

Confronting Authority: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Remaking of *Robinson Crusoe*

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The process of remaking Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* continues as each successive generation since 1719 has taken the Crusoe myth, reconsidered it, reshaped it, repudiated it—and still we have not finished with this strange man, his island, and his Friday. In this century alone, writers the likes of H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, Rose Macauley, Muriel Spark, E.L. Doctorow, William Golding, and Richard Hughes (to name only a few) have grappled with Defoe's creation in an attempt to silence his presence once and for all. As Martin Green has suggested in his recent study, *The Robinson Crusoe Story*, Crusoe is a towering figure in literature: his tale has been hailed as the first English novel, the first story of psychological realism, the first adventure narrative, and the most compelling myth of Empire.¹ Indeed, so powerful is this father of literature, an entire genre, the Robinsonnade, has been named in his honor. And as this name suggests—*Robinsonnade*—Crusoe exists in each of these remaking—a trace, a shadow, a subtext. He is always there, in the margins.

Crusoe has come to signify authority. He is supreme creator of his island, dominant subject of his narrative, master of the material and the psychical. As father of his island and of his narrative, he makes value out of "nothing": the *tabula rasa* of his island becomes infused with his markings and his namings. The continual stoppings and goings of his narrative finally take on shape once he leaves civilization—the already marked—and must face life alone for fifteen years. Outcast from England, from slavery, from Brazilian plantation life, he is left pondering the nothingness of himself—and in the end triumphs as his own most significant creation. As Richard Braverman has proposed, Crusoe's struggle against his own father provides one of the central conflicts of this "fable of exile"; "in order to fulfill his legacy," Braverman concludes, "[Crusoe] must name, and metaphorically, father himself."² His narrative, then, is a myth of recentering, of reaffirming culture, from its most trivial artifacts to its larger structures. By novel's end, Crusoe calls himself "Governour" of "my island"; that he survives twenty-eight years beyond the margins of culture only to return a successful colonizer bespeaks the underlying power of his myth. A culture that privileges nurture, dominion, and will can efface any challenge. *Robinson Crusoe* articulates this basic premise of Western ideology so evocatively, so memorably, that his story is unquestionably part of our heritage, our cultural reality.

¹ Martin Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1990) 22.

² Richard Braverman, "Crusoe's Legacy," in *Studies in the Novel* 18.1 (Spring 1986): 5. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the initials R.B.

If *Crusoe* remains a formidable influence, so, too, does his creator, Daniel Defoe. Paula Backscheider has pronounced him "the indisputable father of the English novel."³ He is also the patriarch of realism. In his pseudo-preface to *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe as "editor" calls his novel "a just History of Facts; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it."⁴ Defoe achieves this sleight of hand through conventions that would become hallmarks of realism: "individualized characters, [a narration] modeled on nonfictional forms of discourse, and the accumulation of materialistic, psychological, and sociological detail."⁵ During the turbulent era in which these novelistic conventions emerged, Daniel Defoe reigned, in Pierre Macherey's words, as "ideological father."⁶ Created themselves from diverse literary forms, Defoe's writings played an essential role in the dialogical development of the novel.

Daniel Defoe, as a father of fiction, has earned a considerable position of authority. But his position is not unassailed. During the last twenty years, in particular, novelists have attempted a form of fiction—call it "metafiction," "reflexive fiction," "postmodernist fiction," "antirealist fiction"—that undermines any illusion of reality. "The novel," Linda Hutcheon writes, "is not a copy of the empirical world, nor does it stand in opposition to it. It is rather a continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience."⁷ When J.M. Coetzee deliberately revises the "history" of *Robinson Crusoe*, when he opposes Defoe's hero with his new heroine, Susan Barton, and includes Daniel Foe (alias De Foe) as author-villain, he has used the very form of the Robinsonnade both to subvert *Crusoe's* myth of ascendancy and Defoe's ideology of realism. By confronting *Crusoe's/Defoe's* authority, he lays bare the illusion of art, the conventions that sustain it; at the same time, Coetzee never escapes the sway of the literary past. Despite his clever recreation of a seminal novel, despite his own mastery over language and form, he cannot totally debunk *Crusoe* or Defoe. For one of the ironies of the reflexive novelist's position is that in "attacking and questioning a powerful literary tradition," according to Michael Boyd, the novelist is ever "more strongly tied to that tradition."⁸

Foe purports to be the "real" story of Cruso [sic], an unheroic, unproductive, and decrepit white master from a shipwrecked slave ship that also delivered a mute and mutilated Friday. This Cruso, a man of few words, and this Friday, a man of no words, do not care to be the authors of their history. Cruso and Friday spend their hours creating massive terraces, stone fortresses of no

³ Paula Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: Ambition and Innovation* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1986) 11.

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972) 1.

⁵ Steven Cohan, *Violation and Repair in the English Novel: The Paradigm of Experience from Richardson to Woolf* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1986) 7.

⁶ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 206.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 89.

⁸ Michael Boyd, *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983) 19.

use, for no enemies have ever washed up on their island. This Cruso is no creator, nor has he salvaged civilization: a hut surrounded by a primitive fence and furnished with a narrow bed is his "castle." Lettuce, fish, and birds' eggs form his monotonous diet. His tools are fashioned, clumsily, from wood and stone. As Cruso, in short temper, explains, "We have a roof over our heads, made without saw or axe. We sleep, we eat, we live. We have no need of tools."⁹ Most importantly, we are informed, he "kept no journal, perhaps because he lacked paper and ink, but more likely . . . because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or, if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it" (16). It is Susan Barton, a castaway to their shores, who is the "real" creator (Cruso's only enemy, too, for her need for stories disturbs his repressive routine). She is the forgotten, silenced author, whose island tale of ennui and purposeless activity counters the final "realistic" adventure recreated and then published by Foe (De Foe), a London author.

It is Susan's attempt to shape the intractable nature of experience that forms the true quest of this novel: recreating a wholeness from that which is shapeless, desireless, meaningless. She worries that there is nothing at her story's core, for the words she uses cannot recreate experience; they are hollow, containing only traces, echoes, hints of reality. She continually stalls on Cruso's tale because her subject is desireless. "Without desire," she asks, "how is it possible to make a story?" (88). Images of death, of stillborn babies, of ghostly daughters, and of mummified bodies project the deadness of her story. It goes nowhere; it has no structure, no action, no potent main character to lend interest. Even Cruso, after years on his island, lacks desire enough to make a satisfactory mate. There can be no recentering on this Cruso's island. Coetzee's Cruso has allowed culture and imagination to wither and die. He does not teach Friday to make of him a companion; he only wants a slave. He rejects Susan's overtures of friendship; he needs her only as an object of control. "While you live under my roof," he informs her, "you will do as I instruct" (20). Coetzee's deconstructed Cruso, who refuses to rearticulate the past for Susan, who labors day in and out on backbreaking, useless terrace building, who has no desire to create an island garden, stands in opposition to the Cruso Mr. Foe will create, master of the spiritual and material. Coetzee's Cruso masters only his mutilated slave and a castaway woman. Susan laments that "the world expects stories from its adventurers, better stories than tallies of how many stones they moved in fifteen years, and from where, and to where; Cruso rescued will be a deep disappointment to the world" (34).

The world never meets Cruso, for he dies on the voyage home, having been rescued by a merchantman, the *John Hobart*. Susan is left to tell a sorry tale. Though home and relieved of Cruso, she cannot shake his mastery of her; after all, she continues to be burdened by his mute slave, Friday, and by his difficult, plotless story. But Susan challenges his authority, repeatedly asserts she is "free," author of her own destiny, her own narrative. The island story, however, will not be born, and, in desperation, she turns to the famous author, Foe, for his help. She attempts to persuade him that her "true" story, the ver-

⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (1986; New York: Viking Press, 1987) 32. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition.

sion she has authorized him to tell, takes precedence over Foe's desired retellings, replete with "strange circumstances" (67). She even imagines she is Foe's muse, a seductive giver of tales for whom he must create. Yet Susan's personal myth of freedom and authority is continually undermined by her vulnerability, her dependence on men. Cruso initially provides her a temporary shelter and food and then furnishes her with a tale. Hoping to live off the proceeds of Cruso's story, she throws herself, quite literally, at Foe and offers him details. Foe then allows her to watch over his Clock Lane residence while he flees creditors. Here Susan spends her time creating epistles to Foe that chronicle her failure to author "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related" (67).

But as Susan's residence at Clock Lane lengthens, her grasp of authority softens. Susan envisions Foe revising her tale: "Better had there been only Cruso and Friday . . . Better without a woman" (72). In fact, Foe begins revising her life, for Susan has refused to offer him details of her abortive search in Brazil for her kidnapped daughter. It is Cruso's life, she has doggedly insisted, not her own that requires articulation. In response, Cruso invents a daughter for her; insidiously he undermines Susan's story and her history. Confronted with a makeshift daughter, "some poor child who does not know who she is" (73), Susan writes in anger, "Do you think women drop children and forget them as snakes lay eggs?" (75). Foe provides his girl pretender with a tale comprised of "the stock in trade of romances for centuries"¹⁰: her father, a brewer, gambled away his fortune; her despairing mother abandoned her; subsequently, she is nabbed by gypsies; having escaped them, the girl seeks her mother. Foe brings them together for a satisfactory conclusion. Though Susan rids herself of this "father-born" child (91), she cannot free herself from Foe's designs. He is "like one of those notorious libertines whom women arm themselves against, but against whom they are at last powerless, his very notoriety being the seducer's shrewdest weapon" (120). In the end, she is the seduced, not Foe, and in so succumbing loses all claim to Cruso's tale. Until her death, she relies upon Foe and his resources to provide sustenance. Thus the Britain she mythologizes as "free" is as oppressive as the island Cruso controlled.

Finally, Susan's attempts as author fail because any attempt at truth falls flat. "You know," she tells Friday, "how dull our life was, in truth. We faced no perils, no ravenous beasts, not even serpents. Food was plentiful, the sun was mild. No pirates landed on our shores, no freebooters, no cannibals save yourself if you can be called a cannibal" (81). In despair she admits, "we will never make our fortunes, Friday, by being what we are, or were" (82). She is reduced to mourning that which will never be: "I was not intended to be the mother of my story, but to beget it." Her story is a foster child to be handed over to Foe, "that he has the last word" and therefore "the greatest force" (124). How appropriate Helene Cixous's words from "Sorties" seem here: "In the extreme, the

¹⁰ Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) 120.

world of 'being' can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for mother . . . it is the father then who acts as—is—the mother."¹¹

Richard Braverman argues that "Defoe's novel deals with the most significant and controversial political issue of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the nature, origin, and reproduction of sovereign power" (R.B. 1). Crusoe's rejection of his father's desires, the "primal sin of disobedience," has its parallel in the political realm: the challenge, by "sons" to tyrants (R.B. 3). Discarding his natural father's authority, Crusoe must "father himself" (R.B. 5). Yet the image of Crusoe's father persists—what is it but the "Middle Station of Life" that Crusoe achieves? Crusoe is always embroiled by his father. Such issues of power and authority find their parallels in Coetzee's text. As "master text," Foe's published tale garners much sovereign power—next to it Susan's plotless, philosophical text comprised of letters and journal entries is dwarfed. Power, force, has everything to do with authority. Tongueless, mute Friday will never author his tale; his only articulations are tuneless flute songs and monotonous, repetitive dances. His mistress, Susan, articulate but unable to shape amorphous experience, ends up silenced by Foe. Transforming her narrative into the solely masculine world of *Robinson Crusoe*, Foe (de Foe) disregards the truth, seeking instead "to invent new and stranger circumstances" (67), circumstances that lend shape, detail, and force to an otherwise dull history.

By providing Susan with a substitute daughter and thus attempting to right her incomplete story, Foe closes in on Susan. "I am not a story, Mr. Foe," she protests, "I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131). But in the end, Foe's ploys leave her in doubt of her very existence: "Now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt" (133). Susan's ultimate submission occurs near novel's end, when Foe seduces her. She is no passive bedmate, but actively straddles Foe (he is made uneasy by her sexual assertion) "in the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets," she teasingly whispers to Foe (140). Indeed, she hopes her prowess in bed will convince Foe to publish her island renderings; the Muse "must do whatever is in her power to father her offspring" (140). Yet in the end she is no more empowered than she was at the beginning, adrift at sea. She accuses Foe of being "a true slave-owner" who closes his ears to her words, doing to her what slavers had done to Friday when they cut out his tongue (150). "I would not rob you of your tongue for anything," he protests (150). But that is exactly what he does.

I am writing about Susan as if she were "real," in the sense that we think of characters in realistic novels as enlivened shadows with voices and experiences parallel to our own, able to affect us because they seem "true." Yet the very fact that Susan's tale, published in 1986, is inextricably tied to an eighteenth-century novel—indeed, could not make sense without the prior existence of

¹¹ Helene Cixous, "Sorties," in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988) 288.

Robinson Crusoe—undermines the apparent reality of her details, dates, inner thoughts, and picaresque wanderings. She is a pastiche of eighteenth-century heroines, a conglomerate of novelistic conventions, like the pretend daughter Foe devises, a made-up thing. *Foe* is, after all, metafiction, a novel about the writing of novels. Indeed, Coetzee's novel is as shackled by conditions as its heroine, desiring freedom from the father (*Robinson Crusoe*), but forced by history into a parasitic relationship. If Susan ends up "embroiled" by Foe, Coetzee is equally "embroiled" by Defoe. His creation remains trapped in an intertextual prison. In Michael Boyd's words, the literary past is "the source of the prisoner's [i.e., writer's] poverty being that he comes too late, after all the stories have been told."¹²

Stephen Watson, in his essay on Coetzee's fiction, has noted the emphasis colonial structures receive in *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983): "If colonialism, at its very simplest," Watson concludes, "equals the conquest and subjugation of a territory by an alien people, then the human relationship that is basic to it is likewise one of power and powerlessness: the relationship between master and servant, overlord and slave."¹³ *Foe* continues Coetzee's analysis of power, and significantly he has chosen a genre that articulates a myth of Empire. Among the many complex relationships he posits—Cruso as master of Friday and Susan, Susan as sexual mistress of Cruso and Foe and social mistress of Friday, Foe as master of Susan and her tale—one stands out as particularly intriguing: in what way does Daniel Defoe maintain his mastery over contemporary fiction, in what way is he colonizer of our imaginations? Watson notes that in Coetzee's fiction one senses a hunger "for a world of event, for a narrative in which there is direction and purpose, a story which has a beginning and end, in which character has some continuity in time."¹⁴ At the same time, Coetzee resists the dominion, the force of traditional novel writing. He wishes to speak to real historical conflicts, but resists what Linda Hutcheon calls a "consolatory structure."¹⁵ At one point Foe sketches out to Susan a possible "consolatory" revision of her tale: "We therefore have five parts in all: the loss of the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, and the adventure of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with her mother. It is thus we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end" (117). Foe understands what an audience desires: a "readerly" not a "writerly" text. His sketch leaves Susan joyless and heavy-limbed" (117); his narrative manipulations are powerfully seductive, but in Susan's words they are "lies" (117).

The dialogue Coetzee creates between Foe and Susan, competing authors, presents the conflict between "ancients" and "moderns," "realists" and "poststructuralists"; it speaks to the power of a realistic method "but then con-

¹² Boyd 37.

¹³ Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee," in *Research in African Literature* 17.3 (Fall 1986): 370.

¹⁴ Watson 386.

¹⁵ Hutcheon 6.

tests it."¹⁶ Coetzee's refusal to accept an art that, through a realistic lens, stabilizes and centers experience, debunks the tradition sired by Defoe. His novel's final pages conjure up a surreal scene: bodies, wrapped like mummies, "dry as paper" (153), are exposed by an unknown voice (is it Coetzee's?). Friday, "hard as wood" (154), lies stretched out on his back, wrapped up in "heavy stuff"; his pulse is weak and "the sound his body makes is faint and dry, like leaves falling over leaves" (154). Above this strange scene of dead and dying characters (grotesque versions of Thackeray's puppets put away in a trunk in *Vanity Fair*) is a plaque that reads, quite simply, "Daniel Defoe, Author" (155). The narrator begins to read the first words of Susan's tale: "Dear Mr Foe, at last I could row no further." This narrator/reader literally slips into the island world and then becomes submerged in a polluted sea. There again he finds dead bodies (drowned this time) and Friday still alive. Friday opens his tongueless, speechless mouth and out of it flows a stream washing everything, including the narrator's eyes and skin, like a baptismal wave. The narrator's peculiar journey to the silence that is Friday brings to the fore Coetzee's own powerful imagination. The final pages celebrate his virtuosity, his technical control, his creative brilliance. "The analogy between author and God," Brian McHale states, "is an old one. Nevertheless, the postmodernist writers seem to be obsessed with it—obsessed enough," McHale concludes, "to be willing to sacrifice novelistic illusion for the sake of asserting their 'authority' . . . their mastery over the fictional world."¹⁷ Coetzee may be "asserting" his "authority," but his final images—the author's plaque, a woman's unread tale, the functionless mouth of a slave—suggest the hidden cost of his assertion: exclusion, repression, silence. In the end, Coetzee challenges his readers to demystify the writer's art (including his own), to find the traces of other voices, and to question any attempt at authority.

¹⁶ Hutcheon 180.

¹⁷ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen Press, 1987) 210.