

# Shorter Papers and Discussion at the Seminar on *Foe*

## Marianne de Jong

Instead of the usual discussion article with which special journal issues and books covering seminars and conferences customarily close, this article compiles contributions made by various participants during the closing discussion session and shorter formal and informal contributions rendered in the course of the seminar.

Different contributions have been sectioned off, occasionally with introductions and responses pertaining to them. Each contribution is subtitled to indicate both the topic and the participant. The type of contribution is indicated.

### 1. *Foe* and Friday: blueprints for the “différend”? – Marianne de Jong, informal paper

I refer to Lyotard's *Le Différend*. Lyotard refers to language use, and the conditions of possibility of meaning as defined by analytical logic and language theory. The “différend” denotes an absolute silence, a non-category which strictly speaking could not even be called silence, since “silence” implies an awareness of the fact that someone is not speaking when he should or not saying what he could. However, Friday's silence is ambiguous. Not only is he speaking loudly and clearly but “silence” in fact obliterates his real silence.

Friday speaks. He is textualised by Barton as object in her discourse. It is impossible to read Friday without also reading her discourse. If we experimentally read the final chapter as Susan Barton's having become a metaphor of herself, having become the pure fiction of a purely implied author – there are many references to authorship – then even in the last chapter Friday is the object of this anonymous person's hearing.

When Friday is taught to write, he is taught to make letters. These letters will, however, also indicate complete, impulsive, spontaneous expressivity. Following Derrida, all meaning comes to us already in the form of letters but not in the form of a particular system of letters. Thus, Friday writes the letters he knows but unguided by a particular system. Friday writes the letters he has acquired in the form of *écriture* – unsystematised language. Ironical as it seems, this is the perfect voice since it states nothing more or less than that someone is expressing something. Friday, however, is making these letters for an audience. Friday is speaking, but in their discourse. If it were possible that Friday could speak, he would probably never have been understood.

The story continues as long as Friday does not speak – the story being, amongst other things, the relationship between Barton and Friday and between Barton and Foe, to whom she tries to report what Friday cannot tell her. The silence of Friday seems to be that lack – in terms of Lacan – that

keeps Barton going. There is, still in terms of Lacan, a relationship of desire between Barton and the story she herself wants to speak, in which Friday is the third term and mediator. Friday's inability to speak is, in this text, the gap in Barton's discourse which drives her to an insistent questioning. Friday is not constituted as a subject in any way. He is the slave, not only of Crusoe, but also of Foe and of Barton, and specifically the slave to their colonialism, which is strongly textualised in the Britishness and Englishness of, especially, Susan Barton. Typically colonialist, she is looking after Friday but he has to adapt to her. When Susan discovers that he is or is not castrated, this exposure simply strengthens the master/slave relationship in sexual terms and in terms of the gaze of which Friday is the object.

To return to Lacan for a moment, the fact that the observed gap (or a gap which is filled) and the experienced lack constitute the master and the colonist implies a critique of colonialism in *Foe*. Yet this critique does not change the coloniser/colonised relation.

Since Friday is the object in someone else's discourse in this book, since this is the only manner in which he is being textualised, I would propose that (textually speaking) Friday is a discursive sign. The discursive sign links the encoding/decoding/recoding functionality of signs – as for example demonstrated by Barthes – with the fact that these codes have been written. They refer to authorship, even to authorship as absence. The semiotic sign is also a discursive sign.

The term "*différend*" denotes this position of Friday's as discursive sign which always refers back to the utterance and its subject. The discursive sign, or the semiotic sign redefined as discursive sign, might help to explain the text as a self-reflective process which continually tries to undo itself, for example by using postmodernist narrative strategies. In this context Friday's silence is a sign full of meaning. This denotes the inevitability of the *différend*'s functioning in the novel. As soon as the novel starts, as soon as there is text in the form of the novel, with its discursive (instead of merely semiotic signs), there also is exclusion. The design excludes by the same token by which it denotes or connotes. How can the "*différend*" be avoided?

It disappears, according to Lyotard, as soon as the suppressed person can state that he is being suppressed. Since he cannot join in the imposed discourse without succumbing to its exclusionary effect, about all he can do is to hope that at least the exclusion as such will be the expression to be heard and understood. The speaker can enter the discourse by stating that it is impossible to enter it. The dispute is not solved, but a way towards its solution is created. I here bear in mind Lyotard's extreme example of the "*différend*". In terms of legal dispute argumentation, the existence of Auschwitz cannot be proved since there are no eye witnesses. If there were eye witnesses, Auschwitz would be disproved, that is Auschwitz can only come to existence once the terms of the dispute are completely changed. One could, to summarise here, define the structure of the "*différend*" cryptically as a gap, discrepancy or injustice which is structured in such a way that it is impossible to see it as such. It is the structure of the invisibility as such of a gap, of exclusion or of injustice. This invisibility structure operates at the seam of

discourse. When a variety of discourses are forced to combine, a rule of combination is necessary. This rule creates the “différend” when the combination effected implies that one or more of the discourses is being wronged. As the postmodernist philosopher Wolfgang Iser has stated: the “différend” can only be avoided when rules of non-combination and difference are being devised and implemented.<sup>1</sup> Difference should not be thought in terms of the eventual cancelling out of differences to achieve sameness, unification or practical rule applicable to all for the maintenance of good order. Failing this, to call something a silence or an absence usually functions as a seaming or as a rule of combination. Naming the silence and the silenced denies the very thing it names and it thus becomes the condition of possibility of absolute silence.

Lyotard analyses this with reference to the way torture implements speech and silence. The castrated Friday represents the tortured body on which silence as instrument of power has been inscribed.

To summarise: participation in a discourse may confine the participant to absolute silence. Does the structure of the “différend” outlined above also describe the structure of Friday as discursive sign in *Foe*?

It seems plausible to theorise that *Foe* indeed implements the “différend” as blueprint, and in the process itself becomes a blueprint for this term as formulated by Lyotard. *Foe* depends on Friday – on a Friday who is everything the book does not include: the South African black person, the colonised and silenced South Africans of today and of South African history. In its insistence on referring to the tradition of the novel as it derives from Defoe, English literature and Europe, in its insistence on subverting this specific tradition and on making this subversion its own mode of literary production, *Foe* seems to create a new Friday, as some of the papers at this conference have shown – the silenced Friday who is a non-subject, and this Friday as the proper object of the British novelistic tradition. In *Foe*, the colonised has only one manner of speaking – by her/his silence. *Foe* does not only demonstrate that discourse always colonises, but it actually shows how. Had *Foe* allowed the colonised to speak, had it ventured to make the South African referent of apartheid, repression, violation of rights and the local context speak, it would not have been able to perform this.

I would suggest that *Foe* might be read, not as a text about the limitations of discourse, but as a text of limitation – it is the limitation it would, in a conventional discourse, have been speaking about. As such, it depends very heavily on a South African context for its literary validity.

It seems impossible not to do two contradictory things simultaneously: to use discourse to create objects separated from ourselves as speakers and, secondly, to do this by way of referring to ourselves as speakers. This contradiction summarises the discursive sign. To refer to anything at all, the discourse has to refer to itself, but it does so not suspecting – or purposefully ignoring – the subjective ideological embedding in existing discourse on which it depends. The writer of *Foe* unmasks this procedure by linking this particular mode of self-referentiality – the novelistic tradition – directly to the object created – the story of the island, Crusoe and Friday.

I would like to redefine this text's so-called postmodernist self-reflexivity as the text's awareness of itself as a discursive sign. This awareness is not employed simply to re-state the white writer's limitations in terms of the postmodern writer's problematics or in terms of the subject's limitation in global late-capitalism, especially as it is centred in the USA and Western Europe. To the contrary, the final chapter seems to imply that stories are possible outside the novelistic tradition and the "différend" it operates. Lyotard's "différend" implies that silence as such does not exist but is created, as much as the non-speaking object is a fabricated one.

As an exploration of both the conditions of possibility and the discursive effects of "white writing" in South Africa, *Foe* seems to me of an imposing cultural-political relevance.

## 2. Marxism and J.M. Coetzee's Writing – Michael Vaughan, formal paper

I have been invited to this seminar on *Foe* with the idea that I might be able to contribute to this debate from the Marxist side. There has been a Marxist criticism of Coetzee's novels in South Africa to which I have contributed.<sup>2</sup> I want to sum up my position at that time by adapting it to the terms of the present occasion and the subsequent debate.

Coetzee in his novels presents a critique of certain forms of power connected with imperialism and racial oppression in a manner which would be impossible from a liberal-humanist position, the previously dominant position of critique in South African literature. However, he treats the consciousness of those who have been brought up by members of the power group in basically self-referential, self-determining terms. This means that such people are seen as locked into prescribed dominative modes of power. They cannot make any positive identification with the cause of the people who are the victims of their group's power. They cannot make any positive contribution to the liberation of those oppressed. Coetzee's critique of power is therefore a negative, rather than a positive one.

Obviously this approach conflicts with the Marxist view of intellectuals. Even if they have been brought up in the institutions of power as members of the power group they can emancipate themselves from the dominative mode and elaborate concepts which are of positive value to those oppressed by power in their struggle to emancipate themselves from its grip – concepts such as exploitation, class, class struggle and so on. The Marxist view is that such people who have been brought up as members of the power group but who have become critical of its relations of power can participate positively in collective struggle against these conditions of power.

In the latest issue of *English in Africa* Teresa Dovey criticised the type of Marxist rebuke of Coetzee's fictional practice which I have already offered.<sup>3</sup> She argues that Marxist arguments on this level treat the relations between language and the real world in non-problematic fashion. She claims also that the Marxist conviction that their language, their concepts and their concepts alone have an authoritative relation to the real world reveals a lack of

self-reflection. By contrast, Coetzee demonstrates an awareness of the problematic relationship between language and reality, a sensitivity to limitations inherent to his position as a writer with a capacity for self-reflection and a far more sophisticated, preferable methodology to that of those Marxists who criticise him.

I had not bothered to read Coetzee's latest novel till the invitation to the seminar arrived. I in fact read it for the first time last week. My lack of interest in Coetzee's writing seems to me related to some features of the literary scene in South Africa. An aspect of this is a great divergence between the deconstructive fictional practice of Coetzee or postmodernist practice and the practice of black fiction writers who are generally much closer to realism. I do not suppose that this divergence need pose a problem of critical methodology. I do not see why one could not apply a postmodernist or deconstructive approach to fiction by black writers for example. Nevertheless, I feel sure that this divergence in fictional practice accompanied by a divergence of critical practice played its part in my turning away from Coetzee's fiction. I realised years ago that there were implications in Coetzee's novels that I would never have been able to grasp from the reading of the novels alone. Behind the novels was a complex body of theory or bodies of theory. Yet why should I grapple with it? I saw postmodernist theory as arriving from a specific intellectual history, from particular conditions for the production of theory in the West where critical theories of society had a very long history. New theories have been built upon ruins of old ones where new conditions suggested problems that have not been anticipated in earlier concepts. A specific history of theoretical work is involved here related to particular features of Western society, namely the ways power is distributed.

Coetzee has engaged with this theoretical work and adapted it to his predicament as a writer in South Africa, leading to an outburst of Western power. On the other hand, a new generation of black writers which feels no connection with this theory has developed a fictional practice which is not postmodernist or deconstructive but rather accepts the realist epistemology, the type of epistemology that Coetzee has rejected. This new generation of writers expresses its filiations with powerful local traditions and populism. These writers were concerned not so much with the deconstruction, the internal critique of dominative concepts, as with the construction of celebratory, validating images of the people of popular life. I do not want to imply that the deconstruction of the fiction of these writers would therefore be irrelevant. On the contrary, the practice of these writers is within the ambit of deconstruction's concern for the constructs of power in Western societies. The use of the English language, the positions of author and reader in accordance with Western models, the core concept of the people, the focus of populist discourse, as well as the relationship postulated between the writer and the people might pretty well be deconstructive. On the other hand, criticism which attempts to engage with black writers could scarcely employ critical terms of reference of which they themselves were ignorant. This would be merely a display of superior erudition and sophistication and it would

defeat the ends at which criticism aims. The issue of critical methodology, of critical vocabulary, is involved with the issue of critical address, of critical accountability.

We seem to have turned then to that area of disagreement between Coetzee and Marxists mentioned earlier. If the position I have attributed to Coetzee is correct, then the white academic is wrong to address criticism to black writers in a collaborative spirit since this address will have a hidden power agenda. On the other hand, if a truly collaborative criticism is possible, then it seems very important that such an address should be made. I declined to engage with the daunting body of fury behind Coetzee's fiction and chose instead to try for a critical but collaborative involvement in black fiction and criticism.

At present a call for critical debate in relation to the South African context is becoming more and more apparent. I would like to respond to this call, firstly, by asking: what about not only a debate between postmodernist criticism and Marxism but also between such criticism and populism? Secondly, I would like to pose the co-presence in South Africa of powerful but divergent accounts and practices of the writer as story-teller as for example by Njabulo Ndebele and Coetzee in *Foe*.

How does Ndebele interpret the role of the writer as story-teller? Here I will particularly emphasise those features of Ndebele's position which seem most to distinguish it from Coetzee's. Ndebele starts for the universal and timeless role of the story-teller in human societies, with the universal fascination and pleasure of the story. In keeping with this, he sees the art of story-telling as involving certain universal and timeless narrative conditions, skills of the craft. The virtue or legitimacy of the individual story-teller depends upon the ability to draw upon this stock of narrative resources and to adapt them to the particular occasion. At the centre of this affirmation is the validating role of story-telling. In other words, the reason why people enjoy stories so much is that in some way stories help to enhance or validate elements in their own lives and their own experience. Listeners feel themselves refreshed and vindicated by the way in which their experiences, beliefs and aspirations are shed into narrative.

It is obvious that Ndebele does not want to deconstruct – I am using “deconstruct” not in the strict and strong theoretical sense – this affirmative role of the story or the affirmative relation between story-telling and popular experience. His postulate is that there is a vital and positive relationship between narrative and experience. That story-telling involves artifice does not mean that it mystifies experience. On the contrary, it in some ways clarifies experience in the minds of its recipients. The story provides a valid basis from which listeners can evaluate their lives or elements in it.

Ndebele's concern is particularly with the active engagement of the listener in the story, in other words with the moment of appreciation, involvement and judgement. The listener is therefore understood to be involved in a process which has fundamental human validity. In connection with this, the issue of accountability arises. The story-teller is accountable to the audience which has expectations and needs to be met and to be satisfied. A further

point here concerns the significance of the story for individuals and for the collective, the people. Here I want to touch particularly on Ndebele's populism. Ndebele stresses that stories need to appeal to people as individuals. Treatment of character can be one form of response to this need. The skillful story-teller deals with characterisation in such a way that listeners feel that their individual as well as their collective capacities are recognised. The premise of Ndebele's argument, however, is that there is no real conflict of problem in this dual allegiance of the story to individual experience and to that of the collective, indeed there is no essential problem in the conception of an aggregation of individuals as a collective entity. Ndebele is postulating that the societies from which the audiences are drawn are made up of persons who, for all their diversity and points of conflict, have some fundamental concerns in common. Individual appreciations of a story are elements of a collective appreciation. Stories celebrate the bonds linking members of a society. The individual response to the story is in this way deepened since local and personalised experience is placed in the context of a broader experience – the collective as a universal figure, a depository of human wisdom. The agenda for these various affirmations which have story-telling as their focal point is the experience of racial oppression of the African population as interpreted in Ndebele's populist frame of reference. The context of abuse, oppression, material and cultural deprivation which is in some sense shared by all populist traditions of response gives to these affirmations an immediate, unquestionable validity. The story becomes for Ndebele the focus of individual and collective counter-assertion to the diminutive assertion of colonial culture in South Africa. As counter-assertion it is the validation of all that is denigrated in the life of the oppressed people. This validation makes a positive emphasis on the people as a collective because they have been collectively abused and because collective action strengthens resistance to this abuse.

How does Ndebele see the relationship between story-teller and writer? At different moments he is capable of distinguishing between and conflating these roles but his overriding concern is with their proximity. In the first place Ndebele uses the role of story-telling to reform that of the writer, in other words, according to him South African writers have moved too far away from the story-teller. Getting closer back to this role would involve them in re-evaluating their skills and qualifications as writers and the place of these in the wider society. In order to move closer to the story-teller writers must give up the idea that they are the bringers of enlightenment to their readers. Rather, by paying close attention to the art of story-telling and the way story-telling is valued by popular audiences, writers must first themselves be enlightened about their readers or their audience. They must learn about the cultural predilections and susceptibilities, the disposition of this audience. When they are engaged in this way with their audience and reflect this engagement in the narrative design of their writing, then narrative design will act in the way that story-telling should – a refreshing, validating while thought-provoking experience for its audience. This is the way in which writers can take on the mantle of the story-teller and while telling stories

contribute to their readers some of the analytical capacities they have acquired as intellectuals.

This touches on the issue of divergence between Coetzee and Marxists mentioned earlier, the issue of the intervention of the intellectual enmeshed in diminutive processes on behalf of those oppressed by these processes. How does this pertain to Ndebele's interpretation of the role of the black writer-intellectual? We have seen that Ndebele sees such a figure as having to be self-critical, having to be critical of a tendency towards intellectual hubris and alienation from the way ordinary people reflect upon and interpret their experience. He sees the tendency to preach to the people, ignorant of their capacities, as obscene. I would like to quote from the story "Fools", from the collection of short stories with the same title, about a radical intellectual, who interrupts a lesson at a school in order to politicise the pupils. An old teacher standing aside and watching this is commenting upon it:

That they heard, I was sure; but that they understood, was impossible. The children just stared back at him. I could sense his frustration. All the while he spoke, he kept the poster up and moved it from side to side as if the poster had to part decode his words for their young minds. I didn't think the poster served more than for dramatic effect. And it struck me at that moment just how evenly serious Zani's language was. He had become his books, and when he moved out of them, he came out without a social language. He spoke to me in the same way he spoke to those children. Is that how he had spoken in the bar, and then got stabbed? I wondered if he was not another instance of disembodiment: the obscenity of high seriousness.

From Ndebele's perspective the writer-intellectual can overcome this estrangement and can, in so doing, truly absorb the lesson of the story-teller. The figure of the uncle who is a trumpet player cum philosopher of popular black counter-assertion in *Fools* is a good example. When at the end of this particular story he plays his trumpet in the township and the audience congregates, it is taken to represent the whole of township life, including some migrant workers who are just returning to their mine. This means that the structurally differentiating features of writing and speaking, reading and listening practices are obliterated. The determinative effect of these features of narrative mode and social contact are overlooked in this conflation. In populist thought this is a rather capitalistic conflation, even in such an independent and scrupulous thinker as Ndebele. This seems to me an area where deconstructive criticism might make an illuminating contribution.

The difference to Coetzee's implicit view of writing is clear. I should like to conclude by summarising this difference very briefly. Coetzee problematises and deconstructs story-telling. Friday as image acquires resonance and in the final chapter moves beyond all previous references. Yet Friday also declares the limits to what the story-teller can tell. The author cannot verbalise meaning and his only meaning is the limitations to meaning. In this, Coetzee endorses the hegemonic power of counter-assertion. The author disclaims the art and power of telling stories. In this view, the writer in the colonial situation, enmeshed within diminutive functions, must resist the temptation to tell stories with conclusive meanings. The energy of the writer is bestowed



upon the deconstruction of the many layers of hegemonic colonialist meaning functions. The white author-intellectual undermines colonialist hegemony (and what better example of a hegemony needing deconstruction and subversion than Cruso?) but at the same time proclaims his inability to transcend this.

### 3. Deconstruction and Marxism – Marianne de Jong, discussion contribution

I would like to outline very briefly points of connection between deconstruction and Marxism.

Barton and Friday are connected through Barton's intention to write a story. As in all other relations in which Friday is placed, he is placed to Barton in the relationship of object to observing, reporting, narrating subject. Barton is the subject of the desire to write a story in order to epistemologise something, that is Friday or the truth of Friday. The fiction will be the epistemological means to find the truth. Subject/object of course denotes an opposition. In order for this opposition to exist we may presume the effect of a Kantian convention: it is possible to know an object outside oneself without thereby losing oneself. In fact, once you constitute the object, you institutionalise yourself as the one who knows, who sees, and who – to summarise – has "Vernunft", "Vernunft" being understood as a closed and centred mental activity. Because of the gap of speechlessness which is Friday in this text, Barton becomes a subject in search of epistemological truth. From this I would like to conclude on a Derridean undecidability as operative textualising force in *Foe*. The subversion of an apparent mere binarism is also visible in the interplay between story as that which has happened and story as that which is absent, a story without a history since Barton cannot establish what has happened to Cruso and Friday.

This undecidability of story and history means that in *Foe*, story cannot be opposed to history since the story Barton wants is dependent on there being a history. Barton cannot write her story since she does not know the history. The true writing of history in *Foe* then will be the proper writing of fiction by De(Foe) – a mere interpretation of what "actually happened". The proper textual relation then is between a story which is being written and a history which, as it is being written, remains unknown.

This is not merely a clever play with deconstructive theoretical insights. History and story deconstruct each other. Barton knows that the story she looks for is history, but she also knows that the history she might find will be based on her own experience of this "history". She tries in vain to transcend this. Her experience is her history and in *Foe* it is her only access to history. Can there be a history without experience and is experience truly experience without becoming part of one's history? Is such a history different from a story? The undecidabilities of story and history, history and fiction, history and experience is deconstruction at work as a text, that is *Foe*.

Such a deconstructive textualisation process also seems to say that a subject cannot make an object. Instead of thinking about causal relationships, it

seems necessary to think of the conditions of possibility for a subject to see or have an object which would also be the conditions of possibility for referentiality. Thinking about history as history, as an object, do we know what it is until it has been reported and until it has been reported – somewhere, in some documentation or by some source – as experienced? Nietzsche's often quoted remarks on "Nachträglichkeit" state that one always speaks after the fact. In order to speak of an experience as such, in order to relate it in its immediacy, we have to speak of what we remember about it. This seems to be the structure of "telling what has happened". In this the object has disappeared – it has in fact "become history". History has become an object of reference in a story (because it is over, it is the past). As much as "story" is the referentiality as such which links Barton to the island, to her object and to the past, so "history" seems to be referentiality as such. To put it somewhat crudely for a moment: history is that which I experience while I find myself in it, but how do I know history as that which determines me unless it firstly goes through my head? Once "there", is it a story or a history?

One of the quarrels deconstruction has with Marxism is that Marxism uses "history" as a term, that is within a discourse with its own particular structure. This is of course the discourse of historical-dialectical materialism. As a term in this discourse, history is precisely not my experience in its immediacy and not my present, my context here and now. It is not a bullet or its victim.

Modern theory of ideology takes as its premise that we are all ideologised so that, in terms of Althusser, it is impossible to speak as a subject of self-reflective closure whose presuppositions are "I know what I say", "I mean what I say", or "I am referring to this or that". To refer one has to be within ideology. In South Africa the criticism has often been launched recently that Marxism can only criticise ideology to the extent that it admits to its own always already being ideologised. Deconstruction would add to this that Marxism needs a logocentric system – dialectical materialism – to practice criticism, implying that Marxism in fact employs another language in order to begin to speak referentially.

Barton can be deconstructed on the grounds of a law which states that she can only be what she is by placing that which defines her – the man, the voiceless, the slave, the perhaps even sexless if not genderless – outside herself. This law explains the preconditions to her becoming a subject. Marxism to the contrary would focus on the idea of the subject and refer it back to those material conditions of history and society (and language in postmodern Marxism) which determine the idea of the subject. Whereas deconstruction undoes ideology, history and experience as the presences for which they are commonly taken, Marxism to the contrary depends on the common validity of ideology, history and experience. Marxism, however, could deconstruct Barton's experience of Friday by, for example, showing up the sexual *cum* colonialist ideologies at work in it. It would, however, have to stop short of deconstructing experience as such, for example by exposing it as a mere term in their own as in any other systematic discourse.

What deconstruction can indicate, is that one cannot posit experience without co-positing history and subjectivity and without, in the process,

discovering that these do not determine each other in a casual way. They have to be stated together. At this point it may become clear that one is working merely with terms and within discursive taxonomies. Marxism is forced to co-posit subject and object, speaker and world-view or set presuppositions in order to make the former dependent on the latter, in order to contrast them or to correct the one with reference to the other. In this manner, Marxism itself highlights its own linguistic or discursive nature. It depends itself on the very system it employs as referential paradigm to describe reality.

One could hardly find a more clarifying example of deconstruction at work than a discourse which claims that it truly describes reality since its discourse as a system is correct. The truth of history is a systematics. Yet one could also hardly find a better example of deconstruction at work than the undoing of systematics by means of the terms of systematic language as in deconstruction. To point to the possibility that history needs a story is, then, hardly a disqualification of the validity and importance of history and reality. History tells itself by using stories. The story seems to be the essential referential means by which material reality becomes discourse. Could such a conclusion contribute to the explanation of the predominance of story-telling in modern black South African writing to which Michael Vaughan has referred?

#### **4. From structure to a South African (?) context – Ina Gräbe, discussion contribution**

The question was asked whether it is possible for structuralism to move to contextualisation. I use the structuralist model as a convenient means to show how *Foe* resists the categorisation, the framing or the putting into little boxes of contextualisation. In my lecture I tried to show that the liberties Coetzee takes with the text, seen as the underlying content in a Genettian sense, are indicative of the stance he has taken to his material. It is therefore not neutral at all. The fact is that Friday – and here one may see how one can move from a reading to a contextualisation of the text, also a South African one – is present in all those levels. Friday does not belong to any specific level and cannot be regarded as the material from which the text is built. In the final instance, Friday is the only possible point where one could start with a new reading.

I do not think, however, that *Foe* could be restricted to a South African context. Particularities are dropped in favour of what could be called the universal, the story of all cast-aways. In terms of the indeterminacies of the signifier but also in relation to some kind of context it could be any context, also South African. If the text has been successful in terms of having involved the reader, then the reader should have come to the realisation of the necessity of a new kind of focalisation. In this sense it could be applicable to any context.

#### **5. The political unconscious in *Foe* – David Attwell, discussion contribution**

The question was asked whether the political unconscious in Coetzee's text should be seen as that unconsciously active historicity of *Foe* which manifests

itself in the text's deconstructing the novel as such, the possibility of the author as such, the possibility of the story as such and perhaps even the possibility of history.

I saw Jameson's concept of the political unconscious as being useful for the following reasons. I think that Coetzee's self-distancing techniques and self-reflexivity provide us with a way of viewing his work in terms of it encoding the notion of a political unconscious before we can talk about how that unconscious might shape Coetzee's work. In Jameson's terminology this is working largely in terms of an expressive sense of causality. This means basically that the text is expressive of an overriding intention. If we move to a structural sense of causality then we look for silences and contradictions within texts and at that point I would like to ask the question: how is Coetzee shaped by the political unconscious?

Yesterday I tried to locate this problem by referring to another kind of historical narrative, one which would involve reading a shift in South African history – a partial shift, not a complete one, from a largely colonial trajectory to an industrial capitalist trajectory. If one reads Coetzee's work within that narrative then his failure to read and critique the discourse used by an industrial capitalist could be seen to reflect something of a political unconscious at work in his text.

There is another sense in which one might be able to look at this question and that is through the question of Friday. From Catherine Glenn's discussion of intertextuality in *Foe* we can tentatively draw the conclusion that it is especially in Coetzee's work that Friday acts as a non-speaking subject. The Fridays in the other texts – whether they are split Fridays or whether there are no Fridays – do not particularly have this force of active presence, that is, as silence. That would seem to me to refer us back to Coetzee's historical context. He seems to register the force of the black world in constructing this very unique presence in his version of the Defoe story.

If that is the case, then we might say that he does not inherit this category from his historical context in a neutral or free way. Friday as category is already filled with meanings from that context and I speak in the sense in which Bakhtin would speak of the sign as having a history already embedded in it. Language is never available to speakers free of historical colouring and something of the historicity of the language is buried in the very structures that we use. If that is the case in Coetzee's use of a Friday then he would somehow be alert to the fact that the Fridays *are* in fact speaking, that Fridays are active subjects, that they are conscious subjects in which the Susan Bartons are posited as objects and that there is another side to the Friday story.

The deconstruction of the notion of authorship and of the notion of history as something unproblematically focussed is done ultimately against the background of the non-speaking subject, Friday. The concept of the political unconscious which I have been trying to articulate seems to me fundamental to the deconstructive work that the novel undertakes.

## 6. Should theory be accountable? – Michael Vaughan, discussion contribution

It seems to me that the virtue of pure theory was that it involves the clarification of fundamental principles which serve as a basis for our practice as teachers of literature. Against that I would say that the virtue of impure theory in this highly theoretical context of a discussion of *Foe* involves a concern with the contextualisation of fundamental principles, with the strategic implications of practice. I would admit that this is a tendential distinction. I think that there is a rewarding and necessary tension between these two dimensions. Obviously we could all benefit from a greater dialogue and mutual recognition between these tendencies. As an exponent of impure theory I would like to address some remarks to the exponents of pure theory along the lines that pure theory can involve the dangers of the reification of epistemology.

The ultimate aim of theory is practice – the most sensitive and discriminating possible practice, that which is most appropriate to precise context. Pure theory works necessarily at a high level of abstraction and generalisation, remote from practice though highly inspirational for it.

In the discussion yesterday there were seven basic ambiguities that remained unresolved. One was ambiguity in relation to language, closely allied to ambiguity in relation to literature. In one way, language is condemned in current poststructuralist theory or some developments of it as the practice of an illegitimate oppressing power. Silence is seen as the only possible alternative to this illegitimacy. Yet at the same time we find expressed all the time the sustaining of language, the extension of the domain of language in highly specialised forms in our critical discourse. There is also an ambiguity in relation to intellectual life. Intellectual life in our social structure is seen as involving a complicity in illegitimate power, in our sense colonial power, and yet again there is a commitment to the sustaining and elaboration of this intellectual life in critical theory, showing no signs of a willingness to self-destruction or reduction to silence. There is further ambiguity in relation to metropolitan theory. There is a condemnation of metropolitan colonialist domination yet, on the other hand, an utter dependence on metropolitan critical theory in the very terms of which this condemnation of metropolitan domination is enunciated.

Finally, there is an ambiguity in relation to authority in that authority is rejected as closure and oppression, yet dependence on the authority of metropolitan theory is at the same time declared in the reverential treatment of metropolitan theorists. It is completely abstracted from the context of their intellectual practice, their personal situations and their ideological limitations so that Lacan, Derrida, Foucault become the reified authors of the truth of the moment, not contextualised or limited in terms of class, institutional situations, occupation, individual character, history or anything of that kind. Thus truth appears in an alienated form, depersonalised, remote, authoritarian, severely abstract and uncompromising.

I would suggest that these ambiguities are potentially disabling or demor-

alising for the development of an appropriate practice in our context. The reverence for the authority of metropolitan theory, which is of course inevitable in our colonial situation, may have unwanted consequences. For example, one of the themes in epistemological theory at the moment is the condemnation of language as illegitimate discourse of power with the subject/object dichotomy. What follows from this in the colonial context? One should remember that metropolitan theorists do not experience the colonial context, the living reality of central significance in their lives. For them it is a largely abstract, a non-specific topic and further ambiguities can follow from this.

We cannot leave at this state of generalised ambiguity. We have specific dilemmas to confront. For example: what is to be our attitude towards black writers and intellectuals, academics and students? What is to be our relation to black literature? Are we to be active in this context? How? Why? What is our estimation of a black silence or absence at this seminar (and I have discovered at the margins of this seminar that there is indeed a black presence but it is not being uttered significantly)? Might not the discourse of language as illegitimate power serve unwanted ends in the practical, highly impure context of South African life and serve further to separate people of different colour? Might it not serve to legitimate the monopoly of high theory by white intellectuals since they have apparently no commitment to self-destruction and it is now up to black intellectuals? Might it not serve to legitimate the preservation of the arcane exclusivity of this theory and its remoteness from ordinary language or accountability to ordinary people? And here we have a problem of accountability not only towards the populace but always to the ordinary language of English departments.

There was a kind of doublespeak in that every speaker is concerned with indeterminacy of meaning and every single speaker has been extremely involved with the significance of meanings. If we are concerned with the truth, what about the popularisation and the dissemination of this truth? What about the ambiguities which will be involved in the process of this popularisation? Might not the problem be that this discourse of the discourse of power might become a sentimentalisation of actual problems? Can this discourse become a sufficient guide to an appropriate practice?

I see us as having to adopt a much more productive attitude towards our own role as intellectuals, a more critical attitude towards the limitations – for our situation – of metropolitan theory, the contribution of that theory being abundantly acknowledged. A dichotomy has arisen; if one strives for the development of critical concepts in the local context, these will inevitably seem completely crude and in fact sub-theoretical, not worth considering as theory, whereas if you want to be a really sophisticated, legitimate theorist all you have to do is to memorise metropolitan idea systems. This seems grossly unfair and savagely polemical. However, there seems to be an imbalance between the internalisation of idea systems and the attempt to work from this with ideas derived from a local context.

*Annamaria Carusi:* Michael has made a distinction between “pure” and “impure” theory. While he will probably see me as speaking on the side of

“pure” theory, I must admit that I have several problems with this distinction. Michael seems to align “pure” theory with “metropolitan” discourse, and questions the very continuance of this discourse in colonial contexts. However, if it were not for the fact that the so-called “metropolitan” discourse were not already always embedded in a colonial situation, we would not have a problem in the first place. Seeing that the theory which he refers to is generally highly self-critical and undermines Western discourse, I do not see why we should *not* use it. On the other hand, while Michael sees himself as an exponent of “impure” theory, which by implication is a “non-metropolitan” theory, he still uses terms like “reification”, “alienation of the truth” and so on. These are not “non-metropolitan” terms – they are Marxist terms – and Marxism, like all of the “pure” theory which Michael refers to, does not spring from the African soil. Given that neither does most of our literary discourse – even that of Ndebele who, although he may use certain African themes still writes by using Western forms, and whose books still circulate by means of Western publishing institutions – it is very difficult to see how anyone can claim to speak from a purely African or purely “non-metropolitan” position. Surely the point would rather be to see what happens to these theories once they are mobilised in a context not their own. Here it is not a question of reverence to “metropolitan critical theory”, but rather of adopting a critical attitude towards these theories, while still using what may be useful in them. I cannot see the point of simply dismissing an entire discursive tradition on the basis that it is “metropolitan”.

Finally, with regards to the question of popularising a discourse, given the huge problem of illiteracy in this country, surely this is simply a matter of degree. If Foucault, Lacan and Derrida are unintelligible to the masses, so is Marxism, and so is Ndebele. This is basically a pedagogical problem, which can be addressed. However, it is impossible to ask of any discourse that before it be given the “green light” it must be accessible on a mass popular level. In this case it would be impossible to undertake any critical interrogation whatsoever.

## **7. A prison-house of mirrors? – Leon de Kock, discussion contribution.<sup>4</sup>**

I want to express some misgivings about our collective cultural project as reflected in this two-day seminar. We seem doomed to self-subversion, self-deconstruction and ultimately self-annihilation, and since we seem unable to escape the implications of this state of affairs, my view must unfortunately be seen as a contribution to our collective decline. I am not attacking so much as questioning, but I would like to think we can achieve a second order of questioning or, to use the terminology of our descent, reconstruct the terms in which we deconstruct ourselves.

Why do we privilege a single text by a self-confessedly marginal white writer for a seminar which approaches conference proportions? This may be an unfair question, since Coetzee’s work is clearly more than mere game-playing. I would like to summarise what may strike some of you as obvious, namely some basic reasons for Coetzee’s importance to us.

One of the most dominant impulses in South African English writing and literary aesthetics has been the desire for extension. Extension out of the asphyxiating confines of perception enforced by apartheid, out of the mediocrity of white middle-class life and the viciousness of its organic racism, and out of physical oppression in the case of black writers. For both black and white writers, this impulse once found its cultural form in humanism. Humanism posited the suffering individual against the indifferent state, and judged the short-sighted political brutality of apartheid by the supposedly more enduring values of liberalism. There was a desire to tell, from the individual's point of view, to reveal the lie behind the moral sanctimony of separate development. This was an immediate, primary need as strong as hunger. Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer and others found their audience within the humanist context, were published in London and valorised as courageous voices of the individual conscience triumphing over the moral turpitude of the worldly South African state.

It is little wonder that "universal" values achieved such a grand appeal in the academy and the liberal literary establishment. The lines of opposition seemed clear-cut and obvious. But then matters only worsened, and by the early seventies perceptive writers such as Coetzee began to detect a lie behind the great liberal idiom, an unconscious complicity between the structures of political hegemony and the structures of liberal writing. There was an international development of discourse analysis as well as an explosion of form internally in the work of black writers, and South African English writing began to experience a crisis in which little could be taken for granted any longer. Bereft of the moral legitimacy of liberalism, we were left with an increasing sense of decadence, and we began to analyse our decay. In this, it seems to me, Coetzee became our chief articulator, fictionalising the crisis by setting up discourses within discourses and collapsing the epistemological and moral self-confidence of liberal writing by recalling our brutal, colonial heritage. He showed us that there continues to be an imperialism in the modalities of the very discourse by which we imagine we are liberating ourselves, and with each successive novel the conflict between a desire to extend (into signification, symbolism, cultural/political liberation) and the knowledge of entrapment became more pronounced.

So the great act of cultural extension became a humiliating reversion to the prison-house, and it seems that Coetzee became a significant pole in the development of cultural awareness in this country, only now it was a growing awareness of marginality, frustration, historical obsolescence. White academics began to over-subscribe Coetzee as trends swung towards post-modernism and deconstruction, and quite a large source of academic rejuvenation was found, except that the excitement was tempered by the knowledge of failure. It is here that my misgivings begin. One may posit some contradictions: we speak very definitely of our uncertainty about reading texts definitely; we sound authoritative while professing the lack of authority in the text; we talk eloquently of the gaps and holes and blind spots in narratives; we teach theme and symbol and imaginative language in the classroom, but undermine the idea of figurative unities at conferences.



Have we become enchanted in a hall of mirrors? Is Coetzee's revisionism being transformed into an academic industry with all its attendant attributes of power and authority? To take up David Attwell's point about a fissure at the point of more modern manifestations of colonialism/capitalism, Coetzee does revert to the most basic archetypes of colonialism, and one can ask the question: why must Friday be dumb? If we allow ourselves to accept that he symbolises something like a collective colonial burden, then he is dumb only insofar as we cannot hear his voice for our own noise. Perhaps this is Coetzee's point, if such a thing as a "point" is admissible. Being trapped in the modalities of one's own discourse is one thing, but celebrating this state, perhaps even perpetuating it, is something quite different.

What I feel is a sense that we may become all too satisfied and comfortable with a multiplying analysis of absence, failure, powerlessness and decadence. To take up a point made by Michael Vaughan, Njabulo Ndebele is in a position to celebrate the affirming qualities of story-telling because his historical determination as a black South African confers upon him a moral and political legitimacy to invest in story-telling. From the white South African point of view, however, it seems difficult to conceive of story-telling except as a function of marginality and powerlessness, paradoxically within the comfort of power. Can we find no better use for the power we have than to pick at our own cultural carcass? Maybe we have no choice in the matter, or perhaps we should consider switching to ESL-teaching, for the time being anyway.

## Note

1. Leon de Kock (1987) has published a comparison between the aesthetics implied in the work of respectively J.M. Coetzee and Es'kia Mphahlele.

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