

“Father to my story”: Writing *Foe*, De-Authorizing (De)Foe

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ABSTRACT

Foe is probably not J.M. Coetzee's best known novel, although it is a text of great importance because of the way in which its political, literary and theoretical values are interrelated. The novel addresses a foundational myth of Western societies in the figure of Robinson Crusoe, and draws attention to its textual quality. This concern with the process of representation and the narrative quality of our beliefs is also manifested throughout the novel in other issues. Thus, in the text there is a whole panoply of reflections about the central issues affecting the very mechanics of constructing a text, such as, for example, the proper way a story should be written, the relationship between representation and its referent in the real, the problem of realism, or the question of authorship.

1.

J.M. Coetzee has become an even better known writer after the concession of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Among his most famous novels are *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999). His latest novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, appeared in 2003. Between *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* he published *Foe* (1986), a novel which critics have considered as something apart from the other novels, a transitional work, both in terms of its themes and its technique, something like a halt in his career. As a matter of fact, *Foe* seems to possess a different quality for in it one does not find that openly political element which is often the hallmark of previous and later novels. But that would be an acceptable view only if we restrict our reading to a very superficial level and see it as a sort of literary *divertimento*, the typical postmodern artifact which takes the usual guise of

literature about literature (although one could ask if there is a literature that is not ultimately about literature).

I would like to suggest that *Foe* is, in fact, a political novel as much as any of his other novels, not only because of the frame of reference which establishes its origin (the figure of Robinson Crusoe and what it means in the Western cultural imaginary), but also in a deeper sense because, beyond specific political problems, the novel deals with issues that have to do with the way in which language is used to generate a fabulation that can be offered and accepted as real, as an objective representation of an unquestionable reality. The novel highlights the degree to which writing a story is actually an activity which implies manipulating the original elements into an acceptable text, even if in the process, which culminates in a mythological creation, some factual details, as important as those included in the representation, are left out. The novel also emphasizes how this process determines the quality of the representation and how the creation of the *mythos* can only be done at the expense of sacrificing, at least partly, fidelity to the original experience or material.

2.

The first problem that the reader faces in this novel has to do with deciding, at least approximately, what it is about, its main concern. Very often this is solved by simply saying that *Foe* is a re-writing of, or a variation on, *Robinson Crusoe*, or even a parody by means of postcolonial intertextuality (Hirsch, 1999: 8). But if this is a variation, in “He and His Man”, his Nobel Prize lecture, Coetzee presents yet another variation on Cruso and Friday in a text which considers the relationship between fact and fiction, the real and the represented, and the question of writing and authorship. That Coetzee is interested in these issues is manifested also in how his latest novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, reflects, sometimes in subtle ways, on the relationship between literature and reality. The protagonist, for example, is a writer who has written a novel about Molly Bloom, the well-known character in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. But there is a coincidence here which is too good to be unintentional, and it is that her last name is the same as that of a real critic, Peter Costello, who has written a real “biography” of Leopold Bloom.¹ In view of these intertextual connections, I would like for my part to suggest that *Foe* is another case in point, offering more than simply a re-writing of an earlier text. More specifically, I would say that Coetzee’s novel presents us with a sort of “investigation” of a possibly *silenced* origin of Defoe’s text, in an exercise not of science-fiction but of literature-fiction, if such redundant term can help for the moment. And I would add that this exercise, actually a sophisticated game with the history of literature, is carried out through a disguised variation on the strategy of the found manuscript. Coetzee might have anteceded Susan’s narrative with a preface (a perverse possibility for a future edition), indicating that his novel was in reality a found manuscript, written before Defoe wrote his novel. This would obviously change our view of Defoe’s text, in a similar manner in which the Qumran manuscripts may question the “originality” of certain aspects of Christian mythology, even if there is an ontological difference between the real Qumran manuscripts and the fictive *Foe*, for while

the former are considered authentic, the latter belongs to the category of fictional biographies and invented memories.

Playing this variation of the found manuscript is an intrinsic strategy of this novel and it uses it emphatically, because from the very first word, that is from the title itself (which in this as in the case of the authorship is key for this aspect of our reading), the novel calls the reader's attention to the relationship between Coetzee's and Defoe's texts, to the peculiar and specific way in which they interact in an oppositional dialectic. This could be defined as "alteration", a term that subsumes the opposition between identity and difference, alludes to the possibility of becoming other, even the Other, includes all manner of inversions and subversions of names and stories, and echoes the related term of "alterities".

The title is, then, the first instance of the alterations which Coetzee's novel makes explicit: Foe, and not Defoe. Similarly, later we will find Cruso, not Crusoe. But other alterations can be mentioned at different levels. Susan's last name was originally Berton but "it became corrupted in the mouths of strangers" (10) and finally became Barton. And at another point she changes her name to become Mrs Cruso (47). Names (and naming) are important for Susan, especially considering her awareness of how words acquire new meanings depending on where you are (108) or how the local culture identifies you with the wrong name. In Bahia she "was thought a whore. But there are so many whores there, or, as I prefer to call them, free women, that I was not daunted" (115). But it is not only a free woman who can be considered a whore. Also the Muse/Susan is seen under the same light (145), and even Foe sees himself as "an old whore...who should ply her trade only in the dark" (151).²

In order to avoid sexual attacks while they are on the road to Bristol, Susan decides to disguise herself and change her appearance "hoping to pass for a man" (101). This is just one instance of the various subsequent changes and even inversions of roles concerning Susan and her relationship with Foe. This inversion reaches its climax in her desire to become "father to my story" (123) and to exchange roles with Foe, both literally in their sexual encounter (139-40), and in their literary relationship: she will be the Muse that "must do whatever lies in her power to father her offspring" (140), while Foe will be the mother who is seen "at his labours" (145), as a result of his having been visited by the Muse. And he will also enter a marital relationship with Susan in which again the roles will be reversed so that Foe will be not only the "intended" (126) but much more: "I think of you as a mistress, or even, if I dare speak the word, as a wife" (152).

In the same way that Foe alters his own name to make it Defoe, he alters Susan's story to make it Cruso(e)'s story in spite of her attempts to control the writing of her story. And one of the important changes between Defoe's narrative and Susan's alleged original lies precisely in the figure of Susan, which is completely omitted, so that it is not only the "linguistic" silence of Friday that is highlighted but also the implicit silence about the existence of a woman on the island. Likewise, the relationship between Cruso and Friday is somewhat altered. Cruso did not find a footprint on the sand and later on Friday, but the two men came together to the island, as they managed to survive the wreck of the ship on

which they were sailing (54). Lastly, another important alteration, which may be explained as a political move on the part of the author himself, has to do with Coetzee's altering the origin of Friday, not a Carib as in Defoe's text but a negro of African origin.

Through the title of the novel, then, Coetzee invokes the question of origins, so that an analogy may be established in which Foe is the original of Defoe in the same way that *Foe* would be the original of *Robinson Crusoe*. Thus, we come to the paradoxical situation in which *Foe*, which is conventionally read as an alteration of the original *Robinson Crusoe*, tries to show that it is *Robinson Crusoe* that is full of alterations: in other words, the supposedly altered text (because it is closer to an imagined real) sets itself up as more authentic and original than the literary original (which is presented as simply a version of the former).

3.

One of the most evident alterations in *Foe* concerns the figure of Cruso. To begin with he is only a secondary figure in Coetzee's novel, almost an excuse for the re-evaluation of the Crusoe myth. Also, he is depicted with negative features which highlight his lack of interest and his unheroic inactivity. According to Susan, when she tells him her story he simply watches in silence (10), showing no further curiosity and asking nothing (13). He does not want to leave the island (13) and is indifferent to salvation (14); he does not care about rescuing tools (16) and does not keep a journal either. He is also dirty and toothless (19), does not teach Friday English (21), is angry at seeing his realm invaded by a woman (25), and will not allow changes (27). He is a dull, boring man (34) with no stories to tell of his own life and no interest in the lives of others (34), someone who would be "a deep disappointment to the world", although a better thing on his island (34-35). Being concerned only with the island, he imposes on Susan and Friday a "morose silence" (36) which even caused Friday's memories to die "under Cruso's rule" (59). Looking back to that time on the island, Susan believes that "life with Cruso put lines on my brow" (93). Also, Cruso is presented as manipulative when she recalls how he leads her to believe that Friday is a cannibal (106). But probably the most relevant criticism of Cruso's figure has to do with his symbolic quality as a man representative of Western society and as the epitome of capitalist efficiency. For Susan his sense of efficiency is completely absurd, as is reflected in the useless toil of building terraces for nothing (18), something that she considers "stupid labour" (35). Ironically enough, Susan will embody the work ethic characteristic of *Robinson Crusoe* when she tries to turn Friday into a laundryman "for otherwise idleness will destroy him" (56); or when she criticizes his lack of interest in learning to play more than just one tune on a flute: "It is a form of incuriosity, is it not, a form of sloth" (95).

The version which Susan gives the reader of the figure of Robinson Cruso is not very positive. Beyond his ability to survive and recreate an environment of survival and security, his figure is belittled by an atmosphere of apathy when it comes to the possibility of creating a chronicle that bears testimony to his deeds. As Susan writes to Foe, there is nothing extraordinary about the island (43) and so Cruso's dullness is intimately connected

with the dullness of the story about the island because Crusoe lacks the will to do anything except spend his days without much hope or ambitions, and dies, not really aware of his situation, when the ship which rescued him is only a three-day voyage away from the coast of England. Hence, he dies without seeing the promised land which he recreated on the island with the help not really of material instruments but with the ideological tools of his bourgeois mentality, as shown by the example of "Crusoe's stove, which was built very neatly of stone" (14).

4.

Another altered parallel between the two novels can be seen in the similarity between both titles but with an important difference. Thus, "Robinson Crusoe" is both the title of the novel and the name of the main character, while "Foe" is the title of the novel and the name of an author who, it has to be admitted, is also a character in this particular text. That the title of Coetzee's novel alludes to the author of *Robinson Crusoe* is very important because it conjures up the question of authorship (and indirectly authority), which is also a very relevant issue in *Foe*. Indeed in this novel the choice of the title is an indication that authorship will also be under scrutiny. But it will not simply be the question of who the author of this narrative is but also, in a more general sense, it will be a question about the origin of the story we are reading, an origin which seems to recede further and further back into an inapprehensible real. A number of possibilities are open for the reader as to the origin of the narrative: we may think of Crusoe and Friday's experience on the island but Crusoe's stories were "so various and so hard to reconcile one with another" that Susan came to believe that he "no longer knew what was truth, what fancy" (11-12); and Friday cannot speak and apparently cannot even learn to speak. Another possibility is Susan, who claims authority over "the history of this singular Crusoe, as I heard it from his own lips" (11), and who is emphatically obsessed with the fetish of truth. Then there is Foe, a Godlike author but also a "ghostwriter", and someone, who given his professional experience, sees the narrative as an artifact that has to be constructed. And we must not forget J.M. Coetzee, a South-african writer who is decidedly connected with other texts related to the figure of Crusoe. Among those texts, there is another candidate in this contest for the origin and it is, obviously, *Robinson Crusoe*, the novel for which Coetzee writes an Introduction in which he comments on the question of the realness of the "author" (Crusoe himself in this case) before he went on to become a myth in Western culture (v).³ And we can think of Daniel Defoe whose real name was Foe and who knew of the story of one Alexander Selkirk, a sailor who after a mutiny had been left on the island of Juan Fernández and whose adventures were published in 1713 by Sir Richard Steele, like other accounts of adventures and voyages of that time. This story, apparently, inspired Defoe in the same way that the other stories which Foe, according to Susan, is used to listening to. And of course we can interpret the narrative in a postcolonial key, given the origin of the author and his specific historical and political background, as Robert M. Post does.

That it may be so difficult to decide a stable site for the origin of the text seems completely intentional on Coetzee's part. By doing so, Coetzee tries to undermine a self-

satisfied notion of authorship and bring his novel into a more difficult, and richer, terrain in which the work transmutes itself into a text. To say it with (a translation of) the words of Roland Barthes (1977: 160-161):

The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches *respect* for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions, while society asserts the legality of the relation of author to work.... As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father.

Author, father, God, phallus, full Presence, Truth, Word, Law: all of these terms are part of Susan's desire to be "father to my story" (123). But "my story" has its source in an original moment of chaos: if Cruso's terraces are absurd and have order but no purpose, so too his stories are chaotic and they are first manipulated by Susan to turn them into an ordered history, as she feels to be the only heir to Cruso's memory: "I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island" (45).

Susan, who wants to be "father to my story", has to deal in the process with a mysterious girl, who in contrast is "father-born" and feels "the pain of lack, not the pain of loss" (91). The father of this girl is Daniel Foe, who begets this flesh-and-bone girl, as an echo of Defoe's quality as a foundational father of English prose. Thus, the initially ambiguous word "foe" alludes directly to the question of authorship and to the process of fathering a narrative. In another instance, Susan disagrees about the story of the Irishwoman that Foe tells her. For Susan the moral of the story is "that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force" and that the important thing is really "to what interpreter the story of my last hours has been consigned" (124), stressing thus that it is not a matter of what the story is about but of who tells it, calling attention again to the question of authorship and all that it implies: representation, point of view, or selection.

5.

The idea that the origin of the story lies in Susan is also subject to question, for as "father" or author of a narrative Susan also suffers the same problems as any other author. Her intentions and her version could be similarly doubted by a reader who in the light of the evidence might want to question her reliability as narrator and the degree to which her story corresponds with reality. In effect, this is another aspect which is problematized in this narrative, and eventually, it constitutes another instance of the silence of Coetzee's novel, that is, the way in which it eludes all attempts (from all angles, at all levels) at making it meaningful.

Susan's narrative could be questioned for a number of reasons. To begin with, the "story of Cruso's island", which Foe is writing, "will lie with a heap of other papers", among them "a multitude of castaway narratives, most of them, I would guess, riddled with lies" (50). Susan fears that Cruso's story will also be seen as simply another story invented by some storyteller, a notion that could only be countered by Cruso himself: "Who but Cruso, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso's story?" (51). But also, her reliability

can be questioned if we pay attention to all those moments when we realize that her comments are based on her prejudice or in wrong interpretations of reality. She, for example, imagines Foe in the process of writing ("I think of you labouring in your attic", 52), but she imagines things that turn out to be different ("It is not wholly as I imagined it would be", 65). That things may not be as she imagined is really not important for someone like her who believes that "life is never as we expect it to be" (113), and who is aware of the way in which received ideas, whether they concern desert islands (7), or cannibals (54), or savages sleeping with one eye open (104), imply a use of stereotypes which do not always correspond with the real, and which may lead to wrong interpretations of history (54).

Also important in connection with the question of Susan's reliability is what we might call the truth about Friday, something that Susan accepts that will be impossible to discover. Talking about his mutilation she says: "How will we ever know the truth?" (23). And this is something which more and more becomes part of her attitude towards Friday. And, thus, since she cannot know the truth, the only thing left for her is guessing, for example about the meaning of his scattering white flakes over the water (31), or his bloodlust (106), or where his homeland is (107). She suggests that it was Cruso who cut out Friday's tongue out of fear of Friday's cannibalism (actually a received idea on the part of Cruso, 81-82), and then she goes on to insist on that idea, guessing in a rather detailed manner, without even looking: "I guess merely, I have not looked into your mouth" (85).

This attitude on Susan's part turns Friday into something even more mysterious. At one point she surprises herself admitting that Friday may have "a spirit or soul" (32), but this shows that her problem is basically one of understanding and of using the wrong approach. Thus, she wonders if he knows the meaning of death (45) when she should rather wonder if Friday, to whom Cruso had only taught as many words as he needed (21), knows the meaning of her (English) words: "Your master is dead, Friday" (44). In other words, Susan is making a comment about cultural issues when it is all a matter of linguistic competence. That she sometimes does not understand what is going on can be clearly seen in the scenes in which Friday is dancing what seems to be a dervish dance: "I shiver as I watch Friday dancing in the kitchen" (94), especially because she thinks that this dance takes his thoughts to a time "when he was a savage among savages" (95), or that "the purpose of his dancing was to show forth the nakedness underneath" (118). As the example shows, sometimes Susan presents her interpretations of Friday's behaviour as truth, as an accurate description of how he feels or reacts, how he has lost all humanity (70), or how he is laughing at her (146). When faced with the presence of the mysterious girl, Susan wonders about her and her origin, which she cannot understand either: "Does [Foe] send her as a sign? What is she a sign of?" (79). Given Friday's loss of his tongue, he also stands or is grounded on a void and he himself becomes a signifier to which Susan adds a signified.

Susan admits that only Cruso could tell his story and how difficult it is to know anything about Friday. Still, she decides to tell Cruso's story, even if "in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what mere rambling" (12). However, for her only a very

simple rule applies: “All I say is: What I saw, I wrote” (54). But seeing does not imply understanding (as the dervish dance episode proves); moreover, a story needs to be written down: it must have not only truth in it but also art, in a process in which something is lost and something gained: “A liveliness is lost in writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art” (40). She will then fight to preserve the reality of her story from the artifice of a storyteller whose trade may be “in books, not in truth” (40). If not truth, at least truthfulness might be achieved by the rhetoric of writing, that “art” which she may lack but Foe might supply so that a fictional lie may eventually produce what Henry James might call an “air of reality”.

6.

And what is the story that she finally tells and we read? Is it Cruso’s story or rather Susan’s story trying to tell his story? We might define *Foe* as a representation of the desire to tell a story, but what story that is is not so easy to discern since we may consider different options, as, for example, that this is the story of an eccentric woman among de-centered subjects; or that this is a story about publishing a story, about truth in a story, even about the possibility of telling/writing a story (but then again, whose story?). As it is, all we are certain about is the peculiar circumstances of somebody who wants to tell a story to somebody who creates all sort of difficulties for the process of telling a story, about somebody who does not want to tell his story or cannot tell the difference between fact and fancy, or about somebody who cannot tell his own story because he is not even physically “authorized”.

The origin of this story lies in the experience of the island, as lived by Cruso and partly shared by Susan, and retrieved through the stories which Cruso tells Susan and her memory of them. For Cruso memory is not something especially important. When advised by Susan to take measures to preserve some record because “our memories grow less certain” (17) he remains unmoved: “Nothing I have forgotten is worth remembering” (17). But Susan sees it differently, she believes that memory is something essential and one of the main ingredients of “the wealth stored in stories” (59). She even wonders if “the secret meaning of the word story” is “a storing-place of memories” (59), and defines the “phantoms” which she finds in her dreams in terms of “memories of my waking hours, broken, mingled and altered” and “as real, or as little real, as the memories themselves” (138).⁴ But memory is not enough to create a story: it must be given shape and, in particular, be turned into a *written* story, ornamented with all sorts of details (“a thousand touches”, as Susan says, 18) to make it unique and different from any other, and it is here, in this process of writing, that a new set of problems appear. In the discussions between Susan and Foe they go over the many aspects of the process of setting a story down, and one of the main problems with Cruso’s experience on the island seems to be, not the events which make up that experience, but the way to narrate them:⁵ the form in which these events are linked is what will truly turn that experience into a narrative, not only with a literary value but also with a right to claim its status of verisimilitude.

Their discussion oscillates between two opposing perspectives: Susan’s desire to tell

the truth, and Foe's desire, given his experience in the art of writing, to construct a truth.⁶ Susan tries to counter the idea that only Cruso could tell his story with the factuality of her own version as an eye-witness: she would only include what she saw. And because she is aware of her lack of "art" to present a given material she is willing to offer Foe details about Friday and Cruso, "as far as I can supply them; and all these particulars Mr Foe is weaving into a story" (58).⁷ She is able to provide Foe with the particulars but, again, that will not be enough: "though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth" (51). And the reason for this is that their story is dull because nothing really happened, and even "the sun was mild" (81). There are "touches of mystery" but they are really uninteresting, like the terraces (83), or unsolvable, like Friday's mutilation or submission, or his scattering of petals on the water (84-87). These mysteries will not be included in Foe's final version, but she wonders about these mysteries, taking the perspective of the reader (86), and in that sense echoing the questions posed to her by Foe. She, then, depends on Foe to turn her narrative into an interesting, sellable, story, that can solve their financial problems (81), being aware that in the present situation "we will never make our Fortunes, Friday, by being merely what we are, or were" (82).

This is another indication of the difference between the actual experience and its textual existence, but on the other hand Susan insists repeatedly on her desire to stick to the factuality of the story. When asked by Foe to include some details of her own personal story, she simply replies: "Bahia is not part of my story" (114). Although she admits that Defoe's narrative must tell the truth and please its readers (63), and that "what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history" (67), she also rejects the need to invent strange circumstances to make a good story (67). Moreover, she ultimately disagrees about Foe's conception of the story, struggling to emphasize the story she is interested in telling, one in which the different elements make sense within the larger whole, even the story of Friday, "not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative" (121). Also, she wants to exclude elements which might be attractive from the point of view of plot or incident but which simply "were not the truth" (121). But although she knows that the world is always larger than its representation in words (122), she is reluctant to accept that some measure of mystification is inevitable in the representation of the real. She wants the story of the island to be the story she chooses to tell the way she chooses to tell it: "I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131), forgetting that the story, written by Foe, told by Susan, lived by Cruso, moves further and further away from its origin.

Susan considers that her life will be "drearily suspended" till Foe's writing is done (63), a writing which will set her "free of Cruso and Friday" (66). For her, the role of the story teller is to divine the "promise of fullness" in the episodes of a life. This process of divination can only be effected through "the grace of illumination". But although, according to Susan (72), Foe could not have possibly invented the story, he admits the possibility of substituting the inspiration of the muse by the imagination of the author as conjurer (135). She thinks that being an author is an easy thing (93), but Foe tells her of his often being "lost in the maze of doubting" (135) and about his tricks to survive. Thus, when

it comes to setting a story down, Foe has a more realistic attitude as regards the need to manipulate his material.

The story of the island is dull and boring (like Cruso himself), and very repetitive (but also true, Susan insists, 127). It seems that, for Foe, the important thing is the ability to dominate the mechanics of writing a "proper" story. He, for example, asks questions that show his ignorance of the situation on the island (53-55), and even asks her the same kind of questions which Susan used to ask Cruso about the details of his stay and his everyday life on the island (116). In the process we see again how Susan's original material is later on manipulated by Foe's "art". In his view as writer, Susan's story has to do with "loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end" (117). He also arranges the events in Susan's story in chronological order so that they will make sense (116). In this way Bahia is more significant than Susan thinks. She wants to restrict her story to the island but Foe wants to give it a larger scope: "The island is not a story in itself... We can bring it to life only by setting it withing a larger story" (117).⁸ Foe spends time listening to people in jail before they are executed, an action paralleled by Susan asking Cruso for a confession before he dies (89). Last words also illustrate an important aspect of Foe's trade and it is the fact that the story must come to an end. Precisely, for Foe the "application" of the story of the Irish woman was that "there comes a time when we must give reckoning of ourselves to the world, and then forever to be content to hold our peace" (124).

But there is a story that cannot come to an end. For Susan, the interest of the story of the island lies in its silence and in the silence produced by Friday's loss of his tongue and the impossibility of ever knowing the story of an event which will always remain a mystery (117-8), and Foe, from his own perspective, also sees the problem: "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken....Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (141). But, in contrast with the affirmation implicit in Cruso's story, Friday's recalcitrant silence makes interpretation of his story impossible, since there is no way that silence can be overcome or turned into speech to give an account, more or less truthful, of his story.

7.

The validity of the story that Susan tells is also questionable because of something that Susan herself is aware, and that is the fact that only the lost member of Friday could tell the story/history of that loss. This means that her story, thanks to Foe's "art", might some day become Cruso's story, but it could never become Friday's story (the one he himself cannot tell or write), for he, Friday, can only be defined by the concept of silence. The term "silence" appears on several occasions during the novel, not always with negative connotations. Thus, at the beginning, Susan, tired of the noise which the wind made on the island, would dive under the water "merely to know what it was to have silence" (15). Also, Foe has to keep silent and not answer Susan's letters as he is escaping from justice (61), and even people in an alehouse sit in silence at seeing Susan and Friday (102). A different thing, however, is the pleasure of conversation. Susan in her ignorance inquires why Friday only understands a few English words and what benefit might there be in a life

of silence (22), until Cruso tells her that Friday has no tongue (22), a mutilation that only causes her to look at Friday "with the horror we reserve for the mutilated" (24). But it is this mutilation that will engage her imagination and become part of her mission.

To begin with there are the practical aspects. Susan, who is looking for a "new situation", is aware that Friday "can never find a situation, since he has lost his tongue" (48). Because Cruso thought that Friday had no need of words, not only recuperating his story becomes something impossible but also, as Susan fears, even "the very notion of speech may be lost to him" (57). Susan explains to him "the magic of words" (58), that is, language's capacity to make something present, also by means of books: "Is writing not a fine thing, Friday?" (58). Susan wants to teach Friday enough words so that he can "build a bridge of words" to cross "to the time before he lost his tongue" and then return to the "world of words" in which ordinary people live (60), a world of speech which he may not be able to understand, in particular "what it is to speak into a void" (80). And so, as in the case of Cruso's story, Susan is here faced with the paradox that only Friday's lost tongue can tell his story and the story of its own disappearance (67). Not only is it difficult to make Friday speak but also what Foe later calls "the silence surrounding Friday" (142), something Susan had tried until she admitted the uselessness of spending her time "on you and your foolish story" (70).

If the origin of that silence proves impossible to decide, since the key to the mystery is missing, the question then turns to the problem of representation. This is the problem which Susan faces when she speculates about the origin of Friday's loss of his tongue, for example, in terms of cultural values and customs (69). The simple gesture of putting out your tongue may have one meaning for Susan and another for Friday (70). Also, Susan asks herself about the faithfulness of her representation or evocation of the origin she is looking for in the sketches she presents to Friday (70). It is suggested that representation can never be *completely* faithful because there can always be a small variation: the Moor can be taller or shorter, or dressed in black or blue, not white, etc (70).⁹ As she goes along, Susan becomes increasingly aware of the difficulty of presenting a story with "the right application" (81), in other words, a story that can only be interpreted in one sense.

But Friday's silence can also be approached from another perspective. If we accept (the hint) that it was Cruso himself who mutilated Friday we would be initiating an evaluation in terms of postcolonial politics, since clearly this would be a sign of castration which, together with the comments in the sense that Friday needed only a limited knowledge of language, we can associate with the typical strategy of a colonial power specially interested in keeping an oppressed subject (a subaltern) from accessing a language in which to articulate his own story/history and thus oppose the discourse of the invader or the colonizer.¹⁰ Just like Cruso, Susan sometimes uses words as "the shortest way to subject him to my will" (60), defines Friday to Foe in terms of the story of the old man of the river (147), and admits that he was "the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told" (150). His silence allows Susan and Foe to "continue to use him as we wish" (148).

Susan vindicates her own right to authority and to authorship, not only because of her "power to guide and amend", but specially "to withhold": "By such means do I still

endeavour to be father to my story” (123). She can also use silence in her favour: “I will say in plain terms what can be said and leave unsaid what cannot” (120); Friday, on the other hand, has no command of words and can therefore be “re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others” (121). Thus Friday becomes what the language of others turns him into. His speechlessness turns him into an incomplete sign, a sign castrated, amputated of one of its elements. As incomplete sign, he can only be a signifier which lacks a signified, more so because it lacks the possibility of ever being complete since the only element that could possibly “narrate” its origin for us is missing and Susan’s attempts to find out are riddled with all sorts of problems: prejudice, received ideas, and wrong assumptions. Apparently the only possibility for him to have a language is in “the sounds of the island” (152), and in the wreck, where the real is experienced directly, because it is “not a place of words” but “a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (157).

But the concept of silence is also used in the novel to achieve one of its most postmodernist goals which can be briefly summarised with the label of “open work”. In other words, Coetzee seems extraordinarily interested in writing a text that the reader may have problems to “close”, to give a definitive meaning. Thus, chapter 4 does not seem to fit with the rest of the novel and therefore breaks down the illusion which up to that point had kept the reader’s attention through the form of an autobiographical memoir. Chapter 4, with an unknown third person narrator, its two halves with two different versions, and its allusions to Friday’s language and home, signifies a new departure in our assessment of the novel to the point that our previous construction of meaning becomes useless. The novel, *as a whole*, does not make sense, it becomes unreadable, but that should not be seen as a flaw. As Brenda Marshall (1992: 124) says:

That [*Foe*] is perceived as unreadable is precisely one of its points, for it is ‘unreadable’ only according to a particular set of expectations concerning the work. To disrupt these expectations and to call attention to the very specific cultural and historical assumptions behind these expectations is part of the Text’s agenda.

But there are other strategies which we may mention. One has to do with the line dividing fact from fiction. To begin with, the very idea that Foe and Crusoe (that is, not one Alexander Selkirk) exist on the same ontological level is one indication of the grey area in which we move. Susan refers to the captains and grenadiers and “the next day in their lives” in the stories by Foe (53) as if they were real people, and even thinks of herself and Friday as “the only personages you have settled in lodgings while you write their story” (61).¹¹ But, on the other hand, she also accuses Foe of “forgetting that while his grenadiers fall into an enchanted sleep whenever he absents himself, Friday and I continue to eat and drink and fret” (66).

A radical example of this instability is the mysterious girl. Susan does not acknowledge her as her daughter and complains to Foe for having sent her: “She is more your daughter than she ever was mine” (75). Later on Susan tells the girl of the “literary” quality of her

existence: "Your father is a man named Daniel Foe....[W]hat you know of your parentage comes to you in the form of stories.... You are father-born. You have no mother" (91).¹² In a context which we might easily relate to some of the tenets of magic realism, it should not surprise us that Susan refers to the girl's "appearances, or apparitions" (136). Earlier Susan had called her "a ghost, a substantial ghost" (132). Susan and Foe will discuss this question of substantiality to the end of their story ("We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world", 152), but the recurrence of a term like "substantial" and the allusions to ghosts and ghost stories (in, for example, 134) are an indication of how fact and fiction may mix when life becomes a story that someone might be telling: maybe we all are characters in the book somebody is writing: "Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?" (133). Foe can only answer to this by kissing her, but there is a more direct answer: Foe is also a ghost, his ghostly presence is felt through a great part of the novel and is conjured up by the story Susan writes for him and by her letters. And, above all, he is a ghostwriter.

8.

Friday will not be able to tell Susan his story, as Cruso did albeit in a random and fragmented manner, and in spite of Foe's optimism he will not be able to write it either. The relationship between speech and writing, and the loss inherent in the latter with respect to the former, is another relevant subtext that runs through Coetzee's novel. Throughout the novel its oral quality is emphasized by means of typographical devices, such as the use of quotes, or with phrases like "Let me tell you" (33) or "I must tell you" (38), in the case of chapter 1. Chapter 2 is dominated by an epistolary form, no doubt an allusion to other writers of the eighteenth century, but it also reminds us that someone is speaking (through writing) and that what we are reading is the story that someone is telling us. As Susan herself puts it: "Even when we seem to write in silence, our writing is the manifest of a speech spoken within ourselves or to ourselves" (142). Chapter 3 also opens with an indication that it is narrated by a subjective voice: "It is I, Susan Barton" (113).¹³ The oral has an immediacy which is highlighted by Susan: "It is not the words, it is the fervour with which I speak them" (44); while writing is something secondary: "Letters are the mirror of words" (142). And, of course, in a novel where the question of origin is problematised, the reader is reminded of Jacques Derrida's critique of Western phonocentrism, with its emphasis on the oral, which in contrast with the written, is regarded as closer to the original moment of the experience: the spoken word precedes the written word. It is then ironic in a sentence like "In the beginning was the Word", for example, the fetishistic use of the "Word" of God (and its poetic power mentioned on page 143), to which most people do not even have access in its written version, since in reality what they have access to is a *translation* (written, of course) of the "Word". Paradoxically, then, we have access to the spoken word because we read the written word.¹⁴

But in spite of the emphasis of the novel on its oral quality, the importance of its opposite is also stressed, and how convenient it is to keep a written record of the experience of the real. Susan advises Cruso to keep a journal of his experience, with a special emphasis

on detail: "Is it not possible to manufacture paper and ink and set down what traces remain of these memories, so that they will outlive you[?]" (17). Susan's story must be set down in writing, only then will it become properly a story, even if in the process it loses some of its "charm" and "liveliness" (40). But writing, important as it may be, is simply not enough: again, in a story there must also be "art". Susan sees no art in Foe's "hearing confessions" (47), but she makes an important distinction between what she does and what Foe can do: "I have set down the history of our time on the island as well as I can.... It is a sorry, limping affair.... but you will know how to set it right" (47). We then seem to have different degrees of representation: what Cruso tells Susan, what she sets down, and what Foe finally sets right. This is also an indication of the falsification of the version by a writer who is finally presented in Chapter 4 as "*Daniel Defoe, Author*" (155).

In contrast to Susan, Foe is optimistic about the possibility that Friday may someday be able to tell his own story. "Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech" says Foe (142), and writing could give Friday an opportunity to have access to language through his own body ("If he has fingers he can form letters", 142). Foe even goes on to question the received idea that "our world was created by God speaking the Word", and wonders if it is not rather "that he wrote it, wrote a Word so long we have yet to come to the end of it?" (143). Foe consistently defends the importance of the written word, even with such a canonical narrative of Christian mythology, insisting on its textual quality, regardless of its existence in the real. Similarly his writing of Cruso's story will have more to do with the rhetorical conventions of the genre than with the actual experience as set down by Susan. Her lack of "art" greatly contrasts with Foe's male ability to represent (and also to misrepresent). His writing can be identified with the phallogocentric, a term which designates the representational discourse used by Foe to falsify the real.¹⁵ And again here, the only possible opposition lies in Friday's silence. Friday is that hole in the narrative which cannot be represented by Foe's or Susan's rhetoric, even if both can take advantage of that lack of definition. Friday does not want to be trapped in somebody else's interpretation and that is why he erases what he has drawn before Susan can see it (147). The only way in which he can be father to his story is by having his body be its own sign.¹⁶

9.

In "Diving into the Wreck", a poem by Adrienne Rich (1973: 23) which envisages a new non-patriarchal language and a dispensing with the "old myths", and which has been sometimes read alongside Coetzee's novel, we may read the following:

The words are purposes
 The words are maps....
 The thing I came for:
 The wreck and not the story of the wreck
 The thing itself and not the myth.

The political quality of these lines, with their implicit critique of representation, and their

disclosure of the narrative quality of our experience of the real, is paralleled in Coetzee's novel by the author's desire to present a text which can be seen as a "product about process" (Morgan, 1994: 94). In other words, a text which tries to show us the way in which "[t]he thing itself", the experience of the island, is covered up by "the story of the wreck", that is, by the rhetoric of language.

Susan seems to be aware of this opposition between the real and its representation. Her curiosity about whether Friday had suffered also the mutilation of his penis is dealt with in a rather oblique manner. And she wonders how this interest of hers can be represented in writing: "I do not know how these matters can be written of in a book unless they are covered up again in figures" (120). Similarly, as we have seen, the story of the island, or rather, the process by means of which Crusoe becomes Crusoe and later on a myth of Western culture, reveals itself as also a question of representation subjected to the rhetoric of language and, more specifically, to the conventions of writing.¹⁷ In a story it is the words that are important, and also the number of words, and the way these words create a map, which is not the territory itself but a version of it that we can use for whatever purposes. In Coetzee's novel, we are presented with an author, Foe, facing the problem of making a dull story interesting, of turning Friday's impossible silence into a telling example of Crusoe's mastery, of salvaging a few scattered, fragmented memories in order to build the magnificent record of an experience which, in the form of a journal, we see in Defoe's novel.

Unlike Crusoe, who had no tools and kept no journal, Foe has a whole panoply of means and devices at his command. Not only the necessary elements which make writing physically possible (to which allusion is made throughout the novel) but also, more importantly, he has at his service the conventions, the accepted practices, and the rhetoric of the narrative discourse which went into the making of the novel of the eighteenth century. Thus, what the reader witnesses when reading *Foe* is a process that has to do with the politics of representation, one that reveals how representation may have its origin not directly in the real but in other texts (unreliable as they may be), and in the conventions that govern a given genre. For Foe, the real (the island, in his case) is not in itself a narrative: "We can bring it to life only by setting it within a larger story" (117). And that process of "fathering" or giving birth, as the case may be, also implies political choices which not only involve the setting of the real in the proper context that will infuse it with meaning, but also the manipulation and even silencing of certain aspects of the real which may not cohere with the "purposes" embodied in the words of the "larger story", that

book of myths
in which
our names do not appear (Rich, 1973: 23),

those other varied cultural texts (political, religious, economic) which stand behind the creation of a myth.

Notes

1. Implicit here also is a parallel with Coetzee and *Foe* and a rather humorous comment on the business of literary criticism in general, for Elizabeth Costello is presented as having “made her name with her fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street* (1969), whose main character is Marion Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, principal character of another novel, *Ulysses* (1922), by James Joyce. In the past decade there has grown up around her a small critical industry; there is even an Elizabeth Costello Society, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which puts out a quarterly Elizabeth Costello Newsletter” (1-2). Later on an explicit connection between her and Daniel Defoe is made: “The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe” (4). And her relationship with Joyce’s novel is also an explanation of Coetzee’s attitude towards *Robinson Crusoe*. While discussing her novel with an interviewer Costello says “No, I don’t see myself as challenging Joyce. But certain books are so prodigally inventive that there is plenty of material left over at the end, material that almost invites you to take it over and use it to build something of your own” (13).

2. That names may have to do with a certain social reputation is one example, among others, of this novel’s intertextual relationship with another novel by Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, in which the name of the protagonist is also indicative of her profession as prostitute. That novel is also indirectly present in Susan’s allusion to Foe’s “grenadiers in Flanders” (66).

3. Interestingly enough, Coetzee starts his “Introduction” by establishing an intertextual filiation: “Like Odysseus embarked for Ithaca, like Quixote mounted on Rocinante, Robinson Crusoe with his parrot and umbrella has become a figure in the collective consciousness of the West...”. (v).

4. The status of reality given to memories connects the work of Coetzee with certain trends in postmodernist fiction. Thus, Susan’s comment that there is “no shame in forgetting: it is our nature to forget” (17-18) can be read in parallel with Jorge Luis Borges’s “Funes el Memorioso”. Also we should keep in mind Coetzee’s critical work on Samuel Beckett, in whose *The Unnamable* the voice who speaks says at one point: “I invented my memories” (364). In a cameo appearance in the film *Lisbon Story* by Wim Wenders, the Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira states: “The only truth is memory, but memory is an invention”.

5. One cannot help thinking at this point of Linda Hutcheon’s opposition between (real) event and (historical) fact, and Hayden White’s comments on the fictionalization of History.

6. Another instance of this novel’s and Coetzee’s postmodernist filiation. Cf. Don DeLillo’s “I construct sentences”.

7. Perhaps Susan is unaware that there is a shared language between weaving and writing and that the use of “weave” as a term to refer to writing has a long tradition, for example in the connection between the Greek *rhapsodós* (the singer of epic poems) and *rhapto* (to sew, mend, weave, arrange). The term “weave” emphasizes the artificial quality of the text, its fabricated texture.

8. And obviously in the case of Defoe’s novel, the text is not simply a tale of adventures but it has meaning within a larger story, which is not literary but which has to do with the ideological discourse of capitalism and bourgeois values in the eighteenth century.

9. Susan engages in a similar operation when considering the dissimilitude between herself and the unknown girl (76).

10. Among others, a by now classic text in this regard is that by Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

11. This is another example of the intertextual quality of this novel, for Susan's comment frankly recalls the situation of a group of characters in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, another novel in which the problems inherent to writing and authorship are dealt with extensively.

12. In line with the allusion to O'Brien in note 11, there is the possibility of interpreting Susan's words to the daughter ("You are father-born. You have no mother") as an instance of what in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is presented as the "theory of aestho-autogamy", which aims at "producing a living mammal from an operation involving neither fertilization nor conception", and which is "a very familiar phenomenon in literature" (40). Aestho-autogamy explains why a given character may be "born at the age of twenty-five" and enter "the world with a memory but without a personal experience to account for it" or how his well-formed teeth may be "stained by tobacco, with two molars filled and a cavity threatened in the left canine" (9). This "scientific" theory is used in O'Brien's novel to emphasize the purely textual origin of the characters, in tune with the idea that "existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required" (25), but also to emphasize the poietic quality of language and the demiurgic power of the God-like figure of the author, while at the same time de-stabilizing any notion of a clear-cut separation between the fictive and the real by presenting a text in which both authors and characters inhabit an ontologically identical space.

13. Of course, Chapter 4, once more, disrupts the general pattern with its third-person narrator. On the other hand, in *Elizabeth Costello* (45), someone says: "The African novel, the true African novel, is an oral novel".

14. Manguel (2001) tells the story of a certain priest in the eighteenth century who, showing a copy of the King James Bible, would tease his audience saying that what he held in his hand was not really the word of God, but a translation of it. But apparently not everybody knows this. Thus, Kristof tells the story of how "a Texas governor, Miriam 'Ma' Ferguson, barred the teaching of foreign languages about 80 years ago, saying, 'If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for us.'" Also Manguel (1997) gives an interesting account of the process of translation of the King James version of the Bible in which again the weak position of the original is stressed: "One of the bishops on the scholarly committee, Bishop Bancroft" stipulated that "[the translators] would follow, as closely as possible, the earlier Bishops' Bible of 1568 (a revised edition of the so-called Great Bible, which was in turn a revision of the Matthew's Bible, itself a composite of the incomplete Bible of William Tyndale and the first printed edition of the complete English Bible, produced by Miles Coverdale)" (271-272), and "even if the original suggested a more accurate translation, traditional usage would prevail over exactness. In other words, Bancroft acknowledged that an established reading overrode that of the author" (272-273).

15. Implicit in my argument at this point is the already established pen = penis equation, counterbalanced by Cixous's "supreme hole" (Cixous 85). That Friday is later defined in terms of "hole" turns him into a feminine figure. See Morgan for an analysis along these lines. Susan also considers Friday's mutilation in a way in which tongue and penis are made equal: "I wondered...whether the lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation; whether by a dumb slave I was to understand a slave unmanned" (119).

16. As said earlier, authorship is also present in Coetzee's Nobel lecture in what seems to be another turn of the screw for the story we have in *Foe*. In the lecture, we have the story of a "real" Crusoe living in Bristol, old and retired from his trade, who reads the chronicles which an itinerant

Friday writes to him.

17. In this way, the implication is that a reader has received ideas of what to expect in a story, something that for Susan can be misleading: "For readers reared on travellers' tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway's thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home. But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place..". (7).

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