

Author-ities: Postcolonial Challenges in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

J. M. Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe* is a postcolonial reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The novel differs from other examples of postcolonial writing back that undermine canonical authority by way of constructing alternative narratives and seeking to reassign agency to the deprived and marginalized subjects of colonialism. Coetzee shifts the focus away from the level of competing narratives to an alternative account of the genesis of the canonical text itself. The article argues that Coetzee produces a postcolonial critique of a second order by weaving together intertextual and metafictional elements. At the centre of this project stands the question of authorship. The struggle for authorial authority between the novel's multiple author figures lays bare the structures of power and repression at work in the creation of colonialist literature by drawing attention to the acts of omission and silencing in its wake.

Keywords: Intertextuality; Metafiction; Postcolonial Literature; Robinson Crusoe

Daniel Defoe, Author

‘At one corner of the house, above head-height, a plaque is bolted to the wall. Daniel Defoe, Author, are the words, white on blue, and then more writing too small to read.’ (F: 155)¹

In 1876, the Royal Society of Arts initiated a scheme of setting up commemorative plaques across London. Today the iconic circular blue plaques administered by English Heritage are a familiar sight across the metropolis. The plaque on the brick wall of the building on 95 Stoke Newington Church Street reads ‘Daniel Defoe (1661–1731) Lived in a house on this site.’ J. M. Coetzee’s reference to the commemorative plaque in the final part of his 1986 novel *Foe* seems out of place. The unidentified narrator of the novel’s concluding pages mentions the blue plaque merely in passing as part of a chain of surreal scenes. Yet the reference to the historic author of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* represents a key to the novel’s complex scrutinizing of questions of authorship and textual authority. Moreover, conjuring the presence of the “real” eighteenth-century author Daniel Defoe and placing him alongside his fictional alter ego, Mr Foe, is a reminder of the multiple textual layers Coetzee weaves together throughout his novel. The postmodern elements in *Foe* obscure the demarcation lines between these textual layers repeatedly and add to the complexity of the novel’s textual web.

Whereas much of the continually growing scholarship dealing with Coetzee’s fiction in general and interpretations of *Foe* in particular focus on questions of marginality and marginalized figures such as the novel’s female protagonist Susan Barton and the mutilated and muted Friday (Parry, 1996; Roberts, 1991; Spivak, 1990), this article shifts the focus onto the novel’s concern with questions of authorship. The question ‘who writes?’ or as Coetzee puts it ‘Who takes up the position of power, pen in hand?’ (quoted after Kossew, 1996: 161), so the guiding hypothesis of the following article stands at the centre of *Foe*’s critique of colonialism. By scrutinizing the question of authorship and deliberately inscribing

¹ References to *Foe* [Coetzee (1987)] appear in abbreviated form.

ambiguity, indeterminacy and absence, *Foe* re-dresses the fundamental ‘questions of power and authority in a colonial context’ (Attwell, 1990: 584).

In many ways, *Foe* differs significantly from other postcolonial re-writings of canonical texts.² Unlike Rhys in her prequel to *Brontë’s Jane Eyre*, Coetzee neither tries to fill the blank spots of the colonial narrative, nor does he attempt to undermine canonical authority by way of reassigning agency to the deprived and marginalized subjects of colonialism. His protagonist Susan Barton ultimately fails in her attempt to defend her narrative against the fictionalization of the professional writer Mr Foe and Friday’s mutilation renders the project of giving authentic voice to the experiences and aspirations of colonized people (within as well as beyond the dominant discourse) impossible. *Foe* evades such simplistic alternatives by shifting the postcolonial critique to the very heart of the canonical text, its production process and thus onto the question of its authorial authority. Consequently, Coetzee’s novel does not discredit or dismantle the colonial discourse primarily by way of a postcolonial alternative narrative but by laying bare the structures of power and repression at work in the creation of colonialist literature. Re-writing becomes an exercise in opening up canonical fiction to the present while preventing it from being conclusive or teleological (Gauthier, 1997: 53).

The following explorations will show how Coetzee produces a postcolonial critique of a second order by interweaving intertextual and metafictional elements. By complementing the intertextual web of canonical and postcolonial texts with elements concerning the nature and practice of literature in general, Coetzee shifts the focus away from the level of competing narratives to an alternative account of the genesis of the canonical text itself. The novel’s multiple author figures (Susan Barton, Mr Foe and the historic Defoe) stand at the centre of this project.

² For a concise overview of different strategies of postcolonial re-reading and re-writing canonical texts, see McLeod (2010), chapter 5.

Canonic Intertextuality and the Problem of Postcolonial Rewritings

Two major objections have been levelled against *Foe*'s postcolonial dimension. Like in the case of Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974), commentators have criticized *Foe* for its apparent detachment from the political realities of institutionalized neo-colonial racism in apartheid South Africa. Others have rejected such criticism by stressing that Coetzee 'write[s] in some other way' (Dovey, 1987: 14), maintaining that he positions his novel in the discursive field of postcoloniality 'in peculiarly South African terms' (Attwell, 1993: 103). Rather than settling for the author's role of providing explicit textual postcolonial critique, Coetzee assigns his readers—'engaged with the historical present'—the role of bridging the divide between novel and supplement history (Marais, 1989: 9).

Besides criticizing the apparent lack of explicit links to the aggravating socio-political conditions of South Africa's black majority in the 1980s in *Foe*, the novel's postcolonial character, especially the question whether it could be labelled as a counter-canonical re-writing, has become a subject of much debate. Helen Tiffin was among the first scholars to place *Foe* alongside other "classical" postcolonial re-writings such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). According to Tiffin, *Foe*, like the works of Jean Rhys or Samuel Selvon, is an example of counter-discursive literary practice that does not simply write back to a specific English canonical text but to 'the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operates and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds' (1987: 23). Though following this interpretation in principle, John Thieme voices skepticism, stressing that despite employing a counter-discursive framework Coetzee's novel maintains only a tangential connection shifting the focus away from an 'overtly oppositional' writing back at the canon to the meta-fictional challenge to Defoe's circumstantial realism (2001: 63). In a considerably more far-ranging way, Benita Parry calls the very inter-relation of canon and postcolonial re-writing into question when she suggests that Coetzee's intertextual transpositions and his 'writing the silence' rather than reprising the discursive power of colonialism and canonicity re-enact 'the received

disposal of narrative authority' (1996: 39–40). These reflections point to a fundamental problem inherent in the literary practice of postcolonial writing back.

By making the canonical text the point of departure of postcolonial literary production and counter-discursive strategies, the re-written work and the emancipatory agenda of postcolonial critique constantly run the risk of re-essentializing the canon and of reinvigorating the discursive power of colonial literature they seek to overcome. Coetzee's novel seems not to escape this fate. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that *Foe* constitutes an alternative model of counter-discursive literature that evades final closure. Such absence of closure may be dissatisfying because it seemingly avoids taking a clear postcolonial stance towards challenging the canon. Yet, by avoiding an essentialist re-inscription, Coetzee's novel provides the prolegomena for repositioning postcolonial writing outside of a simplistic dichotomy.

At first sight, *Foe* seems to be one of many examples of Robinsonade. The choice to write back at *Robinson Crusoe* is neither unique nor surprising. Defoe's 1719 novel occupies a special position within the canon of English literature. According to conventional accounts, it marks the birth of the novel in English, making Daniel Defoe the "father" of the genre. This fact alone ensures its canonical status. In his seminal study *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt emphasizes this formative role in the history of the genre when he declares, '*Robinson Crusoe* is certainly the first novel in the sense that it is the first fictional narrative in which an ordinary person's daily activities are the centre of continuous literary attention' (1957: 74). Far more than from the fact that it made *homo economicus* a fictional protagonist, *Robinson Crusoe* derived its iconic status from providing a master narrative of European colonization (see Phillips, 1997: 32–35). James Joyce has pointedly captured this aspect in a 1912 lecture declaring Robinson, the 'true symbol of the British conquest' and a 'prototype of the British colonist' (quoted after Derrida, 2011: 16). Consequently, writing back at *Robinson Crusoe* seems an obvious choice of counter-canonical postcolonial literature.

Coetzee, however, casts the intertextual web wider. Besides challenging the colonial discourse in which Defoe's novel occupies a central place, Coetzee's 'canonic intertextuality' in *Foe* is not limited to re-writing *Robinson Crusoe* (Attridge, 1996: 169) but incorporates both the figure of the eighteenth-century author and several elements and characters of Defoe's works. From the vantage point of a moment before the historic Defoe had turned to writing *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee speculates on the process preceding 'the 'fathering' of the novel as genre' and the omissions and silences that took place along the way (Head, 1997: 114). With hindsight, (De)Foe appears as personification of authorial manipulations. He effaces Susan from her own account in order to construct the Robinson 'myth of the male pioneering spirit' (Head, 1997: 115). He transforms the mute Friday (whose silence is both a reminder of the total exclusion of the colonized from the dominant discourse and an implicit challenge to its foundation, Western logocentrism) into the self-subordinating noble savage seeking to mimic his master. Put differently, rather than targeting the colonialist narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* head-on, Coetzee draws his readers' attention to the formative elements of the colonial discourse and exposes the structures of power underpinning it.

The effacing of Susan from the Robinson narrative is indicative of a secondary intertextual link between *Foe* and Defoe's opus (Turk, 2011: 299). Different from the allusions to the primary intertext, *Robinson Crusoe*, the ones to *Roxana* are less obvious. Only about halfway through the novel, the references to this secondary intertext become more frequent, namely with the appearance of the strange young woman claiming to be Susan's lost daughter. The woman's self-characterization neatly matches Defoe's plotline. Roxana marries a Deptford brewer who after having squandered his property abandons his wife and children leaving them in financial straits. Subsequently, Roxana becomes the mistress of several wealthy men. Her faithful maid Amy accompanies Roxana in her adventures. Though less obvious than the ones to *Robinson Crusoe*, allusions to *Roxana* are scattered around the second half of Coetzee's novel. The very name of his female protagonist, Susan, is an explicit link

between the two texts for it is Roxana's real name—a fact only disclosed quite late in Defoe's novel.

‘At last I could row no further’ – Concealed Artifice and the Appeal to Verisimilitude

Besides his content-based writing back at Defoe's fiction, *Foe*'s main subversive power lies arguably in its style and composition. Coetzee's deliberate choice to imitate Defoe's prose style (Coetzee, 1992: 146) simultaneously underscores the discursive power of the canonical discourse and ironically turns it against its inherent realism. Already the novel's incipit—‘at last I could row no further’ (F: 5)—is a case in point. It reappears at several points throughout the text. First, when Susan recounts her story to Cruso upon her arrival on the island (or rather her account thereof) (F: 11) and again towards the end of the novel in part IV, where the unnamed narrator stumbles across the opening lines of Susan's initial letter to Mr Foe (F: 155).

Two narratological approaches converge in this line: an autobiographical account and an epistolary technique. Especially the novel's opening part is a playful oscillation between these two approaches. Coetzee deliberately mimics Defoe's realist first-person narrative throughout most of the novel. At the same time, he repeatedly subverts this literary kinship. It is not until the end of part I that the reader is made aware that what appeared, at first, to be Susan's first-person narrative is indeed her first letter written to Mr Foe upon her return to England.

The initial illusion of an autobiographical account is a direct reference to the technique of concealing artifice by appealing to verisimilitude Defoe employed in writing *Robinson Crusoe*. The title page of the novel's first edition effaces the “real” author and announces the book as an autobiographical account of its protagonist, the York-born mariner, Robinson Crusoe. It reads: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: Who Lived Eight and Twenty Years, All Alone in an Un-Inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having Been Cast on*

Shore by Shipwreck, Wherein All the Men Perished but Himself. With an Account How He Was at Last as Strangely Deliver'd by Pyrates. Written by Himself (Defoe, 1719). By replacing the “real” narrator, Robinson Crusoe, with Susan Barton, Coetzee not only subverts Defoe’s claim to authenticity but unmask his work as a work of fictional repression and thus the very opposite of the “true” autobiographical account it claims to be.

Coetzee’s narrative mode aims at what Defoe’s text presents as ‘colonial ‘truths’ (Poyner, 2009: 97) and deconstructs it by persistently questioning the ontology of truth. The inclusion of a paradoxical simultaneity of incongruent temporal levels into the text is another means to underscore the novel’s challenge of the canonical text. The novel’s plot suggests that Susan’s account has been written prior to the writing of *Robinson Crusoe* and that it served as the novel’s *Ur*-text utilized by (De)Foe to fictionalize her story, splitting it in two for his own ends, thus eliminating Susan Barton from *Robinson Crusoe* and turning her into the fictional character Roxana (Turk, 2011: 298). At the same time, Susan Barton displays a familiarity with the genre of castaway narratives in general and the plotline of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* predating its publication. Throughout the novel’s first part, she contrasts her preconceptions of the prototypical castaway story (that yet waits to be written) with her experiences on Cruso’s island. Right from the start of her narrative, she struggles with the apparent contradiction between preconceived reality and experienced reality.

Her reflections and reactions upon being washed ashore of the island and encountering Friday are a case in point. Already Susan’s initial utterance spoken in the presence of Friday renders her word, ‘I am cast away. I am all alone,’ profoundly paradoxical (F: 5). In the next instance, she reflects ‘I have come to the wrong island [...] I have come to an island of cannibals’ (F: 6). The sense of having been cast away on the “wrong” island intensifies over the following pages for Cruso’s island does not comply with the images of Robinson Crusoe’s tropical island kingdom. The fact that Susan holds a pre-conception of the prototypical characteristics

of the castaway à la Robinson Crusoe is further elaborated in her encounter with Cruso.

Like his island, Cruso represents an antithesis to Defoe's fictional creation. He deemed it neither necessary to rescue tools from the wreck to establish Western civilizations on his island, nor does he seem interested in producing an account of his castaway existence. He dismisses suggestions to build a boat to escape from his island refuge to a continent he envisions to be populated by cannibals (F: 13). Cruso is, as Dominic Head aptly puts it, 'emblematic of exhausted imperialism' (2009: 63). Susan's search for a diary, an improvised calendar or any other form of records composed by Cruso is unsuccessful (F: 16). Fervently confronting Cruso with her discovery of the apparent lack of traces and memories, Susan simply receives the Laconic reply, 'Nothing is forgotten [...] Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering' (F: 17). Susan's response foreshadows her fierce fight for the recognition of her account's authenticity and her vehement attempt to prevent it from being turned into a simple story resembling the yarns spanned by mariners.

The contrast between Cruso and Crusoe becomes especially apparent in their different attitudes towards Friday. Cruso does not deem it necessary to instruct Friday in the way Crusoe does. While for the latter, English is an essential tool of the civilizing mission, Coetzee's Cruso dismisses teaching Friday systematically as simply unnecessary by stating 'This is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words' (F: 21). His decision to teach Friday the word 'firewood' rather than the term 'wood', at first sight, seems to contradict this view. Upon closer consideration, however, this apparent nonsensical complication of the communicative flow exposes the true character of colonial mimicry, paying mere lip service to the emancipation of the colonized whilst denying them full recognition and enforcing their otherness (see Bhabha, 2004: 121–131). In a similar vein, Cruso's barren terraces mock the colonizer's zeal and the claim of mastery over nature. Possessing no seeds to plant, the remodelling of vast parts of the island's surface does not serve any practical purpose. In Susan's eyes, Cruso's "legacy" simply represents 'a foolish

kind of agriculture' (F: 34). Cruso's obstinate and unyielding attitude repels Susan's repeated attempts to challenge what she regards as apathy and tediousness characterizing their shared island existence. Even the singular sexual encounter between Cruso and Susan does not dispel the prevailing atmosphere for it is marked by an apparent absence of any lust, desire or emotion (F: 30).

Coetzee, hence, challenges Defoe's authority and his appeal to verisimilitude on two levels. On the one hand, he presents Susan as the "true" Crusoe, the personification of the prototypical colonizer *avant la lettre*. She is the one conscious of the features essential for constructing a legacy of the castaway experience and rendering it suitable for literary production. On the other hand, Coetzee's novel unmasks Defoe's fictional creation of the laborious Crusoe as an expression of the hegemonic colonial discourse and an exercise in literary marginalization. Consequently, (De) Foe is presented as culprit, appropriating Susan's account, distorting it and excluding her from her own story.

Foe, or, The Author as Enemy

The novel's very title encapsulates this ambiguity of the author's position. It underscores the authoritative position of the fictional character Mr Foe approached by Susan Barton to turn her autobiographical story into a book. Employing Daniel Defoe's original patronymic as name of his author character is yet another of Coetzee's subtle techniques to challenge the iconic status of the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. In Coetzee's novel, Foe is anything but a famous writer deeming it necessary to embellish his name with an aristocratic-sounding prefix. On the contrary, he is portrayed as a rather dubious figure fleeing his creditors. Aware of her own literary inabilities, Susan makes an entreaty to Mr Foe to embellish her account of the year she spent on Cruso's island and return to it its 'substance'. She is convinced that such a task requires the mastery of a professional writer.

'For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth (I see that clearly, we need not pretend it is

otherwise). To tell the truth in all its substance you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through; and then the knack of seeing waves when there are fields before your eyes, and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades. I have none of these, while you have all.' (F: 51–52)

As this passage suggests, Susan initially sees no contradiction in the imaginative work of the author and the task of recounting *the* truth. In fact, she perceives of the former as a natural precondition for the latter. In doing so, Susan acknowledges and accepts Mr Foe's authorial authority over the narrative without being able to fully grasp its far-ranging implications. Over the course of the following parts, she comes to realize that what she initially considered to be the true story of the island is nothing but a very partial, fragmentary and subjective account. More importantly, upon finding Mr Foe in his hideout, she discerns that rather than sharing her passionate pursuit of the truth, he is interested in re-telling her stories in a way that serves his own end. Put differently, Mr Foe becomes an adversary, a foe, of the quest to tell the true story (or what Susan takes for it).

In the second part of the novel, Susan is caught up in the web of pre-existing narratives that increasingly impair her agency over the narrative. A central aspect of this process is the mounting pressure that forces Susan into a maternal, marginalized position. The encounter with a young woman who claims to be her lost daughter, the discovery of a dead baby girl in a ditch on her way to Bristol and her ambivalent attitude towards Friday, who becomes like a child to her are emblematic of this process. Moreover, the invasion of the lost daughter episode foreshadows (De)Foe's subsequent exclusion of Susan from the Crusoe narrative and her incarceration into the role of Roxana.

Eagerly, Susan tries to repudiate these assaults on her agency. With growing desperation, she seeks means to extract the "true" story from the mutilated Friday, who is incapable of speech because of his lost tongue.

Furthermore, she tries to defend her ‘substance’ against the strange woman who claims to be her daughter by dismissing her as one of Mr Foe’s fictional creations. This struggle for ‘verisimilitude and ‘substantiality’ (Lane, 2006: 24) culminates in the two women’s excursion to Epping Forest. Susan’s failed attempt to convince the stranger of her “true” parentage reveals that she becomes increasingly conscious of the menace Mr Foe’s and his literary imagination pose to her agency. In an apodictic fashion she rejects any family ties with the young woman by declaring:

‘I do not know who told you that your father was a brewer from Deptford who fled to the Low Countries, but the story is false. Your father is a man named Daniel Foe. He is the man who set you to watching the house in Newington. Just as it was he who told you I am your mother, I will vouch he is the author of the story of the brewer. [...] You are father-born. You have no mother.’ (F: 90–91)

Susan’s rejection of motherhood and her reference to Mr Foe’s ‘father-born’ literary creation of the lost daughter, are indications of the approaching struggle for authority over the story that in the following part of the novel takes on an increasingly gendered dimension. At this point in the story, however, the conflict between Susan and Mr Foe seems but a distant one. Yet, Susan’s utterance (unknowingly) forestalls or reflects Foe’s writing of *Roxana*. The scene in Epping Forest underscores Susan’s attempt to claim or sustain authority. Not only does she seek to expose the woman’s story as fictional creation but she also casts off Mr Foe’s constructed biography (which is to become her own once the author has made her into Roxana) onto her doppelganger daughter in an attempt to prevent herself and her account to suffer a similar fate and be made into a story. The appearance of the strange woman seems to suggest that Mr Foe is already engaged in splitting Susan and her story into two, writing her out of what is to become *Robinson Crusoe* and making her into the loose woman Roxana.

At this point in the story, Mr Foe remains ominously absent. He has gone into hiding to escape his creditors and the court bailiffs. Unable to

get in touch with the writer and in an attempt to escape the destitute existence of the London slums, Susan and Friday set themselves up in Mr Foe's deserted country house in Stoke Newington. In the seclusion of Mr Foe's house, Susan continues her correspondence. At the same time, she abandons her attempts to pass on her letters to their addressee. Susan maintains the false hope that her letters will turn out useful source material for Mr Foe's endeavour to write up her story. In fact, Mr Foe has already begun to fabricate his own narrative inspired by Susan's account.

Fathering, or, The Struggle over Authorship

The struggle between the novel's two competing author figures over the ownership of narrative escalates in the third part of the novel when Susan finally succeeds in discovering Mr Foe's hideout in London. The rejection of the fictional daughter Foe had tried to foist upon her in the previous section and the accompanying attribution of a maternal role reappear and take on a new quality. In their exchange, Foe closes in on Susan and reveals to her that he has decided to write her story in a completely different way from the one she had envisioned. He tries to convince her that in order to make it into a good 'story', the quest for her lost daughter ought to be the central plot. The story of the island and the female castaway, by contrast, is reduced to a mere side-plot (F: 116–117). Susan, who previously had considered Mr Foe an ally in her endeavour to get her narrative published in book form, now comes to realize that his claim to authorial authority makes him into a foe of the true story. She vehemently protests:

'The story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right.'
(F: 121)

'I am not a story, Mr Foe. I may impress you as a story [...] But [...] I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire.'
(F: 131)

Susan's claims to self-determination as 'father' of her story (F: 123) and as independent woman highlight her ambivalent in-between position.

Throughout the first parts of the novel, she has shifted between different subject positions. As mistress of the captain of the ship bound to bring her back to England, she claims the position of a self-determined free woman. Upon arrival of Cruso's island, she becomes one of his 'subjects' (F: 11) until his death when she takes over his position of slave-owning master. Over time, she becomes increasingly the benevolent colonial instructor. Her decision to set Friday free and send him back to Africa underscores this transformation. Susan's continual change of roles highlights the ambiguous subject position of the white woman within the colonial project. More importantly, they expose the internal contradictions of the dominant discourse and challenge the simplistic dichotomy of colonizer and colonized, empowered and marginalized people (see Loomba, 2005: ch. 3). The encounter with Mr Foe in the third part of the novel presents the ultimate challenge to Susan's carefully preserved self-determination. Her marginalization resulting from this encounter, however, differs fundamentally from that of Friday. Unlike him, Susan continues to struggle to get her voice heard within the dominant discourse. She is turned into the 'asymmetrical double of the author' (Spivak, 1990: 18). As white woman, she occupies a precarious position of limited agency and marginalization. She tries to maintain her claim to 'fathering' her story and contents Mr Foe's ventures to ascribe to her an exclusive feminine role.

The struggle between the two culminates in Mr Foe's attempt to make Susan his Muse, reducing her to the role of begetting stories upon poets. Envisioning herself to be 'a man-Muse' that is 'both goddess and begetter,' Susan openly challenges Foe's authorial authority (F: 126). Susan's inversion of roles finds its continuation in the following sexual encounter between her and Foe. Susan succeeds momentarily in subjecting Foe entirely to her will (F: 139–140). Though it seems that Susan—like her future alter ego Roxana—succeeds in emancipating herself from male domination, her "victory" is but a fleeting one. At the same time, (De) Foe's "victory" in effacing Susan from his novel, is not a complete one either. His story is contingent on Susan's narrative and although he

succeeds in excluding her from his *Robinson Crusoe*, the dependency on the Ur-text makes eliminating marginality from the text impossible. Put differently, Foe and Susan are complementary parts of composite authorship, a partnership that depends on preserving distance and tension between them (Attwell, 2012: 182).

The Home of Friday, or, The Absence of Closure

In the final part of *Foe*, the dense, intersecting and overlapping textual levels of the novel converge in a surreal dreamlike scene full of contradictions and indeterminacies. Author, narrator and reader become indistinguishable. The unidentified narrator, ‘a fictional stand-in for the reader’ (Caracciolo, 2012: 95), enters (De) Foe’s study (indicated by the reference to the commemorative blue plaque and the recourse to Susan’s vision of a stairway leading to the author’s hideout (F: 49)). The room is littered with bodies (among them those of Susan and Mr Foe) resembling mummies. Friday is there too, barely alive. On the table, the narrator discovers Susan’s initial letter to Mr Foe. Upon reading her first words (‘Dear Mr Foe, at last I could row no further’)—from this point onwards the quotation marks used throughout the text to uphold the illusion of an autobiographical account disappear—the narrator/ reader literally dives into the underwater world surrounding Cruso(e)’s island. Like the room of the previous scene, the sea surrounding the wreck of the slave ship is full of dead bodies. Swimming into the hulk of the sunken vessel, it turns into the ship on which Susan Barton travelled. Her dead body lies besides that of the ship’s captain. She has never reached Cruso’s island, she has never passed on her account to Mr Foe, who never wrote *Robinson Crusoe* or *Roxana*. The text annuls itself; it robs itself of any closure (Spivak, 1990: 17).

Again, Friday is there and again he features as the only animate body in the scene. Opening his tongueless mouth, a ‘slow stream, without breath, without interruption’ washing everything in its way comes out (F: 157). This cascade of surreal images is the climax of Coetzee’s dismantling of authorial authority, including his own. Taken together, the chain of

conjured up images—the commemorative plaque dedicated to Daniel Defoe, the unread account of Susan Barton and Friday’s speechless underwater utterance—is a stark reminder of the price of asserting authorial authority: marginalization, repression, silencing. Coetzee may be ‘asserting his authority,’ but at the same time he demystifies ‘the writer’s art (including his own),’ in the final part of the novel, ‘to find the traces of other voices, and to question any attempt at authority’ (Maher, 1991: 39–40).

The stream disseminating from Friday’s mouth is emblematic of the ambivalence at work throughout the novel. On the one hand, it seems to confirm the irretrievability of the subaltern voice (laid bare in the preceding part by way of Mr Foe and Susan’s futile attempts to make Friday “speak” by teaching him how to write). On the other hand, it challenges the monolithic nature of discourse and the imposition of authorship upon the subjectivity of the ‘Other’. But the text, once again, evades simplistic dichotomies turning them onto themselves. The surreal underwater world of the last part ‘is not a place of words,’ but ‘a place where bodies are their own signs’ (F: 157). Up to this point, the entire novel had been written against this very view, rejecting the notion of Friday’s body being its own sign. Susan’s desperate attempts to extract the “true” story from Friday by means other than spoken language—sketches (F: 67–68), music (F: 96), and writing (F: 145–147)—are a constant reminder thereof. These failed attempts underscore the impossibility of signification, highlighting the limits as well as the distorting effects of storytelling. The underwater ‘home of Friday,’ (F: 157) by contrast, is a world where bodies stand for themselves and only for themselves, where they embody meaning without disclosing it in the form of a narrative. Exposing the porous nature of texts, their constant permeation by other texts and the consequent impossibility of fulfilment, might indeed be the novel’s message. For Spivak, these elements signify the *aporia* of over-determination such as mothering, authoring and giving voice to the subaltern ‘ ‘in’ the text ’ (1990: 18).

The absence and, indeed, the impossibility of closure Coetzee writes into the final part of his novel is emblematic of his second-order postcolonial

critique. Colonialism is essentially a project of fixating differences. The colonizer imposes the closures of imperialism onto the colonized, simultaneously inscribing and marginalizing alterity. Put differently, both colonialism and canonicity depend on what it excludes. By denying closure, Coetzee destabilizes the very foundations of colonialist teleology and authorial authority. The one who possesses the key to the closure of the narrative is Friday (Attwell, 1993: 112). Friday's utterance, however, remains unheard, his narrative unwritten.

Epilogue, or, How Did Daniel Defoe Make it into the Children's Encyclopaedia?

John M. Coetzee began his 2003 Nobel Prize Lecture, entitled 'He and His Man,' with a personal reminiscence. He recounted how as an eight or nine-year old boy he had come across *The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* for the first time, how he had read the story of transformation of the desert island into an island kingdom with the fullest attention, and how Robinson Crusoe became a figure in his imagination. Consulting the *Children's Encyclopaedia* in search of further information about the story that so much intrigued him, young Coetzee made a bewildering discovery:

'I was puzzled when some months later I came across a statement in the *Children's Encyclopaedia* to the effect that someone else besides Robinson Crusoe and Friday was part of the island story; a man with a wig named Daniel Defoe. What was not clear from the *Children's Encyclopaedia* was exactly how this man fitted into the story. The encyclopaedia referred to the man as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, but this made no sense since it says on the very first page of *Robinson Crusoe* that Robinson Crusoe told the story himself. Who was Daniel Defoe? What had he done to get into the *Children's Encyclopaedia* along with Robinson Crusoe? Was Daniel Defoe perhaps another name for Robinson Crusoe, an alias he used when he returned to England from his island and put on a wig?' (Coetzee, 2003b)

Making this personal anecdote his point of departure, Coetzee revisited and inverted the central questions raised in *Foe* in his Nobel lecture proper: ‘the self-of-writing’ (Attwell, 2012: 181). Coetzee’s lecture or rather short story, tells the story of an aged Robinson Crusoe living in Bristol after he had returned from his island to England. Having grown used to solitude and silence as a castaway, he considers there to be ‘too much speech in the world.’ Since ‘the writing of his adventures has put him in the habit of writing,’ he occupies himself in the evenings by composing accounts of extraordinary events occurring around Britain. These accounts are products of his imagination, yet he passes them off as reports he receives from ‘his man’, an energetic figure dashing so ‘busily hither and thither across the kingdom from spectacles of death to another,’ documenting everything from the ducks of Lincolnshire and execution practices in Halifax, to the outbreak of the plague in London (Coetzee, 2003a). Strolling along the Bristol waterfront, Robinson muses over what kind of personality he should give to the man he created in his imagination. Robinson’s man is Daniel Defoe. In Coetzee’s version, Crusoe writes Defoe into existence, not the other way around. The author becomes a fictional character ‘fathered’ by *his* literary figure.

‘He and His Man,’ hence, presents a kind of sequel to Coetzee’s profound intertextual dialogue with *Robinson Crusoe* and Daniel Defoe and its metafictional deconstruction. Turning fictional creation against itself, Coetzee scrutinizes the ontology of authorship in general by splitting the historical self and the writing self. In ‘He and His Man’, it is Crusoe who occupies the position of historical self, while his man, Defoe, is ‘the self-who-writes’ (Attwell, 2012: 181). Similar to the case of *Foe*, the postcolonial dimension of this endeavour is not immediately obvious. Yet, the split between ‘he’ and ‘his man’ gains its significance from the intertextual field from which it emerges. Coetzee explicitly refers to this dimension by way of his story’s epigraph, extracted from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*:

‘But to return to my companion. I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that

was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke; and he was the aptest scholar that ever was.’ (Coetzee, 2003a; see also Defoe, 2007: 177)

The passage obviously refers to Friday, Crusoe’s man in Defoe’s novel. By replacing Friday with Defoe, making the latter Crusoe’s man, Coetzee establishes a link between authority and marginality, merging them and reminding his audience of ‘the way the self-of-writing embodies counter-voices’ and that alterity and strangeness constitute essential conditions of literary narratives (Attwell, 2012: 181). This tension between the authoritarian nature of the narrative and the omnipresence of its discontents highlight what Linda Hutcheon has called the ‘contradictory doubleness’ of the novel. The novel, she stresses, is a potentially dangerous genre for it simultaneously reacts against and authorizes repression (Hutcheon, 1988: 180). Conflating colonialism and authorship, Coetzee exposes this fundamental ambivalence at work within and produced by the literary narrative. Through his self - critical exploration into questions of authorial authority, he, hence, provides a new vantage point from which a critical rethinking of questions concerning colonial marginalization and the (im) possibilities of postcolonial agency is made possible.

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