

Foes: Plato, Derrida, and Coetzee: Rereading J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

Frank England

Summary

The novels of J.M. Coetzee both invite and reward multiple readings, and *Foe* (1986) remains one of Coetzee's most deliberately innovative and literary of novels. In a prescient act, a conference on *Foe* was hosted by the Theory of Literature Department at Unisa as early as 1988, only some two years after its publication, which resulted in the perspicacious and incisive scrutiny of this aesthetically strategic work. More recently, Attridge (2005) has revisited his 1992 examination of *Foe*, and argued that the novel is both a plea for canonical status and an attempt to widen the canon. Following Attridge's (2005) insightful essay, this article also returns to *Foe*, and appropriates Gräbe's (1989: 176) observation that "the Derridean notion of the textualisation of all experience" informs the work, and therefore rereads it as a commentary on, and critique of, one of Jacques Derrida's most influential essays, "La Pharmacie de Platon".

Opsomming

J.M. Coetzee se romans vra om herlees te word en beloon ook die leser dienoreenkomstig. *Foe* (1986) bly een van Coetzee se mees doelbewus innoverende en literêre romans. Asof met voorkennis het die Departement Algemene Literatuurwetenskap aan UNISA reeds in 1988, skaars twee jaar na die publikasie van *Foe*, 'n konferensie daarvoor aangebied wat tot 'n skerpsinnige en indringende beskouing van hierdie esteties strategiese werk gelei het. Attridge (2005) het in 'n meer onlangse herbeskouing van sy 1992-ondersoek van *Foe* geredeneer dat die roman sowel 'n pleidooi om kanonieke status is as 'n poging om die kanon te verbreed. In opvolging van Attridge (2005) se insiggewende essay, handel hierdie artikel ook oor *Foe*, en eien dit Gräbe (1989: 176) se waarneming toe dat "the Derridean notion of the textualisation of all experience" die werk toelig en dit daarom as kommentaar en kritiek op "La Pharmacie de Platon", een van Jacques Derrida se invloedrykste opstelle, beskou word.

1

J.M. Coetzee's often allegorical (Chapman 2006: 8, 148), yet innovative, self-reflexive, and literary novels, which invite "the reader to experience an alterity that cannot be domesticated" (Poyner 2006: 10), have engendered a sense of "bafflement" (Attridge 2005: ix-xi) amongst scholars and general readers alike. After the publication of *Disgrace* (1999b), a novel that, in an important sense, appropriated the themes of many of Coetzee's previous novels and pursued them in a devastatingly incisive manner (Stratton 2002), and, following the autobiographical palimpsest, *Youth* (2002), a collection of writings entitled *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, appeared in 2003. This book included the reconfigured nineteenth Ben Belitt Lecture, which was delivered at Bennington College in Vermont in 1996 and initially recorded as "What Is Realism?" (Coetzee 1997), and the Tanner Lectures at Princeton in 1997, which were published previously as *The Lives of Animals* (1999a).¹ Thus, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) was somewhat of a pastiche, both postmodern, in the manner in which eight essays, often diverse in subject, were stitched together, and also metafictional, since its form and content generated a sense not only of aporia, but also of deliberate reflection, about the novelistic form and the art of fiction. Then *Slow Man* appeared in 2005, in which the eponymous heroine of the previous novel, namely, Elizabeth Costello, who "appeared" both at Princeton in *The Lives of Animals* (1999a)² and in the Ben Belitt Lecture in 1996, played a prominent part.

"Le souci et la sollicitation", this anxiety and the shaking of the conventional novelistic form and content, which variously is evident in the whole of the Coetzee corpus, when "on perçoit la structure dans l'instance de la menace, au moment où l'imminence du péril concentre nos regards sur la clef de voûte d'une institution, sur la pierre où se résumait sa possibilité et sa fragilité" (Derrida 1967a: 13), foregrounds the "possibility and the fragility" of the craft of the novel, and the more deliberate preterition of traditional protocols in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) continued its work, its *ergon*, in *Slow Man* (2005), although in a muted form. Nevertheless, the novelistic tremor of Costello's reappearance in the latter book led Anita Brookner to comment: "This interruption on Coetzee's part is either post-modern or pre-modern: it is in either case uncomfortable" (*The Spectator* 10 September 2005). More recently, Coetzee has adopted a journal format, with more than one contributor to the entries, in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007),

-
1. In fact, in *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003), only "Lessons 7 & 8" had not been published previously.
 2. Peter Singer (in Coetzee 1999a: 85-91) wonders how to respond to the Tanner Lectures, because he does not know whether the views expressed are those of the "fictional Costello" or the "factual Coetzee".

thereby continuing the “reconfiguration” of the “sanctioned forms” of the novel, as he has done since the appearance of *Dusklands* in 1974 (Chapman 2006: 146). Indeed, the examination and reconsideration of the art of fiction has accompanied Coetzee from that first novel, in which evidence of “defictionalization” may already be observed. This technique is employed again in the following novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1978), which also includes “a linguistic scepticism and an awareness of the artificiality or constructedness of meaning in language” (de Jong 2004: 76, 78).

But, until *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), where the artifice of structure is deliberately foregrounded, arguably the novel that may be Coetzee’s most neoteric with respect to format, intertextual devices, narrative voice, and narratological probing, is *Foe* (1986), and the distance between the two works of some seventeen years may not be insignificant. Marais recalls

the acrimony, even dismay, with which the publication of *Foe* in 1986 was met. While the country was burning, quite literally in many places ... here was one of our most prominent authors writing about the writing of a somewhat pedestrian eighteenth-century English novelist. Nothing could have seemed further removed from the specificities and exigencies of life in the eighties in South Africa.³

(Marais 2006: 83)

However, for the ideological critics, the oppressive South African context does, in fact, appear perceptible in Coetzee’s “creative misreading” of Robinson Crusoe’s black servant, Friday, who now is mute. And the defenders of, what appeared to many as, an abstruse project at a politically explosive *kairos* could point to Coetzee’s emerging worth as a novelist, since “the anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1994: 8) that was pressing upon him is “usually taken to be the earliest novel in English” (Mullan 2006: 40), namely, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Moreover, subsequent information denotes the formidable impact of *Robinson Crusoe* upon Coetzee’s development as a writer, and, indeed, his early perplexity at the relationship between a first-person narrator and an authorial figure in a novel that was “written by himself” (Attridge 2005: 199).

3. Dovey, in the special edition of the *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* on Coetzee’s *Foe*, opens her article by stating:

Shortly after the publication of *Foe* in 1986, a review appeared under the heading: “Postmodern Games While Soweto Burns”. This title carries the implication that postmodernism is *not* an appropriate literary mode in a situation such as South Africa, and, by extension, the implication that certain modes of writing *are* appropriate to a greater or lesser degree in the context of such blatant and legalized oppression.

(Dovey 1989: 117)

But Marais's (2006: 83) comment about the initial reception of *Foe* during cumulative and violent civil conflict in South Africa suggests the question: Why? Why, after the publication of four "relatively" conventional novels – even if they may be innovatively parabolic and experimental in the unfolding of their actions in plot and in their technique of commentary and characterisation, namely, *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1978), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) – did Coetzee write *Foe*? Or, more precisely, why did Coetzee write *Foe* when he did, in the mid-1980s?

Whilst it may be agreed that not only had Defoe's novel been influential upon Coetzee's own imaginative development and not only could the novel be read as socio-politically relevant, a matter noted above and to which we shall return, it must also be emphasised that, for Coetzee, Defoe exercised "a pure writerly attentiveness, pure submission to the exigencies of the world which, through being submitted to in a state so close to spiritual absorption, become transfigured, real. Defoe is a great writer, one of the purest writers we have (Coetzee 2001: 24), and it is the dedicated singularity of Defoe to his craft, his focused concentration upon the act of authorial composition in the creation of a detailed and "real" diegetic world – that rendering of "life" and "speech" into textuality – that seem to occupy Coetzee's meditation upon his literary matrix. Indeed, writing, the writerly craft, the possibility of relating events, their accuracy, arrangement, and authorship, and the place of voice (Coetzee 1992: 143), the place of speech in relation to the fictional act, appear to occupy *Foe* (1986). Stated more boldly, *Foe* (1986) scrutinises the art of fiction in which stories are narrated by means of occlusions, evasions, limited disclosures, and restricted access to the "real" – "stitched" together, as we referred to *Elizabeth Costello*, above – and, perhaps more pertinently, *Foe* (1986) examines the difficulty of replicating voiced presence in printed text.

2

A reflection on the novel and its artifice, the inscription of "real" events and dialogue into textual ciphers, engenders a return to the tradition of the novel and, indeed, to what is generally considered to be the inaugural novel of English fiction. In *Foe* (1986), Coetzee rewrites Defoe's novel by purloining aspects of it, and then writes in the envelope of Defoe's novel. But he also opens that envelope and transgresses its boundaries, by including the author of the earlier novel in his own novel.⁴ Here, the author

4. By overturning historical linearity, Coetzee (1986), in his "new work" writes "less in the envelope of the book", than prises it open, and "reads what was already written between the lines" (Derrida 1967b: 130): "moins de confier à

becomes a character, but, in addition, Coetzee's resourceful device selects life as much as art as he ventures behind Defoe to Foe, which was Defoe's original surname. This act of incorporation invites Daniel Defoe, or Foe, to exist as a character in a novel about his own novel, in a manner in which it never occurred when the original book was published, since on the title page of the first edition the author was said to be "Robinson Crusoe".⁵

The form of *Foe* (1986) immediately strikes the reader as usual, who, concomitantly, becomes attentive to a deliberate aesthetic strategy at work. The first section of the novel appears in quotation marks, and comprises 40 pages.⁶ Susan Barton tells of the events that led her to become a "castaway" on a "strange island" (p. 1). Her "only daughter was abducted and conveyed to the New World ... [and] ... I followed in search of her" (p. 10). In Bahia, an Atlantic coastal state of Brazil, she received no assistance, and "lived in lodgings, and took in sewing, and searched, and waited, but saw no trace of my child. So, despairing at last, and my means giving out, I embarked for Lisbon on a merchantman" (p. 10). Following a mutiny on board the ship, "I was set adrift in sight of this island" (p. 11). There she meets Robinson Crusoe (p. 11) and his black (p. 1) servant, Friday, who is mute. Ultimately they are conveyed on "a merchantman named the *John Hobart*, making for Bristol with a cargo of cotton and indigo" (p. 38). Crusoe dies on board, when they "were yet three days from port" (p. 44). In the final paragraph, the reader discovers that Susan Barton has been addressing an author, Mr Foe: "Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Crusoe or as a bold adventuress?" (p. 45).

The second section of 64 pages, and also in quotations marks, consists of a series of dated letters from Susan Barton to Mr Foe, often asking him how the writing of the events, which she has related in the first section, are progressing. When she visits the house of Mr Foe, she finds it empty – "the bailiffs plundered it" (p. 93) – and she and Friday move in. A girl appears, who informs Susan Barton that she is her daughter and possesses the same name: "She says that her father was a brewer. That she was born in Deptford in May of 1702. That I am her mother" (p. 75). However, Susan refuses to receive the girl as her daughter, but informs her that she is Mr Foe's daughter (p. 91). After residing in the house for a while, Susan, in a

l'enveloppe du livre des écritures inédites que de lire enfin ce qui, dans les volumes, s'écrivait déjà entre les lignes."

5. The original title read: *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited island n the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke. Written by Himself* (in de Kock (2003: 86)).
6. The text of *Foe* referred to throughout is the first edition, published by Ravan (Johannesburg) in 1986. All references are indicated by page numbers only.

dreamlike sequence, takes the girl into a forest and informs her that she is "Father-born" (p. 91). An ellipsis finds Susan waking at dawn in London, and she wonders: "Is the girl gone forever? Have I expelled her, banished her, lost her at last in the forest?" (p. 91). Meanwhile Friday dons Foe's robes and wigs, dances about in them (pp. 92-93), and plays a recorder, which Susan has left out for him to find (p. 95). Susan writes "a deed granting Friday his freedom and signed it in Cruso's name" (p. 99), and she and Friday set off for Bristol, where, at Susan's instigation, Friday may board a ship for Africa, and gain his freedom. However, she detects that should she leave Friday with the ship's master, he will be sold into slavery once again. Thus, Susan informs Foe: "So the castle I had built in the air, namely that Friday should sail for Africa and I return to London my own mistress at last, came tumbling about my ears" (p. 111).

In the third section of 39 pages, Susan and Friday locate Foe in lodgings in Kensington Row (p. 113), and move in with him. Now Susan Barton has become a first-person narrator, and she and Foe discuss, amongst other things, the place of writing in relation to speech, and the art of fiction. These exchanges appropriate issues about the nature of fictional writing which have troubled Susan in the second section. Here they receive a more extended treatment, as Foe endeavours to entice from the voiceless Friday "a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken ... [at the] ... heart of the story" (p. 140). How to make a voiceless voice speak is Foe's conundrum, or, more precisely, how to give voice to the self-presence of Friday. Susan tells Foe: "All my efforts to bring Friday to speech, or to bring speech to Friday, have failed" (p. 142). This exchange, arguably, leads to a pivotal concern of the book, and returns to a matter which Susan had begun to consider in the second section, when she meditated upon the craft of writing stories (pp. 88-89). Friday's inability to speak frustrates Foe, who suggests that Susan teach him to write. But, for Susan graphic inscriptions merely reflect spoken utterances, and without speech there can be no writing. However, Foe states that writing is a ubiquitous gift, and that "[n]one is so deprived that he cannot write" (p. 144).

The fourth section, of only 5 pages, consists of two endings, with the presence of a first-person extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, who is "the supreme or ultimate focaliser in the function of an authorial agent" (Gräbe 1988: 150).⁷ In the first part, the narrator enters the lodgings of Foe and

7. A similar narrative innovation is evident in *Atonement* by Ian McEwan (2001). Briony Tallis, who, in the coda, is revealed as the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator of a novel in which she is a character at a much younger age. Finney's comments about *Atonement* are not without relevance to Coetzee's *Foe* (1986):

I read this novel as a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction *Atonement*, then, is concerned

finds Susan and Foe, who are dead, lying in bed side by side. Behind an alcove, separated by a curtain, the narrator discovers Friday, alive with only an echoing presence of his past. He lies down, moves closer, and “with an ear to his mouth [I] lie waiting. At first there is nothing. Then, if I can ignore the beating of my own heart, I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a seashell From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island” (p. 154). In the second part of the short final section, the narrator re-enters the house, but now, on the outside, “a plaque is bolted to the wall. *Daniel Defoe, Author*, are the words, white on blue, and then more writing too small to read” (p. 155). A girl lies dead on the landing, the girl, Susan, whilst in the bed lie Foe and Susan Barton. In a dispatch box, the narrator finds yellowed paper which crumbles, but he is able to make out the words, “Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further” (p. 155). The narrative continues: “With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip over-board” (p. 155). He dives down to a wreck, and discovers the swollen bodies of Susan Barton and her dead captain, and the body of Friday. He runs “a fingernail across [Friday’s] teeth 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” (p. 157).

3

On the one hand, the narratological devices in *Foe* (1986) generate a host of interesting, often intriguing, avenues of literary inquiry (esp. see Gräbe 1989). On the other hand, the unusual aesthetic form and strategy of the novel retains an aporistic conundrum, and, as Attridge (2005) proposes, may be read both as an appeal for access to the canon of literature, and as a plea to widen it. But the debate about canonicity in the field of literary studies – its definition, establishment, boundaries, and, indeed, openness – is fraught with difficulty (see, inter alia, Bloom (1987); MacIntyre (1990); Bloom (1994)). And whilst Coetzee’s *Foe* returns to *a*, or, arguably, *the*, seminal English novel, and examines the writerly craft in articulating “the silent heart” of a story, one suggests rather that the text itself resounds with two philosophical precursors, namely, Plato and Derrida, or, perhaps more accurately, Plato through Derrida, and “clearly evokes the Derridean notion of the textualisation of all experience” (Gräbe 1989: 176).

with the dangers of entering a fictional world and the compensations and limitations which that world can offer its readers and writers.
(Finney 2004: 69)

Derrida's influential essay, "La Pharmacie de Platon" originally appeared in two editions of *Tel Quel* in 1968, and was republished in *La dissémination* in 1972, and subsequently released in translation in 1981.⁸ The essay opens by referring to the beginning of Plato's dialogue, *Phaedrus*. Phaedrus invites Socrates to accompany him on "a walk outside the wall" (227a3) of the city. Alongside the Ilissus river, they discuss the story of Boreas seizing Oreithyia (229b5), "whilst she was sporting with Pharmacia" (229c5). *Pharmaceia* as a common, rather than a proper, noun, signifies the use of *pharmaka*, which are drugs, medicines, remedies, spells, and poisons, and, reflecting upon the stroll in the countryside, Derrida (1972: 79) notes the seductive nature of a drug and the spell it casts, which causes a departure from the customary paths, and a venture in foreign territory.⁹ Already perceptible is both the "castaway" and the narrative experimentation in *Foe* (1986). Derrida's (1972: 82) observation of the appearance of Pharmacia and the associated terms and dispersed semantic field around this word causes him to proceed to the final section of the *Phaedrus*, where "this time, without hidden meditation, without secret argumentation, writing is proposed, presented, declared as a *pharmakon*".¹⁰

-
8. Although it may be suggested that Coetzee may have read this essay; undoubtedly, it is unlikely that one would be able to confirm this proposal. Although one is aware of the problematics of the intentionalist fallacy and authorial conjecture, one proposes that the suggestion that Derrida's "La Pharmacie de Platon" informs *Foe* (1986) is not without merit. Unfortunately, Coetzee, who is always reticent to volunteer information, is not asked about this essay in *Doubling the Point* (1992), although he is asked about other texts that may inform his fiction, like those of Foucault, for example (Coetzee 1992: 246-247). If the proposal may be entertained, and given Coetzee's (1992: 57) admission about his "frustrated" relationship with foreign languages, one could add the further conjecture that Coetzee may have read Derrida's essay after its translation in 1981. Thus, it is possible that the time-frame would cohere with the writing of *Foe* (1986). But, in contrast, it must be stated forthrightly that, quite obviously, whether or not Coetzee was aware of Derrida's (1972) essay is of little relevance to the primary intention of this article, namely, that examining *Foe* (1986) through the lens of "La Pharmacie de Platon" may enrich scholarly discussions and debates on Coetzee's work.
9. Derrida (1972: 79): "Opérant par séduction, le *pharmakon* fait sortir des voies et des lois générales, naturelles ou habituelles."
10. Derrida (1972: 82): "Cette fois, sans détour, sans méditation cachée, sans argumentation secrète, l'écriture est proposée, présentée, déclarée comme un *pharmakon*".

The discussion to which Derrida (1972) adverts is the story that Socrates tells of an exchange between the king of Egypt, Thamus, who was called Ammon, and Theuth, who was

the first to discover arithmetic and computation, and geometry and astronomy, and in addition, both the game of draughts and dice-playing, and the alphabet Thamus said many things about each of the crafts ... but when it came to the letters, Theuth said: "But this knowledge, O King, will provide the Egyptians with good memories and make them wiser, for I have found the *pharmakon* of memory and wisdom."

(274d-e)

In his reply, Thamus refers to Theuth as "being the father of letters", who, owing to his

kindly disposition towards them, you say the opposite of what they are able to accomplish. This craft will provide a forgetfulness in the souls of those who have acquired it, through lack of practice, since their confidence in writing is in foreign forms from outside themselves, and not being reminded from inside themselves by themselves. You have found a *pharmakon* not of memory but of reminding.

(275a)

Socrates notes that writing as an aid to memory merely gives those with access to it the veneer of wisdom, "the conceit of wisdom instead of wisdom" (275b), and he then compares writing to painting. The images created by the artist "stand there like living things, but if one asks them anything, they are utterly and solemnly silent. It is the same with written words: you might think that they spoke as though containing intelligence, but if you ask something, wishing to learn what they are saying, they always signify only one and the same thing" (275d). In situations of difficulty, writing, being both inflexible and inanimate, is unable to fight its own battles and requires "its father" (275e) to assist it. It is the illegitimate brother to speech (276a); it is a phantom image to living spoken words (276a).

Derrida's (1972) commentary foregrounds a number of binary oppositions in the *Phaedrus*, and particularly those of speech over writing, of the legitimate son over the bastard. But Plato's text, like any other, cannot avoid "at least, virtual, dynamic, lateral relations with all the words which compose the system of the Greek language",¹¹ and these linkages engender a diverse and pluri-dimensional field of varying degrees of force and significance (Derrida 1972: 148). This open dispersion of signifiers shifts

11. Derrida (1972: 148): "... être en rapport, de manière au moins virtuelle, dynamique, latérale, avec tous les mots composant le système de la langue grecque".

the focus from *pharmakon*, the neuter noun, and invokes the secondary meaning of the masculine and feminine noun *pharmakos*, which is that of “scapegoat”.

The ceremonious re-establishment of the coherence of, and order in, the *polis* is undertaken by expelling the *pharmakos*, which bears the evils and misdeeds of the citizens and their city. This symbolic rite dispatches the victim beyond the boundaries of the city. It carries across the threshold those actions and aspects of the city and its populace which are declared otiose, but, significantly, which have been fostered internally. That which is sent into the barren exterior is that which has been “maintained and nourished” internally. The vices and malpractices, injustices and injuries are those of the citizens themselves. The hinterland is *toujours déjà*, the metropolis; the foreign is the familiar. Thus, the city’s limits will need to be transgressed again and again, in order to jettison the intramural offences and improprieties. The borders remain porous and closure cannot be effected.¹²

Writing, Derrida (1972) asserts, is that *pharmakos*, externalised and shunned; the illegitimate son, with no place in the city, but born, bred, fed, and housed within it, a position which itself argues for the legitimacy of the illegitimate. And the necessity of repeating the rite of expurgation signifies the incipient and perennial presence of that which is corrupt and depraved within. In the same way, the attempt to view writing as secondary to speech, as the externalised graphemes of internalised thought, fails in the very notion of signification. Presence, whether self-presence in thought or in speech, is *toujours déjà* representivity, and “the representative is not the represented, but only the representative of the represented; it is not the same as itself. As representative, it is not simply the other of the represented. The evil of representation or of the supplement is neither the same nor the other. It intervenes at the moment of difference and deferral” (Derrida 1967b: 419),¹³ and severs pristine self-present originality, because “the essence itself of presence, if it must always repeat itself in another presence, originally opens, within presence itself, the structure of representation” (Derrida 1967b: 439).¹⁴ In the activity of representation, essence ceases to

12. Derrida (1972: 152): “Mais le représentant de l’extérieur n’en est pas moins *constitué*, régulièrement mis en place par la communauté, choisi, si l’on peut dire, dans son sein, entretenu, nourri par elle, etc.”

13. Derrida (1967b: 419): “... le représentant n’est pas le représenté mais il n’est que le représentant du représenté; il n’est pas le même que lui-même. En tant que représentant, il n’est pas simplement l’autre du représenté. Le mal du représentant ou du supplément de la présence n’est ni le même ni l’autre. Il intervient au moment de la différance”

be other than “a play of representation ...” (Derrida, 1967b: 439).¹⁵ And speech, like writing, is a repetition and, whether “doubling the point” in utterances or in letters, the supplementarity and profusion of semantic possibilities abound.

4

Once aware of Derrida’s meditation upon the *Phaedrus*, its presence may be difficult to ignore in Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986). The mute Friday represents pristine self-presence, a self-presence that Foe attempts to prise open, but Friday has no tongue and is prevented from “ever telling his story How will we ever know the truth?” asks Cruso (p. 23). Thus, Friday is excluded from representivity in an utterance or a string of letters. He is denied the possibility of “doubling his point”, which would open a wide interpretive field. In the final paragraphs of the novel, the first-person narrator attempts to access Friday’s story: “I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in” (p. 157). However, he realises that “this is not a place of words” (p. 157), where “this” may be both the place of wreckage and death, as well as the mute person himself. Likewise, somewhat earlier, when Foe is attempting to “make Friday’s silence speak” (p. 142), he recalls an episode in which Susan tells of Friday rowing out to sea, then stopping, and scattering petals (p. 31). Foe says: “Friday rows his log of wood across the dark pupil – or the dead socket – of an eye staring up at him from the floor of the sea To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye” (p. 141). Friday provides no verbal or written signifier to aid the interpreter. In contrast to the self-present Friday, the non-signifier, Cruso possesses speech, he signifies, but, like Socrates, he has no need of writing. He does not require an *aid to memory*, as Theuth lauded writing, and he keeps no journal. “Nothing is forgotten,” says Cruso (p. 17), and documenting his experiences in writing will engender “forgetfulness in the souls of those who have acquired it” (*Phaedrus* 275a). And, whilst he may be capable of forgetfulness, he informs Susan that “nothing I have forgotten is worth remembering” (p. 17). But Susan disagrees, because it is the details of ordinary occurrences, the events that are forgotten as being of little importance, that “will one day persuade your countrymen that it is all true, every word ...” (p. 18). Writing, for Susan, paints reality, and presents truth: “If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what

14. Derrida (1967b: 439): “... l’essence même de la présence, si elle doit toujours se répéter dans une autre présence, ouvre originellement, dans la présence même, la structure de la représentation.”

15. Derrida (1967b: 439): “Et si l’essence est *la* présence, il n’y a pas d’essence de la présence ni de présence de l’essence. Il y a un jeu de la représentation.”

will be the worth of it?" she asks Captain Smith (p. 40). At this stage, for Susan, written words represent the truthful accounts of existence. They depict permanent and "real" experiences, and each time the words are recounted, they will tell that story truthfully, since "they always signify only one and the same thing" (*Phaedrus* 275d). But, says Captain Smith, the trade of the booksellers, who will hire a story-teller to document her tale, "is in books, not in truth" (p. 40).

In the second section of the novel, Coetzee appropriates the comparison between painting and writing found in the *Phaedrus* (275d), but in a manner different from that of Socrates. Here, through Susan Barton, Coetzee begins to develop a distinctive notion of writing. Whilst it is Romantic in its exaltation of the gifted creativity of the artist, it is also creatively inter-textual, playful, and citationally open. The Realism which Coetzee (2001) celebrates in Defoe, is like that of the painter who portrays what is seen, even though "to render his composition more lively he is at liberty to bring into it what may not be there on the day he paints but may be there on other days Thus we see the painter selecting and composing and rendering particulars in order to body forth a pleasing fullness in his scene" (p. 88).¹⁶ By contrast, the creative imagination of the "story-teller ... must *divine* which episodes of his story hold promise of fullness, and tease from them their hidden meanings, braiding these together as one braids a rope" (pp. 88-89; my italics). After "divining" which episodes are most appropriate – "it is not without justice that this art is called divining", says Susan (p. 89) – the technical skill of fictional composition is employed, the "teasing and braiding" (p. 89) and interweaving of episodes, stories, and texts. Plato presents "writing as an occult power and, as a consequence, suspect", which therefore belongs to the mantic seers, the magicians, and sorcerers (Derrida 1972: 110).¹⁷ Here the writer is that seer, who, like the inspired genius of Romanticism, divines the incipient power of various episodes. But then the technical task of selection, "complication," and "intertwining" is undertaken, which involves "weaving the system of differences" by skilful "intertwining, interlacing, and crisscrossing" (Derrida 1972: 191),¹⁸ which is

16. In the Ben Belitt Lecture, which Coetzee (1996: 21) has Elizabeth Costello "deliver", Costello states: "There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water', there was indeed a glass of water, and a table, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them both. But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems."

17. Derrida (1972: 110): "Platon tient à présenter l'écriture comme une puissance occulte et par conséquent suspecte On sait aussi sa méfiance à l'égard de la mantique, des magiciens, des ensorceleurs, des maîtres d'envoûtement."

that “weaving and braiding” of which Susan Barton speaks. Furthermore, and in contrast to the first section, Susan now begins to puzzle over the manner in which “a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word” and, thereby, defeats the attempt “to neutralize citational play” (Derrida 1972: 111).¹⁹ The chain of signification does not permit closure and stasis of meaning and, as Susan takes Friday to Bristol and towards his liberation, she ponders, “He does not understand that I am leading him to freedom. He does not know what freedom is. Freedom is a word, less than a word, a noise, one of the multitude of noises I make when I open my mouth” (pp. 100-101). The “noise” of “freedom” may be apprehended in numerous ways, which is illustrated more precisely in Marlborough, where Susan and Friday are called “gipsies”. Susan reflects: “Twice have Friday and I been called gipsies. What is a gipsy? What is a highwayman? Words seem to have *new meanings* here in west country. Am I become a gipsy unknown to myself?” (pp. 108-109; my italics).

In the third section, the sustained discussion between Foe and Susan reflects Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Derrida’s critique of it more closely. Foe meditates upon the event referred to above, when Susan had observed Friday “paddling out some hundred yards from the shelf into the thickest of the seaweed ... [where he] ... brought out handfuls of white flakes which he began to scatter over the water” (p. 31). This action, for Foe, is the “silence”, which represents the “heart” or the “eye” of a story which requires telling (p. 141). Friday’s pristine self-presence, which has been noted, is an obstacle: “We must make Friday’s silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday”, says Foe (p. 142). But, replies Susan, “All my efforts to bring Friday to speech, or to bring speech to Friday, have failed” (p. 142). Once again, the *Phaedrus* and “La Pharmacie de Platon” are more directly invoked. Foe appears rather like Theuth before King Thamus, and he asks Susan, “Have you shown him writing?” Susan, adhering to the hierarchy of speech over writing, of phonemes over graphemes, and of the unity of thought and speech, asks “How can he write if he cannot speak? Letters are the mirror of words. Even when we seem to write in silence, our writing is the manifest of a speech spoken within ourselves or to ourselves” (p. 142). Perceptible in her statement is the reply of King Thamus to Theuth’s invention, and the exaltation of speech and the marginalisation of

18. Here Derrida (1972: 191) is dealing with the “*sumplokè tôn eidôn*”, the “intertwining of forms”, inherent in any discourse, whether of dialectical or grammatical science, which entails “l’entrelacement tissant le système des différences ... des genres ou des formes, la *sumplokè tôn eidôn* par laquelle ‘le discours nous est né’ (*a logos genonen emin*) ([Phaedrus] 259e).”

19. Derrida (1972: 111): “Quand un mot s’inscrit comme la citation d’un autre sens de ce même mot ... le choix d’un seul de ces mots ... a pour premier effet de neutraliser le jeu citationnel”

writing: “[C]onfidence in writing is in foreign forms from outside themselves, and [of] not being reminded from inside themselves by themselves” (*Phaedrus*, 275a), which the unity of thought and utterance would ensure in its “truthful representation”.

However, in the Derridean idiom, Foe’s response exalts the power of writing, and also adverts to its uniqueness, which, in fact, recalls the writer as a “Romantic *pharmakos*” as a sorcerer possessed of magical power: “Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech. Be attentive to yourself as you write and you will mark there are times when the words form themselves on the paper *de novo*, as the Romans used to say, out of the deepest silences” (pp. 142-143). More stridently, Foe then suggests the inversion of the hierarchy of speech over writing: “We are accustomed to believe that our world was created by God speaking the Word; but I ask you, may it not rather be that he wrote it, wrote a Word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it?” (p. 143). And rather than a written word merely permanently repeating an utterance in an unaltered form, Foe states the alternative emphatically, overturns the hierarchy of speech over writing, and empowers the latter: “Speech is but a means through which the word may be uttered, it is not the word itself” (p. 143). However, Susan remains unconvinced and, once again evoking King Thamus’s derision of written words because “they always signify only one and the same thing” (*Phaedrus* 275d), she observes Foe inscribing “the same story over and over, in version after version, stillborn every time ...” (Coetzee 1986: 151).

In the final section, the authorial narrator focaliser puzzles over the notion of story-telling, and extends the earlier reflections on speech, writing, and the craft of fiction beyond those of Plato and Derrida (1972). The deliberate and unexpected intrusion of this authorial agent anticipates a supplementarity and augmentation of the problematics of writing stories, and, in this short two-fold conclusion, comment is passed upon the body as a site of resistance and the problematics of the “bodying forth” of words.

5

Coetzee’s novels both invite and reward multiple readings. In a corpus which explores and tests fictional techniques, and includes the more recent narratological experimentation in *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), amongst the most innovative and “literary” of Coetzee’s novels is *Foe* (1986), in which the aesthetic strategy is foregrounded deliberately, and the questions about the philosophy of writing and the craft of fiction are purposefully reflected upon. It has been contended that it is enriching to read this novel as a commentary upon Derrida’s (1972) critique of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Not only is

it proposed that the issues probed by Derrida (1972) may be palpable in the novel; but the argument in the *Phaedrus*, and even some of its phraseology, may also be perceptible in *Foe* (1986). The aberrant and irregular nature of *Foe* (1986), with its palimpsestical quality, its intertextual citations, and its philosophical discussions, attracts readers to take up Derrida's (1967b: 130) challenge that "because we are beginning to write, to write differently, we must re-read differently".²⁰ Without denying or opposing alternative readings of *Foe* (1986), this "different re-reading" attempts to highlight a literary and philosophical context of the novel, which may add to the ongoing conversation and debate about Coetzee's novels.

The deconstructionist legitimation of intertextual citational and palimpsestical techniques permits Coetzee (1986) to overwrite Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. But Defoe's *Roxana* is also intertwined, "braided", into the fabric of *Foe* (1986), which, in Nethersole's (2005: 274) acute observation, "subverts the concept of experiencing unitary subjecthood, together with the notion of the author as the sole originary source of his/her work, rendering biographical criticism questionable". Thus, as stories create subjects, so amongst the central issues in *Foe* (1986) are the important questions of whose story is being told, which story ought to be told, and how to tell the story of a potential subject who withholds his own story, that is, how to "tease" out the tale and then "braid" it. Authorial-narrative power in *Foe* (1986) is held by Susan, by Foe, and by a first-person narrator focaliser; but, ultimately and silently, it is retained by Friday. Moreover, textual borders are transgressed and, resembling the *pharmakos*, which is reared within the city but is dispatched across its borders to the outside, Susan Barton's "own story before and after the period on the island, involving her lost daughter ... becomes Defoe's novel *Roxana*" (Attridge 2005: 78). Lightly inscribed within *Foe* (1986), the episode is marginalised from its centrality in *Roxana*, and ultimately it is exceeded when the girl is cast out (another "castaway") and abandoned in the forest. Coetzee's (1986: 72-92) intertextual fidelity in his treatment of the confrontation between Susan Barton and her "daughter", Susan, is evident in Blewett's (in Defoe 1982: 22) introductory remarks to *Roxana*, although these loose ends do not require "braiding" in Coetzee's (1986) novel: "The dark ending of the novel, the story of her daughter Susan's desperate attempt to force Roxana to acknowledge her and the fatal outcome of the girl's pursuit of her mother, draws together the diverse strands of the book." Additional citational play may appear in the presence of three poems, namely Tennyson's "The Kraken" (pp. 140, 156), Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" (pp. 142, 155-156), and Yeats's "Long-legged Fly" (pp. 143-144).²¹

20. Derrida (1967b: 130): "Parce que nous commençons à écrire, à écrire autrement, nous devons relire autrement."

But as Derrida (1972) rereads and critiques the *Phaedrus*, so Coetzee (1986) rereads and critiques his foes in *Foe* (1986), who are both Derrida (1972) and Plato. First, unlike Derrida (1967a, b; 1972), who seeks less to invert binaries than to demonstrate their plaited intercalation, in *Foe*, Coetzee (1986) overturns the binary of speech (and thought) over writing and, through “an interrogation of authority” (Coetzee 1992: 247), installs God’s written word as the inaugural creative act over God’s spoken word. Thus he opposes both Derrida, who rejects hierarchical binaries, and Socrates, for whom learning and knowledge is forged only through dialogic exchanges, with the self-present Friday who cannot be written or spoken. Second, Coetzee (1986) accentuates the Romantic notion of the inspired creative genius of the poet, who is empowered to divine the appropriate episodic content for a work, which, subsequently, requires “teasing and braiding”. Third, in spite of Foe’s (Coetzee 1986: 143) contention that “we have yet to come to the end of [God’s written word]”, for Coetzee (1992: 248) “endings that inform you that the text should be understood as going on endlessly, I find aesthetically inept”. Thus Coetzee goes further than simply overturning speech with writing. Rather, he rests his conclusion to *Foe* (1986) upon the body of Friday, who “is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body” (Coetzee 1992: 248), and it is the body, asserts Coetzee (1992: 248), that is the “standard erected ... [in] ... my own fiction”. But here *lies* (its *double entendre* is deliberate) a perplexity, as well as a “free” creative possibility, for the author.

Although Friday is mute, it is Friday’s story that Foe wishes to tell (Coetzee 1986: 140-144), but “Friday cannot tell his story: it thus becomes ‘not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative’ (p. 121)” (Dunbar 1994: 105). In spite of this, however, the power of bodily presence finally absents or silences literate/writerly presence. Body-power confounds all of the authorial agents – the first-person narrator focaliser in the final section as well as the fictional authors, Susan Barton and Foe – but it retains a perplexing “weight” for the final narrator. Not only does the overwriting of Friday as mute engender an “ethical confrontation” and here, more pertinently, an “irreducibility,” as de Jong (2004: 82) drawing on Marais (1997), observes, but Friday’s presence in *writing* is absence. If “the novel’s dilemma is to negotiate a position of authorial power” (Graham 2006: 221),

-
21. Coote’s (1997: 572) comment about the notions of self-present silent thought, and its creative expression and impact is not without relevance to *Foe* (1986): “In ‘Long-legged Fly’, he [Yeats] explored the paradox that artistic geniuses, like the heroes and heroines that transform history, must meditate their turbulent, world-changing images in the silence of reclusive thought.” Furthermore, if one were to read *Foe* (1986) “forward”, one could employ Cupitt’s (1987) book, *The Long-legged Fly. A Theology of Language and Desire*, which involves a post-structuralist recasting of the Christian faith.

then the dilemma remains unresolved. Ultimate authorial power over the story that the authorial agents wish to relate is contained within the body of Friday and is withheld. Thus, Friday's body becomes the absent-present *pharmakos*, the transgressor, who holds out the salvific promise of resolution, who bears in his body the sins of those who scorn him, who exists within the city and yet is the possible conduit of redemption, a figure of silence, yet "accredited with extraordinary and transgressive psychic energies" (Parry 1998: 156). Thus, ultimately, Coetzee confronts his foes by replacing Plato's exaltation of speech and Derrida's pharmacologically versatile writing with the body-power and silent presence of Friday, which signifies "alternative futures ... one within and the other outside the formal structures of language" (Parry 1998: 155). This engenders an authorial dilemma, and one that severely troubles the postcolonial project. Friday's liberation from bondage to his body requires that "a discourse must be extracted from him, he must produce a story, and a Truth. He must, in other words, become a productive, signifying and truth-full body in terms of a dominant (White) discourse ..." (Carusi 1989: 142). But, submission to a dominant discourse constitutes a dubious "freedom," and Friday's bondage to his alternative (Black) embodiment, with its promise of a story, constitutes a resistant freedom, the silenced voice pushed beyond the borders of, and yet always present within, the city.

* All Classical Greek and French translations were undertaken by the author.

References

- Attridge, D.
2005 *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Bloom, A.
1987 *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. London: Penguin.
- Bloom, H.
1994 *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*. London: Harcourt Brace.
- Carusi, A.
1989 *Foe: The Narrative and Power*. *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 5(2): 134-144.
- Chapman, M.
2006 *Art Talk, Politics Talk: A Consideration of Categories*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Coetzee, J.M.
1974 *Dusklands*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
1978 *In the Heart of the Country*. Johannesburg: Ravan.

- 1980 *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 1983 *Life and Times of Michael K*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 1986 *Foe*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- 1992 *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews by J.M. Coetzee*, edited by David Atwell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 1997 "What is Realism?" Lecture Nineteen in the Ben Belitt Lectureship Series, November 13, 1996. Bennington: Bennington College.
- 1999a *The Lives of Animals*, edited by Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 1999b *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 2001 *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999*. London: Vintage.
- 2002 *Youth*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 2003 *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 2005 *Slow Man*. London: Vintage.
- 2007 *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Harvill Secker.
- Coote, S.
1997 *W.B. Yeats: A Life*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Cupitt, D.
1987 *The Long-legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire*. London: SCM.
- Defoe, D.
[1719] 1972 *Robinson Crusoe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[1724] 1982 *Roxana: The Unfortunate Mistress*, edited by David Blewett. London: Penguin.
- de Jong, M.
2004 Is the Writer Ethical?: The Early Novels of J.M. Coetzee up to *Age of Iron*. *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 20 (1/2): 71-93.
- de Kock, L.
2003 Splice of Life: Manipulations of the "Real" in South African English Literary Culture. *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 19(1): 82-102.
- Derrida, J.
1967a *L'écriture et la différance*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
1967b *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
1972 *La dissémination*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Dovey, T.
1989 The Intersection of Postmodern, Postcolonial and Feminist Discourse in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 5(2): 119-133.
- Dunbar, P.
1994 Double Possession: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Postcolonial and Feminist Agendas. In: Boehmer, Elleke, Chrisman, Laura, Parker, Kenneth (eds) *Altered State?: Writing and South Africa*. Sydney: Dangaroo.
- Finney, B.
2004 Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. *Journal of Modern Literature* 27(3): 68-82.

- Gräbe, I.
1989 Postmodern Narrative Strategies in *Foe*. *Journal of Literary Studies / Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 5(2): 145-182.
- Graham, L.
2006 Textual Transvestism: The Female Voice of J.M. Coetzee. In: Poyner, Jane (ed.) *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- MacIntyre, A.
1990 *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Marais, M.
2006 Death and the Space of the Response to the Other in J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*. In: Poyner, Jane (ed.) *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- McEwan, I.
2001 *Atonement*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Mullan, J.
2006 *How Novels Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nethersole, R.
2005 Reading in the In-Between: Pre-Scripting the "Postscript" to *Elizabeth Costello*. *Journal of Literary Studies / Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 21(3/4): 254-276.
- Parry, B.
1998 Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee. In: Attridge, Derek & Jolly, Rosemary (eds) *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, Democracy, 1970-1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato
1986 *Phaedrus*, with translation and commentary by C.J. Rowe. Warminster: Aris & Phillips.
- Poyner, J.
2006 *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Probyn, F.
2002 J.M. Coetzee: Writing with/out Authority. Online: <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/probyn.htm>>. Accessed on 16 August, 2007.
- Ryszard, B.
2006 The Politics of Engagement in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *In the Heart of the Country*. In: Sikorska, Liliana (ed.) *A Universe of (Hi)Stories: Essays on J.M. Coetzee*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Stratton, J.
2002 Imperial Fictions: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Ariel* 33(3/4): 83-104.