

The Novel as Ethical Command: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Summary

In this paper, I argue that, in *Foe* (1986), Coetzee depicts the island setting as a site that transcends history and that this depiction self-reflexively points to the possibility of an autonomous mode of writing – that is, a form of writing which posits the other rather than history as an *a priori*. The depiction conceives of the novel as the event of the writing subject's assumption of responsibility for the other; a performance of the ethical command through which the subject substitutes itself for the other. I maintain that it is through this alignment with the other that *Foe*, in a seeming paradox, posits the ability of literary writing to affect relations within history.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat Coetzee in *Foe* (1986) die eilandagtergrond uitbeeld as 'n terrein wat geskiedenis transendeer en dat hierdie uitbeelding selfrefleksief dui op 'n outonome skryfwyse – dit is, 'n skryfwyse wat die ander, eerder as 'n geskiedenis, as 'n *a priori* postuleer. Dit stel die roman voor as die skryfsubjek se aanvaarding van verantwoordelikheid vir die ander; 'n vervulling van die etiese opdrag waardeur die subjek sigself met die ander vervang. Ek voer aan dat *Foe*, in 'n oënskynlike paradoks, deur hierdie gelykstelling met die ander, postuleer dat literêre skryf relasies binne die geskiedenis kan affekteer.

Readers of *Foe* (Coetzee 1986) usually attempt to interpret the island episode of this novel as an allegory of South African history in particular or of European imperialism in Africa in general (cf., for example, Post 1989; Tiffin 1987). To use J.M. Coetzee's distinction in "The Novel Today" between writing that "supplements" history by "depending on the model of history" for "its principal structuration", and writing that "rivals" history by "occupy[ing] an autonomous place" (1988: 2-3), such readers construct a relation of supplementarity between *Foe* and history. In the process, they invest history with the status and authority of an *a priori* structure. I shall depart from this critical trend by arguing that, in *Foe*, Coetzee is at pains to depict the island as a site that transcends history and that this depiction raises

the possibility of an autonomous mode of writing. As I proceed, it will become clear that it is only by occupying an "autonomous place" through positing the absolute, transcendental other rather than history as an *a priori*, that the novel is able to affect relations within history.

1

The autonomy of the island emerges in *Foe*'s interrogation of the notion of the castaway, a notion that presupposes an epistemologically significant relation between "home" and alien terrain, or "wilderness". This interrogation materialises in Coetzee's pointed refusal to portray Cruso as a castaway. Apart from the fact that this character tells Susan Barton that he is not a castaway in as many words (Coetzee 1986: 33), he also does not keep a journal or a calendar – items that conventionally signify the castaway condition. Most importantly, though, Cruso is indifferent to the prospect of salvation. After he is unable to provide Susan Barton with a satisfactory explanation as to why he has never attempted to build a boat and so "escape" from the island, she draws this conclusion:

Besides, as I later found, the desire to escape had dwindled within him. His heart was set on remaining to his dying day king of his tiny realm. In truth it was not fear of pirates or cannibals that held him from making bonfires or dancing about on the hilltop waving his hat, but indifference to salvation, and habit, and the stubbornness of old age.

(Coetzee 1986:13-14)

In this novel, not being a castaway clearly signifies a severing of ties with "home". The epistemological implication of this severance is that since Cruso is not a castaway, he does not relate the island "wilderness" to "home" and therefore allows it to remain an independent site.

This suggestion that the island is an "autonomous place" is further evident in the manner in which the novel undermines Susan Barton's attempt to explain Cruso's reluctance to leave the island and return "home" by attributing it to the will to possess. At one point in the novel, Barton describes Cruso's "evening posture", that is, his habit of standing "on the Bluff with the sun behind him all red and purple, staring out to sea, his staff in his hand and his great conical hat on his head" (Coetzee 1986: 37). She concludes this description with the following observation: "He is a truly kingly figure; he is the true king of *his* island" (p. 37; my italics). The intertextual allusion, here, is quite clearly to the famous monarch-of-all-I-survey passage in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in which the protagonist, upon "surveying" the

island from an elevated position, derives pleasure from thinking that “this was all my own”, reflects upon his “right of possession”, and regards himself as “king and lord of all this country” ([1719]1975: 74). Apart from pointing to the fact that his notion of kingship is singularly mercantile (cf. Green 1979: 76), this passage renders explicit a marked change in Robinson Crusoe’s relationship with the island. Importantly, in this regard, he reflects as follows a few pages later in the novel:

Before, as I walk’d about ... the anguish of my soul at my condition, would break out upon me on a sudden, ... to think of the woods, the mountains, the deserts I was in; and how I was a prisoner lock’d up with the eternal bars and bolts of the ocean, in an uninhabited wilderness, without redemption.

(Defoe [1719]1975: 83-84)

The contrast between these two passages suggests that, in mastering the island wilderness through possessing it, Crusoe affirms his waning sense of self. What becomes visible at this point in Defoe’s novel is the link in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe between the development of property relations and the growth of an increasingly autonomous subject (cf. Davis 1987: 62-64, 86) – a link that is implicit, for instance, in René Descartes’s concern in the *Discourse on Method* to establish a “practical philosophy” by which knowl-edge could be so deployed as to make “man”, conceived of here in terms of an autonomous subjectivity, the “master – and owner – of nature” ([1937] 1969: 46).

Significantly, the allusion in Coetzee’s novel to the monarch-of-all-I-survey passage in Defoe’s novel does not suggest an affinity grounded in possession and domination between Crusoe and Cruso’s relations to terrain. Instead it points to difference between the two novels in this regard and, in the process, refutes Barton’s interpretation of Cruso’s “evening posture”. So, for example, it is significant that instead of scanning the terrain with an imperial eye, Cruso looks out to sea. Susan Barton interprets this stance variously. At first, she assumes that Cruso is on guard for cannibals (Coetzee 1986: 12), but later she thinks that he is “searching the horizon for a sail” (p. 38). Ultimately, though, she arrives at the following realisation: “His visits to the Bluff belonged to a practice of *losing himself* in the contemplation of the wastes of water and sky” (p. 38; my italics). In terms of the link between autonomous subjectivity and property relations, it follows that if the prospect position that Cruso assumes is related to a “practice of losing himself”, it cannot signify a will to possess.

Cruso’s loss of self short-circuits the link between “home” and alien land in his relationship with the island and, in so doing, prevents him from becoming a castaway. In Defoe’s depiction of the subject’s commerce with

the “wilderness”, it is clear that the subject domesticates the unknown by adequating it with the already known. It is through Robinson Crusoe’s interaction with it that the “wilderness” is annexed to the cultural systems of knowledge and value of “home” and, in the process, becomes knowable as “property”, that is, in terms of a highly specific cultural and historical construction of space. What this fictional depiction of the colonial encounter unconsciously reveals, then, is that the subject is not transcendent. She/he is situated in a particular culture and makes sense of that which is beyond the epistemological boundaries of that culture by violently assimilating it into those boundaries. With reference to this assimilative violence, Emmanuel Levinas describes the human subject as the “crucible” of the “transmutation of the other into the same” ([1957]1987: 49-50).¹ In his/her interaction with alterity, the subject initiates what Alphonso Lingis, in his introduction to *Otherwise Than Being*, refers to as the “move of Being”, that is, the integrative procedure through which the subject reduces the other to his/her object in order to achieve a full correspondence between his/her representations and external reality ([1974]1981: xxxiii). Importantly, in this understanding, knowledge involves a movement towards the other followed by a return to self. In Martin Heidegger’s description, “representing is making-stand-over-against, an objectifying that goes forward and masters”. The “perceiving of what is known” is “a process of returning with one’s booty to the cabinet of consciousness” ([1952]1977: 150). The “move of Being” is the subject’s self-consolidating appropriation of everything into his/her totality, the same or “home”. “Home” is thus always the *telos* of the dialectical movement that characterises the subject’s relationship to the other. Given this epistemological orientation, which makes of “home” the site of ultimate meaning, the subject may be described as a castaway in his/her encounter with otherness.

From the above discussion, it should be clear that the loss of self described in *Foe* hints at a dislocation of the *telos* of the “move of Being” and therefore at the autonomy of the island. Coetzee’s depiction of Crusoe’s eschewal of language further emphasises this dislocation and the island’s resultant transcendence of the totality of “home”. Throughout the island section of the novel, Coetzee insists on Crusoe’s aversion to language. For instance, his “evening posture” is quite pointedly set in opposition to language. Upon her

1. The relation between same and other which informs Levinas’s thinking on politics and ethics may best be explained by the phenomenological model of intentionality in terms of which the order of the same would consist of both the intentional acts of consciousness and the intentional objects that are constituted by these acts and, in turn, invest them with meaning.

arrival on the island, Susan Barton wishes to tell Cruso more about herself, her "quest" for her "stolen daughter", and about the mutiny (Coetzee 1986: 13). However, as she explains, she is unable to do so because of Cruso's preference for silence and nothingness over speech: "But he asked nothing, gazing out instead into the setting sun, nodding to himself as though a voice spoke privately inside him that he was listening to" (p. 13). Language is, of course, the means through which the subject adequates external reality with his/her representations, thereby reducing the other to an object. "In the intelligibility of representation", says Levinas, "the distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced" ([1961]1991: 124). So, if the island is to be portrayed as an "autonomous place", Cruso must needs be characterised as being antipathetic to language. As the instrument with which the other is reduced to an object and incorporated into the order of the same, the very presence of language would render inevitable the "move of Being", a *return* to the domain of the same, to "home".

Cruso's aversion to language is also evident in his refusal to keep a journal. Christopher Miller has argued that travel writing is an important instrument of colonisation, that it enables the displaced viewer to bring "home" foreign places *as* language (Miller 1985: 5). Cruso's refusal to keep a journal thus obstructs the colonising process through which the ideological distance that separates *terra incognita* from the "old world" is erased. The very act of writing in such a context would introduce the distinction between "old" and "new" world and thereby construct the former, that is, "home", as site of ultimate meaning. All writing implies a reader and, in this context, the implied reader would inevitably form part of what Mary Louise Pratt refers to as the "domestic audience of Empire" (Pratt 1992: 63). Even if the reader were only the writer as displaced viewer, that is not physically at home, the site of recuperation would still be "home". The act of *not* writing therefore amounts to a rejection of "home", a refusal to assimilate the island as site of otherness into the structures of knowledge of Europe.

It is in the context of this resistance to the "move of Being" and the consequent assertion of the autonomy of the island, its transcendence of the totality of "home", that the novel's emphasis on Cruso's "indifference to salvation" should be read. Salvation would, of course, involve a return home and, as Susan Barton's following account indicates, this is an outcome that Cruso refuses: "When I spoke of England and of all the things I intended to see and do when I was rescued, he seemed not to hear me. It was as though he wished his story to begin with his arrival on the island, and mine to begin with my arrival, and the story of us together to end on the island too" (Coetzee 1986: 34). Later, when she repeats her "desire to be saved", Cruso tellingly responds by asserting the autonomy of the island: "I do not wish to hear of your desire. It concerns other things, it does not concern the island, it is not a matter of

the island" (p. 36).

Significantly, Crusoe's story does not end in England. As Susan Barton's following words indicate, he chooses to die rather than allow himself to be "saved" in this way:

On the island I believe Crusoe might yet have shaken off the fever, as he had done so often before. For though not a young man, he was vigorous. But now he was dying of woe, the extremest woe. With every passing day he was conveyed farther from the kingdom he pined for, to which he would never find his way again.

(Coetzee 1986: 43)

It is in this refusal of the *telos* of return and with it, of course, the forfeiture of the island's autonomy, that Coetzee's Crusoe differs most from his progenitor. The structural corollary of this refusal is that Coetzee's version of the Crusoe story does not possess the tripartite, journey structure of Defoe's novel and the adventure novels which it spawned: that is, the setting forth of the hero, the exploits of the hero in an unknown land and, finally, the return of the conquering hero as master of two worlds, namely the known world and the world which has been made known (cf. Adams 1983: 50). It follows from the absence of this structure in *Foe* that a movement without return from same to other governs Crusoe's interaction with the island.

The ethical implications of this structural contrast may be clarified by reference to Levinas's comparison of the dialectical, integrative trajectory of the "Love of Being" to a nonassimilative and therefore nonviolent relationship that is characterised by a "movement of infinity" (cf. Lingis 1981: xxxiii), that is, "a movement from the Same towards the other which never returns to the Same" (Critchley 1992: 109). In developing this comparison, he elaborates on the structure of these relational modes by drawing the following distinction between Ulysses and Abraham: "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we would like to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his homeland forever for a still unknown land and even forbidding his son to be brought back to its point of departure" (Levinas quoted by Critchley 1992: 109). Since its dehiscence prevents the Abrahamic relation from foreclosing on difference, it obviates the possibility of violence. Alternatively put, it enables a relationship that is characterised by a *respect* for the exteriority of the other relative to the same. In Levinas's words, it enables a "relationship between separated beings" that "does not totalize them" – that is, the paradox of an "unrelating relation", which no one can "encompass or thematize" ([1974]1991: 295).

By inscribing a structural distinction in his novel between the "move of Being" and the "movement of infinity", Coetzee therefore points to the

possibility of an ethical encounter with otherness. He suggests that Cruso, in his encounter with the otherness of the island, does not violate it by integrating it into the totality of the same, or "home". His encounter with the island is characterised by a respect for its alterity because it is informed by a movement without return from same to other. Herein lies the importance of the description of Cruso as "losing himself" in his relationship with the island – in Levinasian ethics, an irreversible movement from same to other is only possible if the subject *gives* him-/herself to the other (Levinas [1974]1981: 99-129, 145; 1991: 194ff.). She/he does this by assuming responsibility for the other. In the process, she/he forgoes power since, in assuming responsibility for the other, she/he invests him/her/it with authority.² By implication, instead of mastering the other, she/he is "mastered" by the other. In this ethical context, though, "mastery" by the other is divested of power because his/her/its authority is a function of the subject's responsibility for him/her/it.

In order better to explain these notions of self-substituting responsibility and authority and their importance in *Foe*, it is necessary to discuss the ability of the other to affect the subject. In the next section of this paper, I shall consider this issue by tracing the change which Susan Barton and her writing undergo in the course of the novel.

2

Coetzee's inscription of a "movement of infinity" in Cruso's relationship with the island in *Foe* means that the island in this novel is portrayed very similarly to the Karoo farm in *Life and Times of Michael K* (Coetzee 1983). In the earlier novel, the autonomy of the farm is directly articulated when it is described as a "pocket outside time" (Coetzee 1983: 82). There is, however, an important difference between these two novels: while *Life and Times of*

2. My argument here raises the question of whether the other can be nonhuman, even nonsentient. Can animals, plants, and terrain place humans under obligation to the extent that other humans can? Coetzee seems to think so. Apart from *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), in which a responsible relation to nonsentient beings is articulated, one finds in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) a representation of a human being under obligation to a dog. For an adaptation and extension of Levinas's humanist ethics to include obligations toward nonhuman entities, see John Llewelyn's cogent argument on "ecological conscience" in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* (1991). (This paper was written prior to the publication of Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*.)

Michael K is narrated from a third-person perspective, *Foe* is narrated from the first-person perspective of Susan Barton. As I proceed, it will become clear that this difference stages the way in which the individual's implication in culture mediates his/her encounter with otherness. However, it will also become clear that Coetzee's use of point of view in *Foe* holds up the possibility that, despite his/her situatedness in the world, the individual may be affected by the transcendental other. Since the narrator is a writer, the text, in the process, self-reflexively contemplates the novel's relation to the other and posits the possibility of a responsible fictional response to alterity.

In choosing Susan Barton as his principal narrator in *Foe*, Coetzee opts to tell the story of the island from the point of view of a castaway. Barton's status in this regard is directly articulated on a number of occasions. For instance, shortly after she arrives on the island, she reflects as follows: "Last night I had been bound for home; tonight I was a castaway" (Coetzee 1986: 14; cf. also p. 20). The epistemological significance of this character's castaway status emerges throughout the island section of the novel in the manner in which she typically explains what she encounters on the island by relating it to English culture and, in the process, eliding its difference. On the most trivial of levels, she likens the birds on the island to sparrows (Coetzee 1986: 7, 51) and describes Crusoe's strange apparel as follows: "He wore ... a jerkin, and drawers to below his knees, such as we see watermen wear on the Thames" (p. 8). More significantly, she insists on seeing Crusoe as a castaway and clearly desires to interpret his aberrant life on the island in terms of the return-of-the-hero-as-master-of-two-worlds topos. Hence, her following question testifies to a desire on her part to *make* Crusoe's experience on the island conform to this topos and thereby annex the island to England: "Might he not justly be deemed a hero who had braved the wilderness and slain the monster of solitude and returned fortified by his victory?" (p. 38).

At the very least, then, Susan Barton's status as a castaway entails that her epistemological commerce with the island is characterised by the "move of Being": she relates the unknown to the known, that which is foreign to "home", and therefore routinely violates otherness. It is because of the violence of this procedure that the novel conflates castaway and coloniser in Susan Barton's characterisation of herself as "the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone" (Coetzee 1986: 51). In alluding to Julius Caesar's pronouncement of victory at the conclusion of the Pontic Campaign, namely "*Veni, vidi, vici*", these words relate the desire "to be gone" to conquest.

The fact that the novel emerges from the point of view of a castaway is, of course, self-consciously pointed to by the presentation of the bulk of it as Susan Barton's journal. Furthermore, this illusion of documentation with its emphasis on language implies that it is Barton's situatedness in language that

makes of her a castaway by aligning her with "home", and thereby divorcing her from alterity. It indicates that it is Barton's immersion in language that inscribes the "move of Being" in her dealings with alterity. This, however, does not mean that the novel posits an ineluctable linguistic determinism. Quite simply, its emphasis on Barton's situatedness in the language of the same provides the context within which it may adumbrate the possibility of an interruption of the same by the other. Just such a possibility is implicit in the manner in which the epistolary presentation of the novel self-reflexively stages the relation of *writer* to alterity and thereby raises the question of whether the novelist, whose relation to the other is per force mediated by language, is able to respond responsibly to otherness by contriving a "movement of infinity" within the form of the novel.

In this regard, it is significant that Susan Barton's attitude to language changes in the course of the text. Initially, she shares the eighteenth-century valorisation of the journal as a form which is close to the present of experience and therefore to "truth". Indeed, in suggesting to Cruso that he keep a journal, she argues for a direct transcription of the "reality" of lived experience: "For surely, with every day that passes, our memories grow less certain ... seen from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its particularity" (Coetzee 1986: 17-18). In terms of constructing equivalence between truth, experience, perception and language, her argument coincides with the views of Arthur Young:

The journal form hath the advantage of carrying with it a greater degree of credibility; and, of course, more weight. A traveller who thus registers his observations is detected the moment he writes of things he has not seen If he sees little, he must register little.

(Young quoted by Batten 1978: 33)

However, as the novel proceeds, and once Susan Barton commences writing, it becomes increasingly clear that, rather than confidently recording her experience, the journal entries document her doubts and inability to "know" that experience in language. In fact, much of the novel consists of her reflections on the "touches of mystery" which she encountered on the island: the walls and terraces, Friday's tongue, his apparent submission to Cruso, the reason for the lack of sexual desire on the island, and Friday's scattering of petals on the water (Coetzee 1986: 83-87). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Susan Barton is initially exasperated with these "touches of mystery" and feels that they mar her story. As Rosemary Jolly explains, she "desires closure and expects all mysteries to be resolved in the course of narrative. In this scheme of things, puzzles or mysteries become 'symptoms' that it is the duty of narrative to 'treat'" (Jolly 1996: 7). Eventually, though, as is apparent in

her resistance to Foe's wish to foreclose on them by making them "speak" (Coetzee 1986: 141), she comes to believe that these mysteries should be left *silent* and unexplained rather than be elided by language and narrative (p. 123). This shift suggests the development in Susan Barton of a recognition of and respect for otherness that is premised on the realisation that what she has seen and experienced on the island *exceeds* language and therefore cannot be understood in the discourses of the same (cf. Attridge 1996: 180).

Through its careful documentation of the change that Susan Barton's writing practice undergoes, then, *Foe* seems to suggest that a *careful* response to alterity is possible in writing. In this respect, Susan Barton's story is, of course, a *mise en abyme* of the novel: the mysteries and lacunae in "her" story are mysteries and lacunae in Coetzee's novel. It follows that the novel as a whole inscribes mystery and that this emphasis on the unknowable constitutes a response to alterity that is grounded in silence rather than representation. Indeed, the foregrounding of mystery in the novel advertises a refusal to attempt to represent alterity and thereby return with it to the same. This refusal to represent otherness is a refusal of the dialectical passage of the "move of Being" and, accordingly, of a relation of correlation between same and other. At the same time, though, it is an attempt to install in the novel an "unrelating relation" to alterity. After all, in the very process of advertising the novel's refusal to represent otherness, the strategy of silence acknowledges, without endeavouring to know, that which exceeds language and intentionality. In *Foe*, silence may therefore be described as a strategy of excession that inscribes in the novel an irreversible movement from same to other. Through it, the text is able to indicate, without ever violating, the radical alterity of the other. Hence, this metarepresentational strategy of excession imparts a sense of the "unpresentable in presentation" (Lyotard [1979]1984: 81).

A corollary of the "movement of infinity" that is installed by this strategy of excession is that *Foe* rejects history's status as an *a priori* structure. Instead of proceeding from history, this novel derives from a source beyond history, the order of the same, and may be described as an "autonomous place". This claim is self-reflexively postulated by the text's motif of inspiration which suggests that Susan Barton's writing is informed by a respectful response to the other *because* she has been *inspired* by the island. The motif of inspiration is most evident in Susan Barton's attempts to inspire Foe with her story of the island (Coetzee 1986: 53, 126, 139-140). Significantly, the aesthetic activity of inspiration conjoins with the sexual and generative activity of copulation and pro-creation in the depiction of this relationship. So, for example, Susan Barton mounts Foe with the words: "This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets" (p. 139). Clearly, then, sex and procreation serve as metaphors for literary inspiration and creation in *Foe*. It is thus noteworthy that, earlier in the novel, after having engaged in sexual intercourse with

Cruso, Susan Barton receives an “intimation” of a disjunction between the order of history in which she is situated and another order:

We *yield* to a *stranger's* embrace or *give ourselves* to the waves; for the *blink of an eyelid* our vigilance relaxes; we are *asleep*; and when we *awake*, we have lost the direction of our lives. What are these *blinks of an eyelid*, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be the cracks and chinks through which *another voice, other voices*, speak in our lives? By what right do we close our ears to them? The questions echoed in my head without answer.

(Coetzee 1986: 30; my italics)

In terms of the analogy between sexual intercourse and artistic inspiration, the suggestion here is that Cruso, the stranger, has, muse-like, inspired Susan Barton-as-writer with intimations of alterity, of that which is “otherwise than Being”.

This suggestion bears comparison with Levinas's descriptions of the approach of the other – descriptions in which he often refers to the other as “the Stranger” (cf. Levinas [1961]1991: 39ff.). For Levinas, as I have already indicated, the same is both the intentional acts of consciousness and the intentional objects that are constituted by these acts and which, in the process, render them significant. By implication, the subject is enthralled in a world that has been constituted by the cognitive categories that she/he has imposed upon it. So, while the subject is ontically with others in this world, the strategies of adequation through which the objects and people in it are mastered and possessed impose a state of being “for-oneself” (Levinas [1974]1981: 56). Owing to the intentionality of con-sciousness, the subject routinely forecloses on such otherness or strangeness that may disturb his/her ontological solitude. As Levinas puts it, “the given enters into a thought which recognizes in it or invests it with its own project, and thus exercises mastery over it” (p. 101). Accordingly, “anything unknown that can occur to it is in advance disclosed, open, manifest, is cast in the mould of the known, and cannot be a complete surprise” (p. 99). Alterity, which is, of course, surprising, is therefore incommensurable with the “vigilance” of the subject in consciousness (cf. pp. 103, 148). The other cannot approach the subject if it is, by definition, “repelled by consciousness, refractory to concepts” (p. 139). For this reason, Levinas argues that consciousness must be “affected” before being able to form “an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself” (p. 102). The other must not knock, it must arrive without announcing itself (p. 102). Like a “thief in the night”, it must slip through the “outstretched nets of consciousness” (p. 148). Only by being “surprised” can the vigilance of consciousness be overwhelmed and the self possessed by the other.

Given his view of consciousness, it is understandable that Levinas assigns a special significance to states of un- or semiconsciousness in which the subject's vigilance relaxes and she/he is not in full possession of self (cf. Levinas [1974] 1978: 65ff.). Susan Barton's references to sleep are significant in this respect.³ By relaxing consciousness, sleep may allow the other to approach the subject. Barton's reference to "blinks of an eyelid" should also be seen in the context of Levinas's view of consciousness. In his discussion of the Levinasian notion of the *Augenblick*, Llewelyn argues that a "*Blick*" may be variously translated as a "look", "glimpse" or "glance", but also carries connotations of "blink" and "wink". He elaborates as follows: "The darkness when in the wink of an eye the lid is momentarily lowered would announce the way that in waking life in the world the light of consciousness, as Levinas maintains, is suffused with the darkness of unconsciousness" (Llewelyn 1995: 52). Consequently, the *Augenblick* may be seen as an interstitial state in which the other may intimate itself. It is, in the words that Coetzee gives Susan Barton, a "crack" or "chink" through which "another voice speak[s] in our lives".

It follows from its emphasis on states in which the intentionality of consciousness may be transcended, that the above passage alludes to Susan Barton's possession by the "stranger", that is, by Cruso's otherness. Levinas's notion that the possession of the subject by the other leads to the former's substitution of him-/herself for the other elucidates the references to yielding or giving oneself to the stranger or waves not only in this scene but also in the earlier one in which Cruso's commerce with the island is described in terms of a loss of self. According to Levinas, the other disturbs the subject's ontological solitude. Confronted by the other's radical alterity, the subject

3. Apart from referring to sleep in the above passage, Susan Barton later comments that the "danger of island life" was "the danger of abiding sleep" (Coetzee 1986: 82). She makes this remark in a discussion of danger in which she compares "sleep" to "cannibals". Significantly, the implication of this comparison is that sleep is more dangerous than "cannibals" because it exposes the subject to the other in the absence of consciousness. On the other hand, the "cannibal" is intentionally assumed. It is a *result* of intentionality, a construct through which the intending subject "knows" the other and thus shields him-/herself from its dreadful alterity. Accordingly, the "cannibal" cannot *surprise* the subject. It is also interesting that, as Susan Barton points out in this passage, Cruso's "first and only piece of furniture ... was a bed" (p. 82), a detail that signifies an openness to alterity. Conversely, Defoe's Crusoe's first technological feat is the stockade with which he protects himself from "cannibals".

recognises that she/he is not alone, that she/he is ontically with others, and this recognition interrupts the “move of Being”, the violent adequation of the other with the same. “Violent action”, says Levinas, “does not consist in being in a relationship with the other; it is in fact an action where one is as though one were alone” ([Levinas [1957] 1987: 18). The approach of the other thus challenges the subject’s autonomy: it presents him/her with the impossibility of conceiving of him-/herself in terms of a freedom that comes with unicity. And with this challenge to his/her autonomy, the subject realises that she/he is responsible for the other. What is involved here is therefore not so much a loss of self as a restructuring of self. The subject assumes responsibility for the other, that is, she/he becomes *for* the other. Differently put, the subject replaces the identity conferred by the ontological solitude of the “for-oneself” with one that is concomitant on a state of “being-for-the-other” (cf. Levinas [1974]1981: 56). The autonomous subject becomes an ethical, which is to say responsible, subject.

In the context of the latent muse imagery in the reference to Susan Barton’s sexual encounter with Crusoe in the above passage from *Foe*, it is significant that Levinas uses the metaphor of inspiration in his discussion of the other’s ability to affect the subject, to induce the latter to assume responsibility for him/her. Levinas describes responsibility for the other as “a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed” (p. 15). By implication, the effect on the subject of the other’s overwhelming of his/her intentional consciousness is a radical passivity. Upon being exposed to the other, intentionality makes way for what Llewelyn, after Maurice Blanchot, calls “attentionality”, that is, waiting for, listening for, *and* obeying the ethical command to be for the other (Llewelyn 1995: 53). It is in his description of this passive, attentional state, which is both a waiting *for* and *on* the other, and of the seemingly paradoxical and deeply ambivalent nature of the ethical command as an order that is formed by an obedient response (and which is therefore not the result of the exercise of power), namely “Here I Am”, that Levinas most often uses the metaphor of inspiration. In effacing itself before the other, the subject becomes the “surprised” “author” of a “command” that has been received “one knows not from where” (Levinas [1974]1981: 148-150). Levinas describes this ethical command as the “saying” with which the subject responds responsibly to the other’s approach (pp. 144-146). Although it is the subject who “authors” the “saying”, it has been “inspired” by the other and is thus an order that is an obedient response. The paradox of a command that is a response that is articulated by the receiver emerges in Levinas’s references to the “Here I Am” as the “command” which “sound[s] in the mouth of the one that obeys” (p. 147) and, even more complexly, to “the coming of the order to which I am subjected before hearing it, or which I hear in my own saying” (p. 150).

My discussion of the muse imagery in the passage in which she refers to her sexual encounter with Cruso indicates that the change that Susan Barton's response to the island undergoes in the course of the novel is a function of her inspiration by the other. And since the index to this change is the respectful response to the alterity of the island that emerges from her journal, the important *literary* corollary, here, is that this character's story of the island is presented in the novel as the ethical command, that is, as "saying with inspiration", the very *event* of the "Here I Am". It is her assumption of responsibility for the other, the obedient *act* through which she constitutes herself as an ethical subject and, in the process, invests the other with authority. Consequently, her authorship is not authoritarian. Far from being an intentional act of mastery that is characterised by the recuperative "move of Being", it is an attentional act of obedience, an irreversible movement from same to other to the point of substitution.

I have already shown that Susan Barton's narrative is a *mise en abyme* of the novel itself. Through it, Coetzee reflects on the ability of the fictional text to respond responsibly to the other. He suggests that rather than simply being a product of the intentionality of the writing subject's consciousness and therefore trapped in the same, the novel may – by refusing to reduce the other to an object of representation, to a thought or intention of the writer – be the event of the writing subject's attentionality. In the process, he adumbrates a mode of fiction-writing that divests itself of power by investing the other with authority. Indeed, through Susan Barton's narrative, *Foe* self-reflexively presents itself as having been inspired not by history, but by the other. By extension, it represents itself as a performance of the ethical command through which the subject assumes responsibility for the other. As I have pointed out, the mysteries and silences in Barton's narrative which are, in fact, mysteries and silences in Coetzee's novel, attest to this responsibility for the other. In the context of my discussion, it should be clear that the refusal to attempt to represent the other that emerges from this inscription of textual silence signifies the writing subject's *passivity*, his obedient *attentionality* rather than masterful intentionality. It is solely through this passivity that the subject may approach the other.

Coetzee's point here is similar to that which Blanchot makes in his discussion of the writer's desire for the other. Following Rainer Maria Rilke, Blanchot uses the myth of the Orphic descent to reflect upon this desire (Blanchot [1955]1982: 171-176). In the myth, Orpheus is able to "draw" Eurydice in the night of the Underworld by means of the "detour" of "looking away" – that is, through an abdication of power. By implication, if the writer is to relate unrelatingly to the other and not repel him/her by foreclosing on his/her otherness, what is required is that moment, or *Augenblick*, in which the eyes of intentionality are closed by the opening of the ears of

attentionality. This seems to be Coetzee's point in *Age of Iron* in the scene in which Mrs Curren approaches the dead "John" by writing with eyes that are shut (Coetzee 1990: 159-160). The only way in which the same may approach the other is through a radical passivity. In writing, this entails a refusal to attempt to represent the other, a "looking away" that never becomes the "gaze" through which Orpheus loses Eurydice.⁴

3

My discussion has shown that *Foe* self-reflexively represents itself as the ethical command through which the subject assumes responsibility for the other. The question that raises itself in this regard is whether this ethical relationship between writer and other extends to the reader of the text. Differently put, is the novel, in its relationship with the reader, able to sustain this "movement of infinity" from same to other? If it does, it will engage with history *affectively*. At the outset of this paper, I indicated that it is by occupying an "autonomous place" that this novel seeks to affect relations in history. If read in the context of the ability of the other to affect the subject, it becomes evident that *Foe*'s self-reflexive eschewal of representation and concomitant assertion of auto-nomy constitute not a withdrawal but the means through which it may engage with history. In order to develop this contention, it is necessary to trace the possible effect of the novel's strategy of excession on the reader. My contention in this regard is that the text attempts to impart a sense of the "unpresentable in presentation" by means of this strategy and, in so doing, hopes to expose the reader to the infinity of the other and thereby render him/her responsible for the other. Should it do so, it will alter his/her relations in history.

Coetzee's endeavour to invest the text with a silence that renders the reader responsible for the other is self-reflexively depicted in the ending of the novel

4. Although Blanchot discusses the abnegation of power through which Orpheus is able to assure the approach of Eurydice, his point is, ultimately, that the "looking away" is always already the "looking" through which Orpheus loses Eurydice. It should be clear from my discussion that Coetzee is less pessimistic about the relation of the writer to alterity. Couched in the terms of the Orphic descent, the refusal to attempt to represent is precisely a refusal to attempt to *return* with Eurydice, in her nocturnal aspect, to the light of day, that is, to that which is not only antithetical to her but which denies her and is the very condition of her impossibility. What is at stake in Coetzee's writing is a "movement of infinity" rather than the "move of Being".

in which an anonymous first-person narrator interacts with Friday and eventually tries to vocalise his silence. This attempt follows Foe's earlier pronouncement with reference to one of the "touches of mystery" in the story of the island and, by implication, in the novel itself: "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken" and that "till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (Coetzee 1986: 141). In the context of this theory of reading, it is clear that Friday's silence in the ending mirrors that of the novel as a whole and that the attempt of the anonymous first-person narrator to speak Friday's silence may be read as an allegory of reading.

In the first of the two scenes that describe this reader-figure's intercourse with Friday at the close of the novel, the narrator enters a room occupied by Foe, Susan Barton and Friday. Significantly, the narrator in this scene makes no attempt whatever to "make Friday's silence speak" (Coetzee 1986: 142). Instead of adopting a position of dominance in relation to Friday, the stance that she/he assumes is remarkably *passive*, as is apparent when she/he lies down on the floor beside Friday and is not sure whether or not she/he falls asleep (p. 154). In other words, his/her relation to the text is characterised by the same somnolence that Susan Barton posits as a feature of life on the island. Equally importantly, as I have already indicated, sleep is a state in which the subject is not self-possessed and which therefore renders him/her receptive to being possessed by the other.

Furthermore, the emphasis in this image of reading is clearly not on speech but on listening. The reader-figure's relation to Friday-as-text-as-other is one of attentionality: she/he puts his/her "ear to his mouth" and "lie[s] waiting" and, eventually, "from his mouth, without a breath, issue the *sounds* of the island" (Coetzee 1986: 154; my italics). Together with Susan Barton's account of her sexual experience with Cruso in which she refers to "other voices" which "speak in our lives" and then asks "By what right do we close our ears to them?", the references to listening here form part of a motif that is most apparent in the island section of the novel. So, for instance, Susan Barton, who initially elides the mystery of the island, is on two occasions described as attempting to shut out the sounds of the island:

If one circumstance above all determined me to escape, whatever the cost, it was not the loneliness nor the rudeness of the life, nor the monotony of the diet, but the wind that day after day whistled in my ears and tugged at my hair and blew sand into my eyes, till sometimes I would kneel in a corner of the hut with my head in my arms and moan to myself, on and on, to hear some other sound than the beating of the wind; or later, when I had taken to bathing in the sea, would hold my breath and dip my head under the water merely to know what it was to have silence.

(Coetzee 1986: 15)

I made a cap with flaps to tie over my ears; I wore this, and sometimes closed my ears with plugs too, to shut out the sound of the wind. So I became deaf, as Friday was mute; what difference did it make on an island where no one spoke?

(Coetzee 1986: 35)

By contrast, Susan Barton's descriptions of Cruso's "evening posture" suggest that he adopts an auditory relation to otherness. As I have pointed out, Barton is offended by the fact that he displays no interest in her history prior to her arrival on the island: "But he asked nothing, gazing out instead into the setting sun, nodding to himself as though a voice spoke privately inside him that he was listening to" (p. 13).

The motif of audition that is foregrounded in the first of the two scenes in the allegory of reading with which the novel ends is thus directly related to allusions to the approach of the other elsewhere in the novel. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the description of the reader-figure's passivity in relation to Friday *precedes* the description of his/her act of listening: in terms of the approach of the other, Levinas states that "obedience precedes any hearing of the command" (Levinas 1981: 148). As I have indicated, the saying, "Here I Am", is the "command" which "sound[s] in the mouth of the one that obeys". Significantly, as Llewelyn points out, obedience and audition are etymologically related (Llewelyn 1995: 58).

It would appear, then, that the imagery and allusions in the allegory of reading in the first section of the novel's ending indicate the reader-figure's exposure to, and possession and mastery by, the other. Suggestively, this possession is announced by the "sounds of the island": an allusion to the mode of existence which is "otherwise than Being" that is intimated by Coetzee's strategy of excession in the island section of the novel. The implication is therefore clear: through "asking nothing", that is, refusing to "make" the text's silence "speak", the actual reader of the novel *can* receive its intimations of a state that is "otherwise than Being" and, in the process, be inspired by alterity. As a result of the role played by silence in this process, this will be a nonconceptual encounter. The strategy of excession, which is a strategic use of silence, thus enables the paradox of an encounter with otherness in a *text*, the medium of which is language.

The second scene in the allegory of reading continues this self-reflexive meditation on textual silence but does so by contemplating the ability of the silence of the novel to oppose the conceptual force that the reader brings to the encounter. Through its silence, it implies, the text is able to *inspire* him/her with its intimations of alterity. Significantly, this image of reading is allusively depicted as a sexual encounter: Judith Newman points out that the reader-as-diver "enters a sexualised sea, moving through a 'great bed' of

seaweed, where something 'gropes' a leg, 'caresses' an arm" (Newman 1994: 9-10). The diver then descends the "trunks", goes below deck and "enter[s]" a dark "hole" (Coetzee 1986: 156; cf. Newman 1994: 10). Given the strong link between inspiration and sex in *Foe*, it is clear that this portrayal of reading as a sexual act prefigures the possibility of the actual reader's inspiration by the other.

Initially, this second scene of reading seems simply to prefigure the reading subject's mastery of the novel. For instance, it lacks the passivity that is a characteristic of the first image. Instead of lying down beside Friday, the first-person narrator kneels over him, and there is a hint of violence in the phrase "I tug his woolly hair" (Coetzee 1986: 157) that cannot be detected in the previous allegory, where the gesture is softened by the inclusion of the word "lightly" (p. 154). Moreover, Friday has a chain about his throat in the second image, a detail that is conspicuously absent from the description in the first and which suggests that the relationship here depicted is one in which the reader endeavours to master the text rather than being mastered by its intimations of alterity.

Importantly, this second depiction of the literary encounter is set in the wreck off the island. Since the wreck – which is shunned by Coetzee's *Cruso* but used by Defoe's *Crusoe* in his transformation of the island – may be read as a symbol of European culture and history, this difference between the two images of reading suggests that the reader-figure in the latter supplements history in his/her reading of the text. By extension, his/her relation to the novel is not characterised by a dehiscent "movement of infinity" but by the "move of Being" through which she/he violently recuperates the text within the order of the same.

An even more important difference between these scenes of reading, however, is the fact that in the second the reader-surrogate attempts to *speak* to Friday: "I tug his woolly hair, finger the chain about his throat. 'Friday', I say, I try to say, kneeling over him, sinking hands and knees into the ooze, 'what is this ship?'" (Coetzee 1986: 157). This bid to articulate Friday's silence must, of course, be placed in the context of the novel's emphasis on the inevitability with which language forecloses on that which is wholly other to its strategies of adequation. In this regard, the failure of this attempt must be deemed pivotal: "But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused" (p. 57). The reason for the reader-surrogate's inability to relate Friday to language becomes clear when the following sentence, which suggests that his/her freedom in autonomy has been challenged by Friday's silence, is read in the context of Levinas's notion of the face-to-face encounter: "He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face" (p. 157). For Levinas, the "face to face" is the event of the subject's encounter with the other. It is "the way in which the other presents

himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*" (Levinas [1961]1991: 50). His description alludes to Descartes's idea of infinity in terms of which the *ideatum* of the idea of the infinite cannot be contained by the idea itself (Descartes [1937]1969a: 85-87). When one tries to conceive of infinity, the relation of adequation which usually pertains between idea and *ideatum* is ruptured and the latter absolves itself from the relation (Levinas [1957]1987: 47-59; 1991: 48-52). According to Levinas, it is this "idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less" that "is concretely produced" in the event of the face to face (Levinas [1961]1991: 196). The infinitude of the other prevents the subject from establishing a relation of correlation with him/her and thereby foreclosing on his/her otherness. And, owing to the other's irreducibility, she/he is able to surprise the subject and thereby challenges his/her autonomy, which is grounded in precisely a denial of the alterity of the other. Differently put, the "epiphany" of the infinite exposes the subject to what she/he has denied and thereby confronts him/her with the impossibility of conceiving of him-/herself in terms of autonomous power (Levinas [1961]1991: 51). It is important to realise that this challenge derives from an opposition without forceful resistance. Levinas explains this point as follows: "The infinite does not stop me like a force blocking my force; it puts into question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being, a 'force on the move'" (Levinas [1953]1987: 58). The other is that which resists the subject through an opposition that is radical to the extent that it derives from its exteriority to the same: it is not that which is opposed to the subject by its resistance. Hence Levinas states that "the opposition of the face, which is not the opposition of a force, is not a hostility" (Levinas [1953]1987: 19).

The fact that the second literary encounter between the reader-surrogate and Friday in the ending of *Foe* is couched in the ethical terms of an encounter with the face suggests that this is a relationship in which the idea of infinity is "concretely produced". It is Friday's face and not force that opposes the autonomous reading subject's violence. And, in the sentences which follow and which describe Friday's response to the encounter, the efficacy of this opposition emerges:

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.

(Coetzee 1986: 157)

The reference to the reader-figure's eyelids in this passage is especially significant. His/her eyes are shut and the suggestion is that they have been subdued by the text's authoritative silence. In terms of the opposition in the novel between vision and audition, the moment of reading here depicted is that of the *Augenblick* in which "opening one's eyes is called to make way for opening one's ears" (cf. Llewelyn 1995: 55). The novel thus concludes with an image of a forceful relation modulating into a face-to-face encounter as the reader-surrogate subordinates him-/herself to the authority of the otherness intimated by the text. Differently put, it concludes with an image in which projective intentionality makes way for attentionality, for waiting for and on, rather than attempting to master, the other. And because the opposition of the face is not grounded in force but radical difference, it follows that what is depicted here is not simply a reversal of power. The authority of the other derives from the subject's epiphanic recognition of its otherness and self-substituting assumption of responsibility for it. Accordingly, the inequality of this relation is a function not of the exercise of power but of the assumption of responsibility.

The self-reflexive meditation on reading in the closing pages of *Foe* clarifies the singular nature of the engagement that this novel envisages with history. The point of the text's resolute eschewal of history is that it aspires to inspire the reader with infinity: that is, it seeks not to *represent* history but to *perform* the ethical. It endeavours to expose the reader to that which will *concern* him/her and thereby to become the means through which his/her relations with others in history will be affected.

Levinas's views on the entry of the ethical into the political explain how the ethical relation that the text attempts to secure between reader and other is able to affect the reader's relations in the political domain. For him, the ethical relation is not "clandestine", it does not occur in private, outside the public domain. As he puts it, "The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other" and "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (Levinas [1961]1991: 213). Expressed differently, the relation to the other is also a relation to the community, to humanity as a whole. The ethical moment implies a political moment.

In Levinas's conception of the entry of the ethical into the community, the event of the face-to-face encounter has the consequence that the unequal, asymmetrical ethical relation comes to mediate those relations already extant in the community. This, as Simon Critchley explains (1992: 227), is the implication of Levinas's assertion that "the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence" (Levinas [1974]1981: 58). All relations in the community that has been entered by the ethical are "based on the inegalitarian moment of the ethical relation" (Critchley 1992: 227). It would seem, then, that by virtue of the coexistence of the other with the third

party, community is invested with a “double structure” and, in consequence, the unequal ethical relation constantly interrupts the relations among members of the community (p. 227). This “double structure” underpins Levinas’s conception of justice. Thus, for instance, he is at pains to point out that “justice is not a legality regulating human masses, from which a technique of social equilibrium is drawn, harmonizing antagonistic forces”, and that it “is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity [to the other]” (Levinas [1974]1981: 59). The outcome of this “doubl[ing of] all discourse” (Levinas [1961]1991: 213) which proceeds from society’s “double structure” would therefore be an ethical community, that is, a community which is grounded in the irreducibility of the responsible relation of same to other and which resists totality by eliciting the constant interruptions of infinity.

In entering the community, then, the ethical *alters* the political. That is to say, it “justifies” the political. It generates an order “which maintains within itself the trace of the ethical Saying” (Critchley 1992: 232).

It seems clear that the image of reading with which *Foe* concludes envisages an ethical community. Should, for instance, the actual reader’s response to the novel follow the course of the reader-figure in the text, she/he will be concerned by the alterity that the text intimates. And, given the fact that the ethical moment implies a political moment, the reader’s proximity to the other will inevitably affect his/her relations in the order of the political. His/her unequal relation to the other will *mediate* his/her relations with his/her fellow human beings. Through its relation with the reader, then, the novel contrives to “justify” his/her community by installing in it a “double structure”. It projects a community that is grounded in an irreducible ethical relation, rather than the specular recognition of self in object, and which, accordingly, recognises difference.

It follows from my argument in this article that *Foe*’s rejection of history as an *a priori* structure and insistence on its autonomy should be read in the context of its positing of the ethical relation as *a priori* of *a prioris*, that is, its assertion that the ethical relation possesses a radical priority which enables it to mediate relations in history. If read in this way, it becomes clear that this novel’s rejection of history is motivated by the desire to effect the justification of the political by the ethical. Quite simply, for Coetzee, politics *begins* as ethics. *Foe* does “engage” with history but in a way that is very different to that used by most politically committed writers. Unlike conventional forms of engaged writing that seek to oppose political violence through resistance, this novel’s strategy of excession attempts to resist *all* violence by imparting a sense of the radical opposition of the absolute other. By exposing the reader to that which is exterior to history, it attempts to *concern* and so alter him/her. Differently put, Coetzee’s novel’s endeavour to affect the reader, and through

him/her history, is not grounded in *force*, but in the ethical authority of the *face* – that is, in a form of authority that is divested of power.⁵ Self-evidently, a text that relies on the authority of the transcendental other for its engagement with history can only achieve this engagement by withdrawing from history – that is, by occupying an “autonomous place”.

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5. In outlining the form of engagement through ethical resistance that is self-reflexively postulated in *Foe*, I have overlooked the way in which this novel questions its ability to secure the reader's inspiration by the other. So, for example, my reading of the novel does not trace the implications of the character Foe's elision of the “touches of mystery” from Susan Barton's account of life on the island – in particular, the suggestion that the strategy of excession in this story does not curb the reading subject's violent autonomy. Clearly, this thematisation of the effect of the sense of otherness conveyed by the text on the reading subject invests the novel with a degree of ontogenetic doubt. It questions the ability of the linguistic text to impart a sense of alterity. I would claim, though, that this ontogenetic doubt qualifies, rather than subverts, the novel's argument for an ethical mode of writing. For an elaboration of this claim, see Marais (1997).

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