoe*, is the authoritative source for Defoe’s correspondence.

³ See the first chapter of my *Essential Selves and the Idea of Unionism in Anglo-Scottish Literature, 1603–1832*.

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