“An Incongruous Monster”:
Idolatrous Aesthetics in Crusoe’s China

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IN A FAMOUSLY polemical section of the *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, the final volume in the Crusoe trilogy, Defoe’s hero asks: “How is it possible these People”—that is, the Chinese—“can have any Claim to the Character of wise, ingenious, polite, that could suffer themselves to be overwhelm’d in an Idolatry repugnant to common Sense, even to Nature, and be brought to chuse to adore that which was in itself the most odious and contemptible to Nature?” (139). The great contradiction of Chinese society—that the same people could practice idolatry and claim to be wise—is the basis for Crusoe’s sustained attack on its other famed achievements in manufacture and civil society. But if Chinese idolatry is “repugnant to common sense,” Defoe implies, England’s longstanding sinophilia is an even graver offense. In this essay, I will reexamine Crusoe’s lengthy account of a pagan idol he encounters in a garden near Nanqing to demonstrate that Defoe links idleness and idolatry in this episode in a double-pronged attack on Chinese idolatry and English sinophilia. In the process, Defoe will be seen both to undermine the value of Chinese art and to elevate his own writing method through the art of ‘suspended description.’

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘idol’ as an “image or similitude of a deity or divinity, used as an object of worship.” But it is also a person or thing “adored,” a “visible but unsubstantial appearance,” a “mental fiction” or, strangely enough, “an inert inactive person (who has the form, without the proper activity or energy, of a man).” If the mention of inertia brings the definition of ‘idol’ closer to that of ‘idle,’ several usages of the two terms in Renaissance texts only confirm an evocative and
useful connection between them. Laurence Tomson’s English translation of *Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus* (1579), warns: “It is not an honour of idlenesse, to bee called to this state and therfore that he must not play the idol, but...must giue himselfe to it” (237). Similarly, in *A Commentarie upon the Epistle of S. Paul written to Titus* (1612), Puritan clergyman Thomas Taylor bemoans that “ministers that thrust themselues in for Pastors” are all “idle, and idoll” and “can only feed themselves” (334). James Kearney tracks the pun on ‘idle’ and ‘idol’ in *The Faerie Queene*, particularly as it relates to digression, wandering, and the trope of the “idol shepherd,” noting that Spenser employs it in order to align “romance digression and the sin of idleness with the infidelity that is idolatry” (115).¹

The pun resurfaces in works by Defoe’s contemporaries. An essay on “female idols” in *Spectator* 73 reinvigorates the earlier sermonic link between idleness and idolatry to mock effect. In the essay, Joseph Addison writes: “An Idol is wholly taken up in the adorning of her person. You see in every posture of her body, air of her face, and motion of her head, that it is her business and employment to gain adorers. For this reason your Idols appear in all publick places and assemblies, in order to seduce men to their worship” (506). The irony of the female idol, as Addison points out, is that her “business” and “employment” are occupied by nothing more than trifles and attention-grabbing. Richard Steele was disturbed by the consuming female subject and remarks in *Tatler* 151: “I have always had a tenderness for [women]; but I must confess, it troubles me very much to see the generality of them place their affections on improper objects, and give up all the pleasures of life for gugaws and trifles” (488). The tendency of women to “place their affections on improper objects” links crass consumerism not merely to idolatry, or inappropriate object-worship, but also to the radical transformation of the female body itself into an object-idol. Flashy dress and gaudy ornaments, for Addison, stained females who ignored “those inward ornaments which are not to be defaced by time or sickness” (508).

Feminine idleness, therefore, was evidenced in both pauses in the duties of running the household and in an excess of attention paid to external appearances and beauty products—that is, to women’s complicit status as empty idols. Pope’s Belinda, with her “files of pins” and “puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billets-doux,” typifies the female idol, consuming “India’s glowing gems” and attended to by an “inferior priestess, at her Altar’s side.” When Pope writes that Belinda’s beautification requires “sacred rites of pride,” he makes use of a spiritual lexicon to parody (if not outright condemn) women’s roles as excessive consumers, particularly of foreign goods. Idolatry, then, functions as a particularly useful framework through which to understand eighteenth-century critiques of consumerism. The image of the idol, primarily feminine and excessively consuming, exposes the contradiction of England’s prosperous trade ethos. With great industry comes the threat of great cultural and moral decline.²
Certainly, no two issues were more important to Defoe than commerce and religion. Katherine Clark attests that Defoe believed that commerce was the “key to the divinely ordained moral and material advance of human society” (2). God had created the world “in its [geographically] broken state in order to promote navigation and trade” (2). But if trade and spiritual health were intimately linked, the deleterious effects of overconsumption only magnified the problem of idleness. In 1712, in his periodical The Review, Defoe warns that the “most admirable return of wealth from China, which adorns the Scratores and Cabinets of the Ladies” will displace the “very name of Clothier from whole Counties and Boroughs, which were once the principal Cloathing Towns of the Nation” (qtd. in Nelson and Rewa 35). Defoe’s fear that an unchecked appetite for Chinese imports will sicken England’s native industries brings together two broader concerns—idleness and idolatry—that have deeper rhetorical connections.3

The problem of idleness was as deeply vexing to other eighteenth-century writers as it was to Defoe, and it was as stratified along social station or rank as it was along gender lines. As feminine idleness hinged on interruptions to the domestic order, masculine idleness manifested as unemployment or social apathy in the public sphere. William Hogarth’s 1747 Industry and Idleness engravings and Samuel Johnson’s aptly titled periodical, the Idler, directly speak to the dangers of idleness, while problematizing growing social pressures toward industriousness and productivity.4 Recent scholarship has shown the extent to which the anxiety over idleness amplified the call to industry and, with it, the ethos of hard work, ambition, and self-improvement.5 For the poor, as Sarah Jordan explains, “any pause in work other than what is absolutely required for sleep, meals, and devotion is idleness” (39). Moreover, any “mental labor, when engaged in by the poor, is not labor at all, but idleness” (39). With this understanding of uninterrupted labor, the middle and lower classes began to define themselves against the old order of nobility, characterized by leisure and sport.

Idleness itself was not, of course, a novel problem, but its function in Christian doctrine—as a sinful iteration of sloth, or worse yet, despair—was slowly being replaced by the threat it posed to the social order.6 Even the character of the British nation, an emerging identity, was defined by what Jordan terms the “virtue of industriousness” (15). That industry is positioned as “virtue” is crucial; idleness was now manifest not merely as a physical vice, but as an intellectual one. For Kant, after all, the very notion of enlightenment meant “man’s emergence” from a state of immaturity and “nonage,” wrought by “laziness and cowardice” (17). The kind of idleness censured in Enlightenment discourse—and indeed in Defoe’s writings on the error of revering China—breeds stagnation on economic, political, and intellectual grounds.

Idolatry also aroused a particular rancor in the religious and political writings of Defoe’s contemporaries according to Clark. The rhetoric of idolatry, she contends,
was both “polemically useful” and representative of a “deeper mentality of iconoclasm in which artists and writers sought to revive or reshape various ideals from the hollow and broken forms which littered their cultural landscape” (128). From Crusoe’s perspective, “idols of natural religion litter the globe and often assume the most heinous shapes” (128). Of course, Crusoe’s contempt for idolatry is not limited to the Chinese; in Muscovy, he becomes enraged at the sight of peasants worshiping at a wooden idol. He bemoans those who prostrate before such a “frightful Nothing, an meer Imaginary object dress’d up by Themselves” (Farther Adventures 330). Although Crusoe takes his sword to the Muscovite idol in a fit of iconoclastic fury, his description of the wooden deity as a “frightful Nothing” is, like that of the Nanqing idol, as elusive as it is destructive.

However, what concerns us here is Defoe’s account of the Chinese idol, and the Chinese more generally, for which he was partially indebted to earlier travel writers’ tales of the Far East. In his survey of European encounters with China, Chen Shouyi notes that John Mandeville’s Travels presents the first report of China in the English language. As with medieval travel texts, the Principal Navigations of Richard Hakluyt (1589), and Samuel Purchas’s Hakluytus Posthumus (1625) treat China as a land of marvels and wonders, as well as a society of great ingenuity. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, many of Defoe’s contemporaries were sharply divided over the costs and benefits of emulating Chinese society. While Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope praise Chinese engineering and civil society, others like William Wotton and Francis Lockier question the basis for past writers’ exalted versions of China. Seven Lockier, a member of Pope’s coterie, posits that “it is true they have had astronomy, gun-powder, and printing for perhaps these two thousand years: but how little have they improved on each of these articles in all that time!” (qtd. in Shouyi 236). Criticism of the “wonders of China” and the “learning” of the Chinese in Nouveaux Mémoires sur l’Etat présent de la China (1696; English translation 1697), by the French missionary Père Le Comte, has been put forward as a source of Defoe’s censure of the European craze for China and the means by which to launch an attack on China (Secord 64–68).

David Porter argues that to many eighteenth-century travelers and writers, China was a ‘blocked’ and ‘obstructionist’ society, not merely in its mercantile culture, but in its customs and artistic and intellectual spheres (Porter 181). Porter cites a 1793 account by the ambassador John Barrow that highlights the compass as a consummate symbol of Chinese “inertia.” As Porter explains, Barrow recognizes the invention of the compass by the Chinese, but insists that they are “blind” to their own discovery: “[T]he compass languished for so many centuries in China as the un tarnished idol of
‘long established superstitions’ rather than evolving into a practical instrument of navigation” (189). As a symbol of knowledge and innovation, then, the compass, encased and enshrined in superstition, mirrors the stilted Chinese mind itself.8

Barrow’s account helps us make some sense of Crusoe’s invective against China, which Robert Markley claims is “without precedent in the vast European literature on the Middle Kingdom,” with Crusoe “castigat[ing] the Chinese at far greater length than he does any other people or culture” (189). On the one hand, Crusoe’s reflections on China inaugurate a discourse of cultural progress and measurement that now tilts away from the Far East. It is England’s capacity for wide circulation—of trade and of ideas—that allows it to move forward as a society. Although Crusoe’s diatribe may be “without precedent,” it anticipates a critical stance oriented around commercial isolationism and cultural stagnation that would emerge several decades later. But perhaps more interestingly, Barrow’s account of the compass employs the same rhetoric of idolatry to which I call attention in Defoe’s writing. If there is a link between idolatry and idleness, it is not based merely on older tropes of paganist spiritual torpor, but on the inability to forge new meanings out of tired materials.9

G.A. Starr fundamentally challenges the notion that Defoe directs his critique at China. He contends that Defoe’s actual target is England. Defoe’s writing on China, consistently critical throughout his career, is an extension of his views on commerce, religion, and political values, Starr argues: “When Defoe generalizes about national characteristics, he usually treats them as symptoms of underlying political, economic, or religious causes. He is less interested in China for its own sake than in using it as a stalking horse for his critiques of the East India Company and British trade policy, ‘divine right’ autocracy, idolatry and deism, and so on” (436). While Starr is rightly skeptical of reading deep psychological frustration into Defoe’s writing on the Far East, I would argue that there is simply too much vitriol in Crusoe’s relationship with China to be ascribed purely to England’s economic standing. To reduce the account of the grotesque idol to a critique of English trade policy, or to read it as one in a string of iconoclastic encounters directed at “aspects of English society” that Defoe “found disturbing or dangerous,” as Clark suggests, would be to diminish its complexity vis-à-vis the broader debates over idleness and progress I trace here, as well as to Defoe’s language (113–14).

For Crusoe, China is a problematic corner of the globe because it is neither “Mahometan” nor “savagely primitive.” From the start, Crusoe’s intentions seem transparent when he notes that “China is famous for Wisdom, that is to say, that they, having such a boundless Conceit of their own Wisdom, we are oblig’d to allow them
more than they have; the Truth is, they are justly said to be a wise Nation among the foolish ones, and may as justly be called a Nation of Fools among the wise ones” (Serious Reflections 138). Rather than uphold the merits of Chinese wisdom that English and western European travelers had long sketched in their writing, Crusoe contends that China has been profoundly misread and misrepresented to the English. “As to the human ingenuity, as they call it, of the Chinese, I shall account for it by itself: The utmost discoveries of it to me appear’d in the mechanick, and even in them infinitely short of what is found among the European nations” (138). In fixating on the notion of a ‘popular belief’ when it comes to Chinese progress—on their “famous” wisdom, or on their “ingenuity, as they call it”—Crusoe implies that he will challenge conventional wisdom, reverse the exaggerated praise that prior writers had lavished on the Chinese, and all the while deem the European nations the true winners of civilization.

In an attempt to “take these people to pieces a little, and examine into the great penetration, they are so fam’d for” (Serious Reflections 138), Crusoe heralds himself as the one who will set the record straight. “The height of their ingenuity, and for which we admire them,” he explains, “is their porcellain or earthen-ware work, which, in a word, is more due to the excellent composition of the Earth they make them of … than to the workmanship” (142). He goes on to dismiss their “manufacturing in fine silks, cotton, herba” and their “lacquering, which is just as in the China ware, a peculiar to their country, in the materials, not at all in the workmanship” (142). As he strips the Chinese of their responsibility for creating fine works of porcelain, clothing, and wares, Crusoe completely subverts the narrative of fine aesthetic progress that, as Markley notes, had been celebrated and sought out in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English consumer culture. Crusoe drains the Chinese of their artistic excellence, instead taking their porcelains and silks “to pieces,” reducing them to their earthly materials. In disassembling their famed crafts, Crusoe codes Chinese superiority as something manufactured.

At the heart of Crusoe’s attack on China is an extended description, or more aptly, non-description, of a pagan idol (or the “Pequin idol”) he encounters in a garden near Nanqing. Crusoe reports:

It 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, but a shapeless trunk or log, whether of wood or stone, I know not. (Serious Reflections 139–40)
When he tries to relate the idol to his English audience, Crusoe relinquishes descriptive detail in favor of generalities. The idol possesses a “thing” rather than a head, an “unshapen chasm” for a mouth, a “shapeless” body. It seems simultaneously to possess the features of all manner of beast and fowl, and no living creature. “If I have not represented their monstrous deities right,” Crusoe offers, “let imagination supply any thing that can make a misshapen image horrid, frightful, and surprising” (140). Crusoe’s non-description seems to mirror the non-mimetic quality of the idol itself, which does not resemble any human or animal form.

Idolatry presents the biggest challenge to Crusoe because it flies in the face of China’s technological prowess or their reasonably impressive “mechanicks.” As earlier noted, he asks:

How is it possible these people can have any claim to the character of wise, ingenious, polite, that could suffer themselves to be overwhelm’d in an idolatry repugnant to common sense, even to nature, and be brought to chuse to adore that which was in itself the most odious and contemptible to nature; not merely terrible, that so their worship might proceed from fear, but a complication of nature’s aversions. (Serious Reflections 139)

What is striking here, though, is how Crusoe censures Chinese idolatry; it is not idolatry per se that Crusoe finds backward and ‘repugnant,’ but rather, the empty will of the Chinese to allow themselves to be “overwhelm’d” and to “be brought to chuse to adore” the idols. Crusoe casts their pagan idolatry as a form of passive acceptance, implying that those opposite to the Chinese—the truly “wise, ingenious, and polite”—would choose other forms of worship. In other words, the most stinging and powerful criticism of the Chinese that Crusoe can make is not their “idolness,” but their idleness. Still, their idol-worship, and by extension their idleness, is framed by Crusoe as the result of an oppressive cultural force to which they succumb. The discourse of idleness here hinges on two interrelated ideas: that the Chinese proclivity for idol-worship is intimately tied to a political system of despotic oppression, and that rather than overturn this, the Chinese perpetuate a culture of unbroken tradition that amounts to little more than self-worship.

As Crusoe recounts his encounter with the idol, he also observes “a Mandarin with his attendants, or, as we may say, a great Lord and his retinue, prostrate before the image, not of any one of God’s creatures, but a creature of mere forming, such as neither was alive, nor was like any thing that had life, or had ever been seen or heard of in the world” (Serious Reflections 139). The scene of the lord prostrate in front of the idol mirrors a trope of oriental submission long embedded in the European imagination. In his Travels, John Mandeville describes the middle of the great court of Cathay as containing a “dais made for the Great Khan…adorned with gold and precious stones.” At the very top of the dais, “the throne for the Emperor is
positioned, high up from the pavement, where he sits and eats his food” (142). For Crusoe, the elevated, deified stature of the Chinese lord renders his prostration in front of the grotesque idol even more foolish. To bow down before a creature never “seen or heard of in the entire world” reduces the lord to a believer in utterly nothing.

The link between cultural idleness and idol-worship is also at the fore of Crusoe’s accusation against the Chinese for “having such a boundless conceit of their own wisdom [that] we are oblig’d to allow them more than they have” (Serious Reflections 138). Implicit here is the notion that European envy at China’s might and unbroken tradition is utterly groundless; that is, the Chinese themselves, rather than past European travelers, are culpable for disseminating the fantasy of their superiority. It is up to the English to adjust their dated and fundamentally damaging views of China. As a corrective, Crusoe will “trace this wise nation that we talk so much of, and who not only think themselves wise, but have drawn us in” (140). That the Chinese have seduced and “drawn in” prior English travelers and writers is obviously of concern to Crusoe, but what I highlight here is the insistent critique of China’s view of itself. The unyielding loop of self-admiration and obstinacy—ideas that Barrow and later travelers echo in their accounts of Chinese trade culture—inhers in the Nanqing idol itself. But even more deleterious than China’s self-perception is the English acceptance of China’s superiority, a blind devotion to the reverence advanced by past travelers.

To recalibrate English perceptions of the Far East, Defoe develops a new descriptive mode, which accounts for cultural difference, specifically China’s apparent backwardness. To situate the Serious Reflections’ experiment in description—that is, in the moment of encounter with the idol—let us briefly revisit the younger Crusoe. Aboard the ship that will soon cast him onto an unknown shore, amid a raging seas-storm, Crusoe states that “it is not easy for any one, who has not been in the like condition, to describe or conceive the consternation of men in such circumstances” (Robinson Crusoe 24). When he falls into the water a few pages later, he adds: “[N]othing can describe the confusion of thought which I felt when I sunk into the water” (25). Having almost drowned, he recounts: “I walk’d about on the shore, lifting up my hands, and my whole being, as I may say, wrapt up in the contemplation of my deliverance, making a thousand gestures and motions, which I cannot describe, reflecting upon all my comerades that were drown’d, and that there should not be one soul sav’d but my self” (26). Crusoe, the exacting hero of detail and measurement, the man who remembers walking “about a furlong from the shore” to find drinking water, simply cannot find the language to communicate his terror and despair aboard ship, his gratitude when landing onshore, and certainly not the psychic lives of others. It is,
after all, “impossible” for him to “express the astonishment of [those] poor creatures” (17), the savage heathens of the Tenerife Islands, when they hear the unfamiliar sounding of his gun. Why is it that Crusoe can offer descriptive precision at many moments and be evasive at others?

Virginia Woolf might say that these instances of descriptive handicap are due to the hollow representation of Crusoe’s inner life. Having expected the famed castaway who was “isolated from his kind” to brood and emote, she posits that, in fact, “there are no sunsets and no sunrises; there is no solitude and no soul” in Defoe’s novel. Instead, “reality, fact, substance is going to dominate all that follows” (54). Woolf’s reaction, written two hundred years after Robinson Crusoe was first published, underscores a recurring assessment that later critics and readers of the novel have made about its lack of psychological realism.¹⁰

Rather than consider instances of Crusoe’s aphasia as a failure, I suggest that there is logic to his withholding.¹¹ As with the moment aboard ship, in the midst of the sea-storm, or the moment of the Africans’ astonishment over his firing gun, Crusoe is stunned out of communication by the sight of the infamous island footprint. He recounts:

But after innumerable fluttering thoughts, like a man perfectly confus’d and out of my self, I came home to my fortification, not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on, but terrify’d to the last degree, looking behind me at every two or three steps, mistaking every bush and tree, and fancying every stump at a distance to be a man; nor is it possible to describe how many various shapes affrighted imagination represented things to me in, how many wild ideas were found every moment in my fancy, and what strange unaccountable whimsies came into my thoughts by the way. (Robinson Crusoe 112)

Crusoe’s terrified state of confusion and disarray accounts for his inability to communicate the experience. “Innumerable fluttering thoughts” run through him, and it is not “possible [for him] to describe” the “various shapes” with which his imagination distresses him. He does not detail the “wild ideas” that plague his fancy or the “strange unaccountable whimsies” that come into his thoughts; he only offers a generalized grammar of terror.

No less startling is the way in which these thoughts seem to materialize, or rather, not materialize. As uncontrollable shapes appear out of his imagination, and as he translates bushes and stumps into potential cannibals, Crusoe seems to suggest that he is both author of these “unaccountable whimsies” and a passive recipient of them. The points at which Crusoe lapses into a descriptive paralysis are also moments in the narrative when he is “not quite himself”: he is destabilized and suspended. Days after, Crusoe claims that “in the middle of these cogitations, apprehensions, and reflections, it came into [his] thought one day, that all this might be a meer chimera of [his] own” (115). In other words, Defoe suspends description in order to represent a suspension
of the self; the reader’s ability to fill in his gaps suggests that the non-communicable is in fact a point of contact between author and reader.

Because the concept of reflection is charged with a more complex social, political, and aesthetic history than can be captured here, it is essential to demarcate the way in which it bears on idleness in this particular context. In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke defines reflection as “that notice which the mind takes of its own operations” (34). For Locke, ideas are derived by a first order, sensation, and a second order, reflection, where “internal sense” makes ideas out of the mental acts of desire, deliberation, or will. Although the question of whether reflection is self-aware or automatic may be unresolved, Locke’s definition is useful for reading Defoe. Not only is the third volume of the trilogy identified as a series of reflections, but more importantly, the development and growing popularity of the novel depended on an understanding of “internal sense,” vis-à-vis Locke, that legitimated the practice of narrating experience.12

While Serious Reflections is not a novel in the conventional sense, the volume’s essays are nonetheless drafted by a fictional character, a narrator whose mission to make “useful and instructing” observations is sometimes at odds with the privacy and non-communicability of reflection. In the remainder of this essay, I hope to show that the strategy of suspended description in Crusoe’s account of the famously grotesque Pequin idol is an attempt to bridge the gap between the knowable and unknowable. As he considers the idol to be a marker of Chinese idleness, and in specific an aesthetic handicap, Crusoe necessarily struggles to reproduce it for his reader. The effect is to distinguish that which is representable, substantial, and real – that is, Defoe’s own prose – from that which is unrecognizable and unrecognizing, the idle idol and the culture from which it comes.

It is crucial to note here that idleness for Crusoe amounts to more than passive submission; it also espouses an aesthetic lapse, a mimetic handicap. He asks:

Shall we call these a wise nation, who represent God in such hideous monstrous figures as these, and can prostrate themselves to things ten thousand times more disfigured than the Devil? Had these images been contriv’d in the Romans Time, and been set up for the God of Ugliness, as they had their God of Beauty, they might indeed have been thought exquisite; but the Romans would have spurn’d such an image out of their temples. (Serious Reflections 140)

Ultimately, Crusoe wonders how it is that the Chinese can create idols of superlative ugliness, “ten thousand times more disfigured than the Devil,” unfit even for the title
of ugliness. There are two possible means of understanding the idol; it is either what
the Chinese consider to be a perfect emblem of ugliness, or worse yet, a beautiful
representation of divinity. Either interpretation casts the idol as a failure; if it is meant
to be aesthetically pleasing, it clearly disappoints. If it is meant to be a “God of
Ugliness,” it is somehow inadequate for this designation, too.\textsuperscript{13} That which the
Romans would have “spurn’d” out of their temples is made worthy of prostration by
the Chinese, and for Crusoe, this is a sign that Chinese worship is

the most brutish, and the objects of their worship, the coarsest, the most
unmanly, inconsistent with reason or the nature of religion of any the
world can shew; bowing down to a meer Hob-gobblin, and doing their
reverence not to the work of mens hands only, but the ugliest, basest,
frightfullest things that man could make; images so far from being lovely
and amiable, as in the nature of worship is implied, that they are the most
detestable and nauseous, even to nature. (139)

That their idols are ‘course’ and ‘unmanly’ verifies the Chinese incapacity for true
aesthetic sophistication.\textsuperscript{14}

If there is an expectation of recognizability in Crusoe’s encounter with the idol,
it is deeply challenged here by its abstract qualities, which are “contemptible to
nature.” I underscore the concept of unrecognizability in order to suggest that for
Crusoe, the fact that the idol does not resemble anything he knows manifests as an
aesthetic lapse, much in the same way as his inability to describe it accurately. If the
grotesque idol that fails to represent anything produces a moment of descriptive
failure for Crusoe, it is then up to the reader to turn the shapeless form into an object
of terror and disdain. But in large measure, the fact that the idol is shapeless is itself
the source of Crusoe’s terror. In order to “accurately represent” this truth he must
actually preserve the idol’s unrecognizability, its shapeless and monstrous strangeness.
The suspension of description accomplishes just this.

The evolving importance of descriptive detail in early modern prose
undoubtedly owes much to Baconian empiricism and the growing use of and
excitement over such inventions as microscopes in the seventeenth century. The new
visual practice of microscopy affirmed that all the world’s objects could be split open,
observed, and understood under the lens. Moreover, they could be reproduced for the
layman’s eye in the forms of illustrations, paintings, and models. In his reports on the
experiments of the Royal Society, Thomas Sprat suggests that scientific
experimentation can be “useful for the cure of men’s minds.” He asks:

\begin{quote}
What ambitious disquiets can torment that man, who has so much glory before
him, for which there are only requir’d the delightful works of his hands? What
dark, or melancholy passions can overshadow his heart, whose senses are always
\end{quote}
full of so many productions, of which the least progress, and success, will affect him with an innocent joy? What anger, envy, hatred, or revenge can long torment his breast, whome not only the greatest and noblest objects, but every sand, every pible, every grass, every earth, every fly can divert? (Sprat 344–45)

The “ambitious disquiets” and “melancholy passions” to which Sprat refers evoke the grammar of idleness mentioned earlier—despairing, overwrought, and vanity. As such, the practice of experimenting offers “full, and earnest employments” that can remedy the “diseases of the mind” and “keep it from idleness (343). But if experimentation (which is here linked to the practice of microscopy) can cure idleness, it is because of a gesture outward, to the world of objects, and further still, because he can ‘produce’ such objects in their full intricacy. Observation, whether of sand grains, grasses, flies, or idols, can only produce knowledge if it can adequately represent, reproduce, or describe. Moreover, Sprat casts observation as an active and engaged mode of being. In contrast to the condition of the disquieted man, who is always looking inward, the experimenting, observing man looks outward, so as to be employed by the act of reproducing the object of study. There is, however, a sense of distracted inoperability in Sprat’s claim; though the experimenting man may be able to gain ‘diversion’ from the cross-section of a blade of grass, Sprat does not discuss to what end this is a useful activity. In other words, to observe, and describe, is itself a meaningful form of employment.

For an English reading public that had grown increasingly attentive to the visual and representational possibilities offered by technological innovation, the mimetic lapse that Crusoe attributes to the Chinese is even more revealing. As he notes, the “horrid shapes of their priests invention” are “compos’d of invented forms, with neither face nor figure, but with the utmost distortions, form’d neither to walk, stand, fly, or go; neither to hear, see, or speak, but merely to instill horrible ideas of something nauseous and abominable, into the minds of men that ador’d them” (Serious Reflections 138). That the priests have invented their own forms is deeply troubling to Crusoe; that “poor abandon’d” worshipers “pay their most blinded devotions” to them is deplorable. But his assessment here relies on an understanding of sight and seeing that is fundamental to the development of a realist aesthetic that puts a premium on the observable, recognizable, and describable.

While Sprat’s musings center on scientific experimentation, his celebration of the careful observing eye both links up with and deviates from ideas on the role of literary description in interesting ways. Crusoe of the island has long been emblematized as ‘economic man,’ but perhaps he can more aptly be described as ‘experimenting man.’ Like Sprat’s observing enthusiast, diverted by handiwork, Crusoe’s manufacture of breads, baskets, and umbrellas relies on the same process of trial and error that characterizes the scientific method. While Sprat’s objects of study are found in nature, Crusoe’s experiments are reproductions of civilization;
nonetheless, he suggests that the products of culture—or at least, the processes by which they are manufactured—are as knowable, and dissectible, as a fly. “Few people have thought much upon the strange multitude of little things necessary in the providing, producing, curing, dressing, making, and finishing this one article of bread,” Crusoe remarks, before he goes on to detail his feat (Robinson Crusoe 66).16

Because Crusoe interprets the idol as having a “thing instead of a head” and a “mouth distorted out of all manner of shape,” we note that it does not contain discernible sense organs, no sign of the human form characteristic of Greco-Roman gods. Despite their pagan nature, the idols of antique western societies provide some kind of use for Crusoe; the gods did not merely symbolize heroism, wit, and so forth, but they also offered an aesthetic model. If the Nanqing idol is “coarse” and “unmanly,” it is precisely because of the Chinese inability properly to observe and represent. This is to say that although the idol is man-made, there is nothing of the active, inquisitive and, crucially, observing human in it. To Crusoe’s mind, the Chinese images, “far from being lovely and amiable,” both stand for nothing and see nothing (Serious Reflections 139). Their intrinsic idleness only mirrors the “blinded devotion” of the worshipers themselves.

Given Crusoe’s painstaking interest in the manufacture of goods, his taking of Chinese society “to pieces” in the Serious Reflections is imprecise and poorly contextualized. One wonders why he is unable to question a local about the idol’s true nature, or provide any native knowledge or perspective as to its representational logic; instead, Crusoe stands apart, passively observing the idol of the “great palace at Pequin,” where there “appear’d” the prostrate Mandarin with his attendants. If this kind of detached position is the basis for a truly objective observation, it also threatens to diminish Crusoe’s credibility. Why should he include this obscene and obscure idol if it is unworthy of being made at all? That is, why does Crusoe choose to reproduce that which is undeserving of production in the first place?

Roland Barthes notes that western narrative, in its effort to represent ‘the real,’ contains a certain amount of “useless details.” He notes that description “has no predictive mark;” moreover, the “singularity of description (or of the ‘useless detail’) in narrative fabric, its isolated situation, designates a question which has the greatest importance for the structural analysis of narrative…if insignificant stretches subsist in the narrative syntagm, what is ultimately, so to speak, the significance of this insignificance?” (143). Barthes goes on to explain the aesthetic function of description, shifting from the tradition of ekphrasis in antiquity and pre-modernity to the aim of verisimilitude of modern realist writers. The constellation of details that comprises “the real” is therefore “self-sufficient” and creates the effect of “having been there” (147). It is the “category of the real,” then, that is signified by ‘useless details,’ as the “very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism” (148).
Barthes’s ‘reality effect’ resonates with Crusoe’s suspended description of the idol. I do not mean to suggest that Crusoe’s inclusion of the idol should be considered an “insignificant stretch,” existing only to reinforce the idea that he had really been there, standing and watching in the Chinese garden. On the contrary, devoid of dialogue, local legend, and any of the other authenticating strategies of most travel narratives, Crusoe’s account of the idol seems to be unconcerned with faithfulness. After all, Crusoe recognizes the inadequacy of his description and appeals to the reader’s own imagination. He ensures that the description of the idol itself becomes useless. In rendering his description of the idol incomplete, and thus preserving its strangeness, Crusoe demonstrates that suspending description makes the object less accessible and, in large measure, useless. A radical subversion of what it means to describe—that is, to suspend narrative—Crusoe’s account proves that he cannot reproduce the idol. The kind of realism we find in the Serious Reflections is not interested in faithfulness or accuracy, but rather, in delimiting productive art. Because the Pequin idol marks the idleness of Chinese society, Crusoe takes it up in order to legitimate his own literary production. As it punctuates the course of his survey on China, the idol, isolated in the garden, becomes the very form of unproductive art—showing nothing and meaning nothing, simply a shapeless chasm.

Crusoe’s account of the idol may fail in some crucial respects, but in its struggle for accuracy, there is a sense of becoming that seems also to transcend the idol’s inertia. Like the posture of the idol, which is “rolled up within itself,” the “Chineses,” Crusoe tells us, remain “prostrate on the ground” (Serious Reflections 140). In this, the ultimate act of submission, the body rolled into itself, the suggestion of inertia mirrors that of the idol. If the idol is “fix’d to a bulk” and made of solid, heavy materials, either “wood or stone,” Crusoe’s account attempts, but fails, to make it move. In suspending his descriptive power, and thus failing to animate or lend depth to the idol, what he does hope to move, however, are the minds of his readers, whose longstanding reverence for the Chinese seem, at least to him, akin to idol-worship.

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NOTES

1 Kearney points to another usage of the pun in Francis Quarles’s Shepheards Oracle, where the radical Protestant speaker Anarchus refers to the Book of Common Prayer as an “Idoll, whereunto / You bend your idle knees, as Papists doe / To their lewd Images” (91).

2 In her study of shopping culture, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace argues that diatribes against the rise of English consumerism framed the female subject in competing, contradictory terms; she was an emblem of the transformative power of consumption, crucial to the nation’s economic health, but also susceptible to its corruptive influences. The craving for
foreign goods—silks, teas, sugars, and other wares—that relied on slavery and imperialism (themselves hugely contested and controversial practices) rendered women of means glutinous, depraved, and even complicit with the atrocities of global trade networks. But more importantly, the consuming female subject also figured in the social threat of idleness. As Kowaleski-Wallace notes of the gendered dynamics of tea-table behavior, “unlike her upper-class counterpart, the working woman was never encouraged to dally at the tea table, and she was warned against narcissistic self-display” (31). While the body of the upper-class woman “was disciplined to facilitate male pleasure; the body of the working woman was formed to labor for England” (31).

In an earlier work, *The Consolidator, or Memoirs of Sundry Transactions from the World in the Moon* (1705), Defoe’s narrator praises Chinese wisdom, but only to be undermined by his defunct, “ancient” perspective. Narelle Shaw explains that while the narrator in *The Consolidator* appears to praise Chinese learning, “Defoe himself did not actually believe the Chinese to be the inventors of gunpowder, printing, and the compass” (392). Defoe’s true attitude to China, as Shaw notes, “is substantiated by clues embedded in the *Consolidator* itself” (392). However, the gentle parody found in the *Consolidator* gives way to what Nelson and Rewa consider an “outright denunciation of sinophilia because it dangerously affected his own schemes and aspirations for the betterment of the British economy” (27). Elsewhere in the Crusoe trilogy, Defoe’s view of China also turns on the issues of manufacture, learning, and craftworks. In the *Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, chinaware and the Great Wall are among the objects of scrutiny and ridicule for Crusoe. After passing the “mighty Nothing call’d a wall,” Crusoe remarks on the hordes of “lean starv’d creatures, taught nothing, and fit for nothing” (314).

Johnson states in the first issue of the *Idler*, “Perhaps man may be more properly distinguished as an idle animal; for there is no man who is not sometimes idle. It is at least a definition from which none that shall find it in this paper can be excepted; for who can be more idle than the reader of the Idler?” (3).

Sarah Jordan’s *Anxieties of Idleness* and Pierre Saint-Amand’s *Pursuit of Laziness* survey cultural formations of idleness as counterpoint to and constitutive of the discourse of productivity and industry. Jordan explains that the new man of industry “embodied a change from the older, aristocratic notion of masculinity,” which was characterized by sport and leisure. Saint-Amand unsettles the conventional narrative of Enlightenment progress, as he suggests that “laziness and idleness become figures of resistance within bourgeois economy.”

As Joseph Addison notes in *Spectator* 411 (June 1712), there are “but very few who know how to be idle and innocent, or have a Relish of any Pleasures that are not Criminal.”

See Chen Shouyi, “Daniel Defoe, China’s Severe Critic” (1935), which provides a useful survey of English representations of China in the period.
8 Barrow describes the shrine that Chinese sailors set aside for the needle of the ship’s compass. With changes in weather pattern, the sailors offer incense to the shrine. As Porter suggests, the violation of the “commercialist telos” of the compass, which is inscribed with astrological ideographs and seems mainly to serve as an icon, is deeply disturbing to Barrow.

9 David Porter’s article on English perceptions of Chinese commercial culture points to metaphors of blockage and circulation in many areas outside of trade. The practices of foot-binding, methods of waste management, and dearth of social spaces (such as the English coffeehouse or tavern) also expose, for Barrow and other travelers to China, a society that is constricted and stagnant. Porter also notes that Crusoe anticipates this position toward China in The Farther Adventures, in which Crusoe’s dismissal of the Great Wall renders it a monument of “hopeless resistance to the overwhelming forces of modernity” (196).

10 Ian Watt claimed that though it might seem unrealistic, Defoe’s depiction of Crusoe overturned a familiar account of solitude’s effects—deterioration and lunacy: “Defoe departs from psychological probability in order to redeem his picture of man’s inexorable solitariness . . . An inner voice continually suggests to us that the human isolation which individualism has fostered is painful and tends ultimately to a life of apathetic animality and mental derangement. Defoe answers confidently that it can be made the arduous prelude to the fuller realization of every individual’s potentialities” (88).

11 Mary E. Butler contends that the recurring correctives and interruptions found in Robinson Crusoe endow it with the qualities we assign to “concrete matter rather than with fiction” (77). As a result, the text “gives the illusion of improving itself even as we read” (77). She goes on to provide a comprehensive schema for moments of “rhetorical uncertainty” in Robinson Crusoe. She claims that moments of uncertainty in Crusoe’s narration aim to “claim that a subject is ineffable, to confess that a narrator cannot identify the things he speaks of, to avoid detailing a given object or event, or to confess in various ways his uncertainty about the translation of what he sees into what we read” (78).

12 David Radcliffe explains that writers began to call contemplative works “reflections” after the Restoration. Because the new generic distinctions “turned less on what stories are about than on how stories are told…one of the new tasks assigned to mental reflection was to distinguish between kinds of representation, [as] reflection became a constituent of narrative, and vice versa” (81).

13 Takau Shimada offers several possible sources for Defoe’s writing on China in the Serious Reflections; he suggests that the move to compare Chinese and Japanese idols to Greco-Roman idols was indebted to other Christian missionary writers Defoe would have read. Other titles in Defoe’s library may have included Bernhard Verenius’s Descriptio Regni Japoniae (1649), Athanase Kircher’s China illustrata (1667), and Arnoldus Montanus’s Atlas Japannensis (1670). Unlike Le Comte, Shimada suggests, these other writers made detailed descriptions of idols and are, therefore, more probable sources for Defoe (211).
According to Barrow, Chinese artists “exercise no judgment of their own. Every defect and blemish, original or accidental, they are sure to copy, being mere servile imitators, and not in the least feeling the force or the beauty of any specimen of the arts that may come before them; for the same person who is one day employed in copying a beautiful European print, will sit down next to a Chinese drawing replete with absurdity” (qtd. in Porter 190). The so-called lack of originality in Chinese art troubles Barrow the way poor mimesis troubles Crusoe.

For more insight into the role of description in visual culture, see Svetlana Alpers’ study of seventeenth-century Dutch art, *The Art of Describing*. In her book, the hyper-realist works of Dutch painters, such as Vermeer, privilege the attentive eyes of the artist who is entrusted with the task of faithful representation.

In *Ends of Enlightenment*, John Bender explores a set of concerns about the relationship between novels and knowledge-production in the eighteenth century. Crucially, he expands on the suggestive link between “experience” and “experiment” as related to novel reading. In French, Bender demonstrates, “a person can be expérimenté, meaning ‘one who has benefited empirically from experience.” As such, he suggests that “novel readers in the eighteenth century became expérimenté.” Such an account of the eighteenth-century novel casts Defoe’s prose as dynamic and experiential, even in its descriptive moments.

**WORKS CITED**


