

Narrative (De)construction: Mr Coetzee, in the Basement, with the Quill: A Discussion of Authorial Complicity in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Summary

The article offers a deconstructive reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and attempts both to explain and to reveal the abusive writing employed by each of the "authors" (Susan Barton, Foe, Daniel Defoe, J.M. Coetzee) in the novel. It operates within a Derridean framework, tracing the concepts of supplementation and origin in the text to indicate how the novel simultaneously collapses and conceals its own narrative practices. Like its object, the analysis presents itself as a piece of intertextual writing which questions not only the construction of the novel (and the apparent presence of meaning inherent in it), but also its own modes of composition. A detailed discussion of Susan Barton's credibility as author is proffered, and a close inspection of Coetzee's use of punctuation aims to suggest that the author, as a fictional being, is present in the novel before Part IV. Ultimately, this article attempts to illustrate, through its self-reflexive nature, the various ways in which *Foe* betrays the fallibility of language and representation.

Opsomming

Dié dekonstruktiewe interpretasie van J.M. Coetzee se *Foe* poog om beide te verduidelik en te onthul hoe die misbruikende skryfwerk van elk van die roman se "outeurs" (Susan Barton, Foe, Daniel Defoe, J.M. Coetzee) manifesteer. Die artikel werk binne 'n Derrideaanse raamwerk en ondersoek konsepte soos supplementasie en "oorsprong" om aan te dui hoe die teks sy eie narratiewe praktyke terselfdertyd verbreek en versteek. Soos die roman, word die ontleding voorgestel as 'n stuk intertekstuele skryfwerk wat nie net die konstruksie van die roman nie, maar ook sy eie konstruksie bevraagteken. 'n Gedetailleerde bespreking van Susan Barton se geloofwaardigheid as outeur word voortgesit, en 'n noukeurige inspeksie van Coetzee se gebruik van leestekens sal daarop dui dat die outeur, as fiktiewe wese, teenwoordig is in die roman voor Deel IV. Na aanleiding van sy eie selfrefleksiewe natuur, sal hierdie bespreking poog om die verskillende wyses waarop *Foe* die feilbaarheid van taal voorstel, te illustreer.

“Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

“The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

“That was the curious incident.”¹

(Doyle 1960: 145)

An introduction too is a curious thing. It is at once an inclusion and an exclusion: while it leads us into (*introducere*) a certain space, it inevitably removes us from another; as we are drawn into open air, so we are pushed from a window. In the case of this introduction, which is, in effect, a pre-introduction, or, in less linear terms, a meta-introduction, it might seem that we are ushered into speech and out of silence. If this is indeed our situation, we (and our writing) are, as the syntactical arrangement of the preceding sentences suggests, controlled by the introduction – the introduction leads.² But what is an introduction if it is not writing? Is it anything more than text inexorably followed by more text? Or can it be said that an introduction produces the opportunity for subsequent discourse, that it possesses some originative power? If we subscribe to the last hypothesis, what then should be held as the point of departure? Were we lured into this paragraph by its opening words, or rather by the title and the epigraph? If we agree that the latter precedes the former (however paradoxical this may sound) and thus leads us into the introductory argument, we must also admit that, before casting our minds forward (that is to the prospect of a yet-unread piece of writing), the words of the heading and quotation allow us a backward glance at something already known. Whether the surname Foe leads us to think of specific works of fiction, or whether the figure of Sherlock Holmes evokes in our minds overtones of mystery, we referentially reach beyond the present(ed) body of words; “[t]he text is an intertextual construct, comprehensible only in terms of other texts which it prolongs, completes, transforms, and sublimates” (Culler 2001: 108).

An introduction, then, is a curious thing because it is nothing; it is a chimera. If “[t]here is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida in Leitch 1983: 176), certainly the action of entry is impossible – we are already there. But just because we reside on an isolated patch of land, does it privilege us to all its idiosyncrasies? Let us assume this island of text on which we find ourselves is inhabited by two people whom we can distinguish as male and female. To make this distinction we need not rely on any external guidance but only on our intertextual field of language and perception – we can call a spade a spade because we know it is not a club (“the meaning of a sign is a

1. Doyle 1960: 145 – “Silver Blaze”

2. Significantly the word “introduction” is derived from the active infinitive *ducere* and not the passive infinitive *duci*.

matter of what the sign is *not*” (Eagleton 1983: 128)). But in order to know that the male is called, say, Friday, we must necessarily be lead to and *into* this knowledge from outside our own referential vocabulary – we need an introduction.

“A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him” (Coetzee 1986: 5). These are the words through which the secondary³ narrator of *Foe* chooses to effect the initial (re)presentation of the character Friday. While the impressionistic cadences of this sentence might suggest an immediacy of interpretation, we must remember that Susan Barton’s account of her experience on the island is recorded retrospectively.⁴ What this observation is meant to suggest is not that there lies a fuller measure of presence in immediate depiction, but that a greater cycle of deferral is allowed to develop due to an augmented time-window; where Susan Barton’s initial subconscious interpretation/reading/writing of Friday might have been limited to visual variables of race and gender, for instance, her recollected (re)presentation of Friday is informed by occurrences and qualities which are not available to first impressions.

Writing, then, becomes a tool of choice.

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? – how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him.

(Coetzee 1986: 121-122)

Derrida states that “a writing becomes the instrument of an abusive power, of a caste of ‘intellectuals’ that is thus ensuring hegemony, whether its own or that of special interests: the violence of a secretariat, a discriminating reserve, an effect of scribble and scrypt” (Derrida 1979: 55). Is this unfair? Should we regard Susan’s writing rather to “[acknowledge] and [perform] a more incisive subversion, cutting into and past contaminations of its present historical moment, past the antagonisms which have bred this moment, deeper into the contagion that must be aired but not transmitted?” (Macaskill & Colleran 1992: 442) Perhaps. Or perhaps we should defer

3. Yet to be explicated

4. “I have set down the history of our time on the island as well as I can, and enclose it herewith” (Coetzee 1986: 47). Since Crusoe had no intention of “manufactur[ing] paper and ink”, Susan, having been restored to England, is forced to extract details from memories which, by her own admission, “grow less certain” “with every day that passes” (Coetzee 1986: 17).

sentencing while redirecting our line of questioning. Maybe we should not be asking *what* the writing does, but rather *how* it is done.

Starting (or continuing to start, or even starting to continue) with Part I, we will find that Susan's island account is produced under the weight of apostrophic address. The descriptions, personages and events within her narrative are (re)constructed with the knowledge that they will be received and interpreted by an audience. Considering that the intended reader of this document is no less than an eminent man of letters, it is tempting to presume that the author falls into a mode of documentary writing which prioritises aesthetics over facts. And yet, throughout the novel we are reminded that Susan Barton "will say in plain terms what can be said and leave unsaid what cannot", also that she endeavours to create "a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island" (Coetzee 1986: 120, 67). Possibly, these persistent claims for veracity posit her as a reliable, honest narrator, and could allow us the faith that she does not, as she claims, possess the necessary "art"⁵ to supplement the "liveliness ... lost in writing" (Coetzee 1986: 40), that she presents a point of authorial stability from which we can extrapolate certain truths.

But the fact that "[t]here are times when [Susan Barton's] benevolence deserts [her] and [she] uses words only as the shortest way to subject [Friday] to [her] will" (Coetzee 1986: 60-61) might well lead to the question: should we "think less of [her] for this confession?" (Coetzee 1986: 61). Certainly the admission presents the possibility that Susan Barton's narrative is subjected to a similar code of convenience, but it also posits her writing as what Barthes would call a "healthy sign": that "which draws attention to its own arbitrariness – which does not try to palm itself off as "natural" (Eagleton 1983: 135). This desirable self-disclosure/signification of Susan Barton's narrative is manifest not only in the conscious confessions of authorial power ("[I]t is I who have disposal of all that Crusoe leaves behind, which is the story of the island" (Coetzee 1986:45)) but also in her meta-writing. The act of relating the tedium and troubles of writing within yet other writing (pp. 66-67) may well indicate that the "very reflexivity of metafiction is a gesture outward, specifically toward the reader, whose constitutive role is emphasized in the very act of the narrative's turning back on itself and revealing its own fictionality" (Attwell 1990: 589-590).

Rather than establishing herself as an objective, omniscient narrator, Susan Barton deliberately reveals her complicity in partial representation. She admits that "[i]n every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken" (Coetzee 1986: 141), and that to render a "composition more lively the painter (writer) is at liberty to bring into it what may

5. "Art" from the Latin *ars, artis* – "skill (in any art) the art (of any profession); science, theory; handbook; work of art; moral quality, virtue; *artifice, fraud*" (Collins Latin Dictionary 1996; my emphasis).

not be there on the day he (she) paints (writes)” (Coetzee 1986: 88; my parentheses). Furthermore, we find implicit in her writing a subconscious doubting which materialises most ostensibly – insofar as something implicit can materialise ostensibly – in the employ of rhetorical questions. “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?” (Coetzee 1986: 30).

The function of Susan Barton’s persistent self-interrogation is manifold. Firstly, it positions her (the author of Parts I & II) as narrator of limited insight who can overcome the strictures of assumption and silence only through tentative speculation. Secondly, narrative progression is deliberately impeded by instances of contemplation and self-reflexivity in order to steer (re)presentation away from a totalising logocentricity. Finally,⁶ we may argue that texts “containing questions explicitly assert their intertextual nature, not just because they seem to request an answer and hence designate themselves as incomplete, but because the presupposition carried by their questions imply a prior discourse” (Culler 2001: 114).

The allusive/elusive nature of Susan Barton’s questions does not, however, make of her a narrator whose reliability is affirmed in acknowledged unreliability. In fact, considering the second constituent of Barthes’s healthy sign – that “in the very moment of conveying a meaning, [it] communicates something of its own relative, artificial status” (Eagleton 1983: 135) – we may perceive in the epistolary text of Part II a reluctance toward a positive admission of deceit.

The first indication of questionable authorship occurs when Susan Barton mentions “toss[ing] [the letters] out of the window” (Coetzee 1986: 64). Since Foe has seemingly abandoned all correspondence with her, she similarly abandons the consideration of audience: “To whom am I writing? Let who will read them.” (Coetzee 1986: 64)⁷ Without the accountability to which an outside reader (and eventual commentator/assimilator/narrator) might hold her, it can be said that portrayal, whether of Crusoe, Friday, or the island, is less inhibited. In a textual world where there is no correlation to a greater system of signification, where meaning flows but from a single axis of semiotic determination, (re)presentation becomes a futile exercise. Thus, whether or not Susan Barton is conscious of actual reception (we are reading her story), her solipsistic constructions have significance because they function within a shared vocabulary. If “[a]ny “certainty” to be achieved then is “a matter of conversation between persons” (Simpson 1995: 42), the letters produced after this point (admission above) might well

6. “Finally” in this sequence. Admittedly, the function of Susan Barton’s rhetorical contemplation may extend indefinitely.

7. Her letters

be wielded in favour of the author's personal interests.⁸ Susan Barton is suspended in a sphere where there is recourse (and thus validation) to speech neither in Friday nor Foe, in effect nullifying the necessity for writing: "[W]hen I was writing those letters that were never read by you, and were later not sent, and at last not even written down, I continued to trust in my own authorship." (Coetzee 1986: 133)

At this point in the article I must, unavoidably, interrupt the argument in order to confess to a mode of authorial transparency. For nearly seven pages I, Rick de Villiers, have been making claims on behalf of those who are reading, and will yet read this article. Through the use of the first-person plural pronoun, I have written into existence the beliefs and interpretations of a homogeneous group of people who do not exist. For this I apologise.

Returning to the passage above, we⁹ may question how something which is never written comes to be read. Perhaps Susan Barton's dubious authorial practice is misleading us once again, and we are duped into believing she does not write all the letters which we find in Part II. Perhaps there lies someone hidden behind and beyond her words, someone who uses both censorship and writing to abuse (re)presentation. Perhaps the text is "expressing and silencing itself at the same time" (Derrida 1979: 53).

The first clue that may justify our suspicions of outside interference can be found in the irregular narrative construction of *Foe*. In a novel which divides itself into modes of epistolary writing (Parts I & II), traditional first-person narration (Part III), and surrealistic authorial intrusion (Part IV), a question of textual veracity seems to be raised by the composition¹⁰ itself. Considering the appearance of quotation marks in Part I, for example, we are initially convinced that the segment is that of spoken language, that Susan Barton is relaying her experiences in a long passage of unbroken speech. But once we cross over to the following part in which it becomes clear not only that letter-writing is the obvious method of communication but that the preceding textual unit is also in writing, we are forced to seek a voice which is simultaneously covert and self-revelatory.

The curious occurrence of the punctuation marks mentioned above, may suggest that Susan Barton's writing is subliminally presented as being reproduced/quoted. The immediate effect of this feigned vicarious discourse (that is, Coetzee pretending that Susan Barton speaks through him – as I too have been pretending to speak for many) is a semblance of historical authenticity. Coetzee claims not to invent Susan Barton. Instead, he

8. One might argue that the writing which precedes this moment is equally void of that intercommunication necessary for the resistance of solipsism, but this is countered by the anticipation of conversation implicit in those creations.

9. Oops. I did it again.

10. Composition – Latin *componere*, "put together".

intimates to be weaving already existing documentation into a greater narrative to expose the violent rescription by the author Daniel Defoe, who is depicted, through the retrospective glass that is *Foe*, to have not only caused Susan Barton's¹¹ dreary, insubstantial, extratextual "[suspension]" (Coetzee 1981: 63), but also a great perversion of truth.

Whether this narrative belongs to Susan Barton, author of a novel called *Foe* which originally consisted only of what we know as Part III, or whether Part III is Coetzee's creative extension of Susan Barton's actual writing (Parts I & II) which subsequently produces a collaborated work called *Foe*, is difficult to say. Or was it difficult? Maybe we have already answered the question in asking it: how does something which is never written come to be read? Only through supplementation.

"The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest* measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence" (Derrida 1976: 144). Coetzee fills/complements/completes¹² Susan Barton's writing by assimilating her voice and assuming her authorial position, and it is maddening "because it is neither presence nor absence" (Derrida 1976: 154). We can neither dismiss nor accept Susan Barton's accounts, since we do not know where supplementation begins. What we can assert is that Coetzee deliberately shows himself to be as guilty of representation/re-formation as the eighteenth-century author he attacks.

Turning finally to the concluding segment of the book (how linearly appropriate!), we are told that "[f]rom [Friday's] mouth, without a breath, issue the sound of the island" (Coetzee 1986: 154), and it is suggested, by way of this paradoxical and biologically impossible action, that silence may well constitute expression while expression, in turn, may produce silence. But while the "home of Friday" might be a "place where bodies are their own signs" (Coetzee 1986: 157), the narrative sphere of *Foe* functions within a mode of communication that is naturally exclusive and eternally selective.

Perhaps for this reason Coetzee chooses to introduce us to the dubious world of narrative construction. His sacrificial mode of writing implicates not only Daniel Defoe, Susan Barton or himself, but also the reader, a being guilty of constructing meaning as he receives it since

[he/she] that hath liberty to define, i.e. determine the signification of [his/her] Names of Substances (as certainly every one does in effect, who makes them stand for [his/her] own Ideas,) and makes their Significations at a venture, taking them from [his/her] own or other Men's Fancies, and not from an Examination or Enquiry into the Nature of Things themselves, may, with

11. As a historical figure

12. Supplement – Latin *supplere*, "fill out, make good, make up to the full, complement" (*Collins Latin Dictionary* 1996).

little Trouble, demonstrate them one of another, according to those several Respects, and mutual Relations [he/she] has given them one to another, wherein, however Things agree, or disagree, in their own Nature, [he/she] needs mind nothing but [his/her] own Notions, with the Names [he/she] hath bestowed upon them.

(Locke in Simpson 1995: xii)

Perhaps, in doing nothing, the dog is doing something. But because we neglect to draw attention to its lack of movement, we neglect to mention our own complicity in the nothingness.

Perhaps the curious incident is our own silence, and not that of Friday.

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