

**“A place where bodies are their own signs”: Re-reading J.M. Coetzee’s
Foe via Gubar, Spivak, Parry and Levinas.**

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Resumo: Esse ensaio argumenta que, na obra de Coetzee, a escritura é sempre representada como uma apreensão violenta da alteridade. Mas a escritura é também representada, repetitivamente, como o malogro para representar o outro, marcado por seu corpo. É esse malogro que *Foe* propõe a perscrutar. Reconhecendo o malogro da autoridade escritural, a falha em possuir na interpretação a marca de alteridade, abre o leitor (escritural), sempre, ao (auto) questionamento. E essa (auto) interrogação é precisamente o que mitiga o ostensivo poder aural. Nessa abertura, nesse reconhecimento da reiteração e reavaliação sem fim, jaz a possibilidade de novas narrativas para a leitura do sujeito e uma política que começa no autoquestionamento e na recusa da autoridade. Assim, esse ensaio aborda a obra de Coetzee usando as abordagens teóricas de Gubar, Spivak, Parry e Levinas.

Palavras-Chave: Escritura; malogro da representação; autoridade escritural; autoinvestigação.

Abstract: This essay argues that in Coetzee’s work, writing is always represented as the violent apprehension of otherness. But writing is also represented, over and over again, as the *failure* to represent the other, marked by his/her body. It is this failure that *Foe* exposes to scrutiny. Recognizing the failure of writerly authority, the failure to own in interpretation the mark of otherness, opens, the (writing) reader, always, to (self) questioning. And this (self) interrogation is precisely what mitigates ostensible authorial power. In that opening, in that recognition of endless reiteration and reevaluation, lies the possibility of new narratives for the reading self and a politics that begins in self-questioning and the refusal of authority.

Thus, the essay approaches Coetzee's work by using assumptions by Gubar, Spivak, Parry and Levinas.

Key-words: Writing; failure of representation; writerly authority; self-interrogation.

"[Foe] is not a retreat from the subject of colonialism or from questions of power. ...[It asks] *who writes?* Who takes up the position of power, pen in hand?"

J.M. Coetzee "Two Interviews" 462 (emphasis original)

"Print ... is sadism, and properly evokes terror."

J.M. Coetzee *Dusklands* 14

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One

Much contemporary literary criticism and the literature it explores, particularly when of a feminist or postcolonial bent, makes extensive use of metaphors of textuality and voice to explore interpersonal power relations. How and why such tropes are ubiquitous in our current cultural moment is a subject worthy of extended discussion, although beyond the scope of my essay. I am interested, rather, in the kinds of assumptions that underpin, and derive from, the use of these metaphors and the politics to which they gesture. The figurative questions raised via these tropes are familiar ones: who is empowered to 'write' (for) the 'other' (the other, that is, positioned *as* disempowered other by virtue of hegemonic writing/discourse)? Can the other 'voice' an oppositional or even alternative identity and history to that spoken by those with greater 'author-ity' (to indulge in familiar

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word-play)? More pressingly, perhaps, in our postcolonial moment, can one responsibly speak *with* or even write *of* (if not *for*) those othered in our very acts of speaking and writing?

Few would dispute that the work of J.M. Coetzee is deeply concerned with such questions. While it could be said that all of Coetzee's novels open to consideration in these terms, I will here focus on *Foe* (1986) in which questions to do with textuality, voice and authorial power are quite explicitly foregrounded. It is my contention that in this novel Coetzee not only utilizes but challenges the efficacy of what I will refer to as 'tropes of textuality and voice,' or rather the essentialism that often underpins their use. Further, I will argue, Coetzee's work encourages a shift in the metaphorical critical terrain he so deliberately traverses, opening to scrutiny not only the role (and responsibility) of the writer, but also the affective responses – and responsibility – of readers.

As a means of framing the ensuing discussion of *Foe*, I will briefly consider two well-known essays, both published in the same decade as Coetzee's novel, and so both part of the intellectual/critical climate in which he wrote: Susan Gubar's "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity" (1980) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985/1988/1999).¹ My choice of these essays is not arbitrary, as will become clear in what follows. Pertinently, both essays employ metaphors of textuality and voice albeit in the service of quite divergent ends. In "The Blank Page," Gubar develops a series of metaphors to consider the (gendered) relationship between creating self and created other. The most fully considered is the "model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page" (p. 77), in which the male creator-author violently appropriates the female (as object) who is "'read' or written into textuality" (p.75). The act of inscription is equated with

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¹ Spivak revised her essay a number of times and it exists in several published versions, as well as having been extensively anthologized. The earliest version of the essay was published in *Wedge* in 1985, although the best-known is that which appeared in 1988 in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture*. This version is reproduced in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (1993). A later and further revised version appeared in Spivak's *Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) and this is reproduced, abbreviated by the author, in in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed (2006). In this essay I draw on the 1988 version, as reproduced in Williams and Chrisman, eds., referring to this as (1993 [1988]), and also on the 1999 version, as reproduced and abbreviated in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, eds., referring to this as (2006 [1999]).

(violent) sexual ‘pen-etration,’ a metaphor extensively developed in Gubar’s other work, notably in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, jointly authored with Sandra Gilbert. While much of the essay considers the literal struggle of nineteenth and twentieth century women to write independently under patriarchal constraints, it is more fundamentally concerned, via figural extension, with the possibility of women’s autonomy in a fuller sense. In short, Gubar asks whether it is possible for women to ‘write’ (for) themselves independent of patriarchal authority.

Central to Gubar’s argument is her reading of Isak Dinesen’s evocative short story “The Blank Page” which

... centers on the sisters of a Carmelite order of nuns who grow flax to manufacture the most exquisite linen in Portugal. This linen is so fine that it is used for the bridal sheets of all the neighboring royal houses. After the wedding night, it is solemnly and publicly displayed to attest to the virginity of the princess and then is reclaimed by the convent where the central piece of the stained sheet ‘which bore witness to the honour of a royal bride’ is mounted, framed, and hung in a long gallery with a plate identifying the name of the princes. These ‘faded markings’ on the sheets are of special interest to female pilgrims who journey to the remote country convent, for ‘each separate canvas with its coroneted name-plate has a story to tell, and each has been set up in loyalty to the story.’ But the pilgrims and sisters alike are especially fascinated by the framed canvas over the one nameless plate which displays the blank, snow-white sheet that gives the story its title. (p. 78)

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Gubar reads the stained (framed) sheets as “biographical remnants of otherwise mute existences, a result of and response to life rather than producing an independent aesthetic object” (p. 78), and argues that for many women “the body is the only accessible medium for self-expression” (p. 79), a claim which, by the end of the essay, begins to rely very problematically on a series of essentialist claims grounded in the materiality of the female body. By ‘framing’ the sacrificial blood, by “making the sheets into objects as sacred as alter cloths,” she claims, the nuns

collude with and reiterate “the [patriarchal] story”: “The framed sheets imply, then, that all the royal princesses have been ‘framed’ into telling the same story, namely the story of their acquiescence as objects of exchange” (p. 84).

So to Gubar’s central question: “how can women experience creativity?” (p. 86); what scope have they for self-expression? For Gubar, *within* the patriarchal textual/sexual economy women’s (self) writing can only ever mean “being possessed and wounded” (p. 86), “experienced quite literally as the terror of being entered, deflowered, possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished” (p. 86). If this is so, what alternatives are there, for women, for agential authorship without appropriative violation? Gubar proposes that the *blank page*, the unmarked sheet at the centre of Dinesen’s story, can be read as an “alternative to the bloody sheets that surround it” (p. 88-89) – as a female refusal to be wounded in/as writing. The blank page, then, should be read not as “a sign of innocence, or purity or passivity” but as a “potent act of resistance,” as “radically subversive” (p. 89).

It is here that the essay, over-freighted with metaphor, collapses in on its own argument. Let us not forget that the blank page is *blank*. It tells no story; it offers no resistance in and of itself – except by virtue of the meaning imposed by the act of framing itself, or when considered in relation to the bloodied sheets that surround it. It is only the site of potentiality for another’s inscription: it is a blankness that must be bordered/bounded, or overwritten, in order to mean. Whatever its author’s story *was*, is lost and can only be retrieved by another appropriation, that of an inscribing reader, a framing curator. On that blank potentiality any number of stories can be written. And so Gubar takes up the pen:

Was this anonymous royal princess not a virgin on her wedding night? Did she, perhaps, run away from the marriage bed and thereby retain her virginity intact? Did she, like Scheherazade, spend her time in bed telling stories so as to escape the fate of her predecessors? Or again; maybe the snow-white sheet above the nameless plate tells the story of a young woman who met up with an impotent husband, or of a woman who learned other erotic arts, or of a woman who consecrated herself to the nun’s vow of chastity but within marriage. Indeed, the interpretation of

this sheet seems as impenetrable as the anonymous princess herself. (p. 89)

Yes, indeed, the sheet is impenetrable to interpretation. But in what follows, Gubar interprets it nonetheless: “blankness here is an act of defiance, a dangerous and risky refusal to certify purity. The resistance of the princess allows for self-expression, for she makes her statement by not writing what she is expected to write” (p. 89).

What I want to hold onto here, for the purposes of what follows, is Gubar’s claim that blankness is a form of resistance that somehow “allows for self-expression.” There are several points worth noting. For a start, but crucially, Gubar ignores her own act of interpretative authority in asserting the woman’s resistance, simply asserting – as the result of her imaginative reading/writing – self-expressive agency outside an economy of inscription or interpretation. And yet, of course, whatever meaning is read in/on the blank page is retrospective of any original authorial intent, if intent there was. While Gubar’s *reading* of the blank page may be redemptive or resistant, it comes at the price of her own interpretative inscription on the other’s blankness. Gubar, too, has framed the unnamed noblewoman.²

Two

“Here is a woman who tried to be decisive in extremis. She ‘spoke,’ but women did not, do not, ‘hear’ her.”

Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 2006 [1999] 28

The above brief discussion of Gubar’s article is not intended as a challenge to the writer per se. I am less concerned with her specific application of a set of metaphors equating sexuality, textuality and identity (which needs to be situated in a

² There are other stories, of course, that might be written on/of the blank sheet, not least a story of warning or threat (possibly the intention of the men, and their acolytes, who framed it). Perhaps the princess was killed, literally silenced, or otherwise absented – for infidelity, for transgression, for refusal. In this case the blank page might tell another, more terrible story that cuts against Gubar’s: that of a final silencing and the erasure of name and identity.

certain moment of feminist politics in the 1980s – importantly, the decade in which Coetzee wrote *Foe*)³, than with her work as an example of the ubiquitous use in literary criticism more generally of tropes of textuality and voice to articulate self/other engagement, and the political claims that result. Such tropes are not restricted to gendered criticism, of course, and feature in many postcolonial accounts. So the colonised other is often figured as the blank page inscribed by the colonial pen(is); silenced (or raped) in an appropriative blood-sacrifice that births the coloniser's story of ownership, civility and selfhood.⁴ Thus coloniser/colonised, white/black, male/female (or any number of other binary pairs) are opposed as writing subject and written other, authoritative author and passive text, speaker and spoken, and so on. When a simplistic notion of the dynamics of reading and writing (involving, for example, a conception of unproblematically authoritative authorship) informs the metaphoric vehicle, problems abound, not least the positing of deeply problematic 'solutions' – such as silence or blankness – as a means of resisting the violence of authoritative 'writing' or as an alternative mode of self-expression. This begs an important question: does the other have *any* capacity to write/voice him/herself, to resist the hegemonic (colonial, masculine, racist) narratives within which s/he is objectified? To shift the metaphor from writing to speech (a common shift in contemporary critical discourse, and not only for those following the work of Jacques Derrida), in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous formulation: "Can the subaltern speak?"

Clearly for Gubar, yes – but only in silence retrospectively *interpreted* as agential choice. In her terms, those silenced by virtue of another's empowered voice can 'speak' – if only, paradoxically, by being silent. This paradox turns on two competing interpretations of silence – one suggesting enforced disempowerment, the other imagined as *chosen* resistance, a point to which I'll certainly return in my discussion of *Foe*. Women's silence, in Gubar's account, is reclaimed as intentional agency that is apparently *chosen* and meaningful in consequence. Likewise, for some commentators in the postcolonial arena of debate, the colonised's resistance is

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³ Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) must have mention here.

⁴ This is, of course, not to deny the fact of violent appropriation of indigenous people, their history and their lands and the concomitant denial of their agency that is often the consequence of colonial encounter. My concern here is with the metaphorical representation of colonisation and its aftermath.

figured as *chosen* exclusion from the coloniser's discursive arena: as a refusal of intercourse, at least on the terms or in the language of those empowered. In this way, loss and disempowerment are made good in what is paradoxically another (interpretative) overwriting.

In reply to her own question, Spivak answers emphatically, in an early version of her essay: "the subaltern cannot speak" (1993 [1988], p. 104). It is an answer that has generated many angry responses, considerable misunderstanding, significant critical debate, and extensive defensive commentary (and rewriting of her original essay) by Spivak who claimed, in a later version of the essay, that her earlier comment was an "inadvisable remark" (2006 [1999], p. 35). It is not my intention to retrace these debates here. However, the congruencies and divergences between Gubar's and Spivak's essays can be fruitfully explored for my purposes with respect to Coetzee's *Foe*. Both ask whether it is possible for women/the subaltern (or, what I have called the 'other') to 'write' or 'speak' within an expressive economy that denies her agency or voice. Both ask whether silence or self-erasure can be (read as) a form of refusal, of agential self-articulation. Where the two critics differ markedly is not only in their divergent answers to this question, but in Gubar's blindness to her own *reading* of the silent other figured as 'blank page' and, in contrast, Spivak's heightened awareness and foregrounding of her own role as (academic) reader.

In her essay Spivak considers "the regulative psychobiography of [Indian] widow-immolation [*sati*]" in order to track what she calls the "double silencing" (2006 [1999], p. 32) of subaltern women – the failures of their representation in both senses of that word: political representation ('speaking for,' *vertreten*) and aesthetic/theoretical re-presentation ('portrayal,' *darstellen*; 2006 [1999], p. 30). Between these two "sentences," claims Spivak, "one cannot put together a 'voice'" (2006 [1999], p. 33) for the *sati* widow (here emblematic of the subaltern subject whose 'text' or 'story' – in life as in death – is written, or in Spivak's term, "overdetermined" by plural hegemonic discourses). Proceeding "by way of an example," Spivak describes the suicide of a young, unmarried Bengali woman, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, in 1926, as "an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide" (2006 [1999], p. 34). Did Bhaduri, in choosing the

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most extreme refusal of voice, suicide, manage nonetheless to ‘speak’ for herself and refuse the terms of the ‘social text’ in which her subalternity was written, a text which ironically anticipated and required her (later) suicide / sacrifice via *sati*? In choosing suicide ostensibly on her own terms, then, could Bhaduri refuse her predetermined, scripted social role? Despite the fact that the young woman appears to have timed her suicide for when she was menstruating, to obviate the misassumption that she was pregnant, subsequent familial (and female) readings of the young woman’s ‘text’/death overwrite her intentions (whatever they were): her suicide was dismissed as the result of an illicit affair, or delirium, or melancholia as a result of her father’s recent death. A decade later, a letter from Bhaduri to her sister, written at the time of her suicide, revealed that she was a covert member of a resistance group charged with a political assignation that she felt unable to perform. Despite this revelation, (female) family members continued to treat the suicide as shameful and as “a case of illicit love” (2006 [1999], p. 35). In this way, suggests Spivak, although Bhaduri attempted to “‘speak’ by turning her body into a text of woman/writing,” “her attempt ... failed” (2006 [1999] 35). Even if her suicide *was* an attempt to articulate a resistant self, subsequent readings of her act, and the blank page of her now silent body, only serve to obliterate any agential ‘speech.’

In a notable revision to her earlier claim that “the subaltern cannot speak,” Spivak writes in a later version of her essay, “The subaltern as female *cannot be heard or read*” (2006 [1999], p. 35; my emphasis). This important qualification shifts questions from those of ‘speakerly’ agency to reader/listener interpretation. The question is not, of course, whether or not *sati* wives (or Bhaduri) *literally* spoke before or during immolation / suicide, or were able to do so (as suggested by some of Spivak’s critics, spectacularly missing her point – and this, too, is relevant to my discussion of *Foe*). Even if they had literally spoken, they would not have been “heard or read” in Spivak’s metaphoric sense. Spivak is thus less concerned with what *sati* widows might (not) have said than with the essentialist assumptions of those who read *sati* widows after their deaths – not only those evoking the authority of tradition but also (Western) cultural theorists and historians who, in ‘reading’ *sati*,

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imagine a European agential subject and then proceed to *give* her voice (just as Gubar does for her princess):

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, *not into a pristine nothingness*, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak, 1993 [1988], p. 102; my emphasis)

It is in this sense that the subaltern “does not speak” (is not heard, is not read) for Spivak; rather she is (re)produced in ventriloquial critical gestures that worryingly echo gestures of colonial benevolence, while in fact reproducing the discursive violence of imperialism (or patriarchy).⁵

Benita Parry’s response to Spivak’s essay is well known. (Parry is a notable Coetzee critic, engaging most particularly with questions of voice and silence in his writing.) Parry claims Spivak (and others “concerned with deconstructing the texts of colonialism” (*Postcolonial Studies* 14)) denies or refuses the agency of the “native” in her work, and counters this by insisting on the need for a “*conception* of the native as historical subject and agent of an oppositional discourse” (*Postcolonial Studies* 28; my emphasis). In effect, she urges contemporary critics to conceptually *recover*, via academic (re)conceptualisation, historically repressed subaltern knowledge or ‘voice.’ In response, Spivak argues that “the moot decipherment by another in an academic institution ... many years later must not be too quickly identified with the ‘speaking’ of the subaltern” (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 309). Speech, on her account, is always intersubjective, a “transaction between speaker and listener” (“Subaltern Talk” 289), and not to be confused with sympathetic vocalisation by an empowered other. Further, as an intersubjective act, speech is bound by extra-personal (inevitably epistemic) ‘presuppositions’ and ‘regulations,’ however deeply internalised these are.

⁵ “[T]he ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade.” (Spivak 2006 [1999], 28).

That [autonomous speech] is what did not happen in the case of a woman who took her own body at the moment of death to inscribe a certain kind of ... annulment of all the presuppositions that underlie the regulative psychobiography that writes *sati*.... And even that incredible effort to speak did not fulfil itself in a speech act. (“Subaltern Talk”, p. 289)

Spivak continues, in the same interview:

The actual fact of giving utterance was not what I was concerned about. What I was concerned about was that *even when one uttered*, one was constructed by a certain kind of psychobiography, so that the utterance itself – this is another side of the argument – *would have to be interpreted* in the way in which we historically interpret anything (“Subaltern Talk”, p. 291; my emphasis).

Here – crucially, I would argue – Spivak shifts questions from issues of writing or being written (and essentialist notions of the writer’s autonomous agency that lurk in such claims) to issues of intersubjective interpretation, from debates about authorial agency to ones of, if not reader responsibility via interpretation, then, at least, an inter-subjective engagement in which writerly authority is necessarily qualified.

Three

“[H]e has the last word who disposes over the greatest force”

Susan speaking, *Foe* (p. 124)

As I’ve already suggested, in Coetzee’s novels oppressive relationships are frequently figured with recourse to metaphors of writing and narration, or speech and silence.⁶

⁶ See Attwell, Bongie, Chesney, Jolly, Kossew, Lewis, Macaskill and Colleran – and this list is by no means exclusive. Coetzee refers to the “gaze of the author” as “the gaze of authority and authoritative judgment” (*Doubling the Point* 368).

Characters whose disempowerment is ostensibly marked by blankness/silence abound in Coetzee's fiction: the eponymous protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K*, the barbarian "girl" in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the surly Vercueil in *Age of Iron*, are just some examples. The (white) would-be woman writer, Susan Barton, and Friday, the (black) man/slave, in *Foe*, are exemplary. At first glance, Susan appears anything but silent, in contrast to mute Friday. She volubly narrates the first three sections of *Foe* (a travelogue or autobiographical fragment, a series of letters, and a first person narrative, respectively), all the while offering fertile pickings for feminist and postcolonial critics. Coetzee situates *Foe* as an imaginary 'pre-text' to Daniel Defoe's ur-text of colonial endeavor and justification, *Robinson Crusoe* and, less obviously, but also importantly, *Roxana*. Susan, a rescued 18th century castaway, ostensibly relates the story of her time on an unnamed island to the professional writer Foe⁷ to whom she has turned for assistance in the task of writing a saleable tale, provisionally titled *The Female Castaway*. Foe seeks to selectively rewrite Susan's story, relayed to him in a travelogue/memoir, a series of letters and in direct speech. Her story, as told to him, encompasses not only her time on the island with Cruso [Coetzee's spelling]⁸ and Friday, but also the period before it in which she looked for her lost daughter in Bahia. Despite her stated desire for authenticity, Susan comes to recognize that truth – particularly when mundane – is not the prerogative of (commercial) fiction, or even history: "the world expects stories from its adventurers" (p. 34), she reflects, and writes to Foe of "the history [he] write[s]": "it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too" (p. 63). But, as she acknowledges in a letter to Foe, "You know how dull our life was in truth" (81). In another letter, she queries "Without desire how is it possible to make a story? ... I ask myself what past historians of the castaway state have done – whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies" (p. 88).⁹ Of course Coetzee alludes here to the fact that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, strikingly lacking in

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⁷ Coetzee alludes to the well-known fact that Defoe's was born Daniel Foe and only as an adult changed his name to the more 'gentile' version by which we know him now. By returning to Defoe's "proper patronymic" (Spivak *Theory* 7) Coetzee also invites readers to consider Foe as a foe (of Susan? Of Friday?).

⁸ See Bongie on the significance of the missing 'e' in Cruso's name and elsewhere in *Foe*.

⁹ Susan writes to Foe of "the history [he] write[s]": "it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too" (63).

(sexual) desire, was originally received as a ‘true’ account of a castaway’s experience (and written in the mode of journalistic (autobiographical) reportage) and also to the many and extensive contemporary debates about the *fictional* nature of novelistic realism and its ideological functioning, and debates about desire in writing.¹⁰

Within the text, Susan’s desire to take possession of her own life, to autonomously (self) narrate, is made explicit in several extended passages of metafictional debate in which she resists Foe’s attempts to rewrite her (life) story. While she certainly has a *literal* voice through much of *Foe* (she not only speaks with Foe and Friday, and other characters, within the fictional heterocosm and defends her story and its authorship, but also acts as Coetzee’s narrator for the most part), she is nonetheless progressively silenced in metaphorical terms as the novel progresses. Ultimately, as we realize (if with the benefit of literary historical hindsight), she is ‘written out’ of not only (De)Foe’s subsequent “history” (women are striking for their absence in *Robinson Crusoe*) but also of her role as Coetzee’s narrator. By the final fourth section of the novel she is literally voiceless: dead.

Coetzee thus appears to be directly addressing the issue of violating writing, and authorial power, so widely debated at the time the novel was written. Perhaps not surprisingly, in doing so he casts more than a salutary glance towards the work of Gubar, a key feminist theorist at the time. As Pamela Dunbar, among others, has noted, Coetzee is surely alluding to the work of Gubar (and Sandra Gilbert) in his portrayal of Susan’s “battle” with (her) Foe (p. 101), particularly when this battle is allegorized in a scene of copulation. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar ask, “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organs can females generate texts?” (p. 73; quoted in Dunbar, 101). Coetzee’s response to this question is perhaps parodic in his portrayal of Susan’s misguided belief that “the pen becomes

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¹⁰ “Desire” is a significant and repeated word within the novel (see, for example, 86, 88, 121, 131). It is perhaps not coincidental that Nancy Armstrong published her groundbreaking feminist text, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* in 1987. There are many account of the significance of desire in narrative, one of the finest being Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot* [1984]. Brooks writes, for example, “If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*” (52).

mine while I write with it” (p. 66); “I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” (p. 131), she says. He offers an account, instead, of her failure to claim the male pen(is), “to be father to [her] story” (p. 123), to become its “begetter” (p. 126).

As I have argued elsewhere¹¹ Parts One to Three of the novel index Susan’s decreasing narratorial authority, a fact that is underscored by the insertion of Foe – who initially features as the Susan’s absent addressee in the first two sections – into her (ontological) “order” (p. 133) in the third section. Here the two characters literally battle for control of Susan’s story – the right to write it/her. Susan struggles to reject the “deceitful fatherhood” and “false paternity” (Connor, p. 183) of her ‘foe’ who attempts to foist an unwanted (invented) daughter on her (the allusions are to *Roxana*),¹² and to restructure her narrative into a more pleasing aesthetic ‘whole.’ The gendered struggle for narratorial/procreative dominance is symbolically enacted in the sexual encounter between the two described at the end of Part Three. Susan insists she is not “a mere receptacle ready to accommodate whatever story is stuffed into me” (p. 130). During intercourse she adopts a position of (symbolic) sexual dominance: she “straddle[s] him” (p. 139). Noting Foe’s unease at this she says “This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets [I]t is always a hard ride when the Muse pays her visits.... She must do whatever lies in her power to *father* her offspring” (p. 139-140; my emphasis). The scene is fraught with irony, for the knowledge that readers of *Robinson Crusoe* bring to the text is that Susan failed in her bid for paternity: she was written out of Defoe’s novel. In the (far too) simplistic terms of a gendered politics of writing, then, Susan can be read as a woman ‘silenced’ by masculine (narrative) authority. She is mastered and finally authored by (De)Foe.

Gender politics, however, are not Coetzee’s sole or even primary concern in the novel. In stark contrast to the naïvely voluble Man Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, and the speech of Susan, Coetzee’s Friday – explicitly portrayed as black – is mute, a muteness *figured* by his tonguelessness (and my stress on the figural is important).

¹¹ Worthington, *Self as Narrative*, 236-75.

¹² For a discussion of Coetzee’s allusions to *Roxana*, see Spivak, “Theory in the Margins.”

Although some of his acts *could* be read as non-verbal signing (his dancing, or scattering petals on the water, for example), his exclusion from a shared linguistic or ontological “order” (p. 133) empties them of the capacity to mean for others: they are not dialogic nor do they partake in a shared system of symbolic exchange. Whether this ex-communication is chosen or imposed is irrelevant; excluded from the intersubjective order of language/signing, Friday is merely an object written (on) by readers within and of the novel’s order. He does not “speak,” in Spivak’s original sense.

As several readers have noted, the absence of Friday’s tongue is only a supposition on the part of Susan, itself based on Cruso’s suppositions.¹³ Susan admits to being unable to look inside Friday’s mouth when asked to do so by Cruso (p. 85). Similarly, that Friday has been possibly been castrated is only offered up as a possibility, not a confirmed fact.¹⁴ Lewis MacLeod takes issue with what he sees as the mistaken critical assumption that Friday is literally tongueless: “all critics of *Foe* operate under some assumption that Friday is the subject of some kind of radical mutilation” (p. 7), he asserts. Instead, he suggests, “it’s possible to suppose Friday possesses a tongue and consequently to read Friday’s silence as a *voluntary* act, to think Friday has the capacity, just not the inclination, for speech” (p. 7; my emphasis). He thus invites exploration of the “unexamined possibility that Friday is merely silent” (p. 11). (*Merely?*) To my mind, setting aside a somewhat naïve imputation of intentionality for the character Friday (evident in such claims as “Friday apparently thinks ...” (p. 7)), MacLeod here enacts what we might call a Gubaresque move open to critique in the terms discussed above – in imagining that Friday’s speechlessness is chosen MacLeod ‘writes’ a story of resistance onto the ‘blank page’ of Friday. Even more importantly, even *if* Friday’s silence is chosen, as Spivak argues so vociferously in the essay discussed above, it is no defence against being spoken for, however benevolent the intention of retrospective ventiloquists. MacLeod, while charging other critics with “tak[ing] [Friday’s] tongue away [to] use him for their own ends” (p. 11), remains ironically unaware of his own appropriative

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¹³ For example, see Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. 81, fn 18.

¹⁴ 119-20; his ostensible lack of a pen(is) perhaps figuring his lack of authorial power in Gubar’s terms or, importantly, his lack of desire: “why did you not desire me ...?” Susan asks of him (86). See also Dominic Head, *J.M. Coetzee* 120.

critical practice, which does precisely the same. Whether or not Friday has a tongue, whether or not his voicelessness is voluntary, is a moot point. What matters is that his silence, his refusal *or* inability to engage in ‘speech’ means he is (over)written by Cruso, Susan, Foe and, ironically, also by Coetzee’s most well-intentioned readers: in the face of his silence, “he is to the world ... what [they] make of him” (p. 121-22), a point Coetzee emphasizes again and again.

Coetzee quite specifically draws attention to such issues. Susan is portrayed as mistakenly assuming that her silences are different from those of Friday because she chooses, in some instances, not to speak. She says to Foe,

You err most tellingly in failing to distinguish between my silences and the silences of a being such as Friday. ... 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. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. ... Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. (p. 122)

Soon after, she distinguishes herself from the dead whose “eternal silence” leaves a writer like Foe “to make of their stories whatever [he] fanc[ies],” and insists that as a living speaker “[i]t is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold” (p. 123).¹⁵ But in this, as in so much else, Susan is shown to be deeply mistaken. For all that she insists on their difference, throughout *Foe* Susan is linked to Friday, not least in Foe’s deeply ironic comment, “I would not rob you of your tongue for anything, Susan” (p. 150). Susan may well speak in the novel, but remains *unheard* and *unread* (recalling Spivak, above) in subsequent ‘history,’ just like Friday.

While the first three sections of the novel trace a debate about the agency of the female writer and her capacity to “speak” or “write” autonomously, they also expose the will-to-power involved in the act of writing, and its complicity with existing structures of power and authority. Silenced by the voice/pen of patriarchy

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¹⁵ In a similar fashion, following the death of Cruso, she says, “it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island” (45).

Susan may well ultimately be, but she nonetheless explicitly, and knowingly, subjects Friday to the same fate in her attempt to assert *her* authorship and authority. She says to Foe of him: “The true story [of Friday’s tongue] will not be heard till *by art* we have found a means of *giving voice* to Friday” (p. 118; my italics). She continues,

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defense 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 [...] What is the truth of Friday? [...] No matter what he is to himself ... what he is to the world is what I make of him. (p. 121-2)

Just as Susan’s (self) narrative is ultimately overwritten by Foe in this imaginary pretext to *Robinson Crusoe*, so Susan “make[s]” Friday according to her own interpretative desires: in both cases the dynamics of authorial power are treated explicitly in figures of speech. Interestingly, Susan initially advocates listening to the mute black man, “it is for us to descend into the mouth It is for us to open Friday’s mouth and hear what it holds” (142). Foe is less inclined to listen and responds, “We must make Friday’s silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday” (p. 142).

But Coetzee does not leave things here, in a reiteration of the problem of the violence of writerly/speakerly authority. Nor, crucially, does he posit Friday’s muteness or Susans’s silences as a solution to appropriation: quite clearly, blankness or silence (chosen or not), is no defense against being ‘written’ by another’s pen or ‘spoken’ in their speech. Further, Coetzee refuses to mollify the reader with the comforting myth that s/he is somehow outside this arena of textual or, in Michael Marais’s term, of “interpretative authoritarianism.”¹⁶

Before moving on, I first want to suggest what I think are the central questions posed by Coetzee in this, and much of his other writing: How might one counter the violence of textual hermeneutics, if one *accepts* that it underwrites the

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¹⁶ See Marais, “Interpretative Authoritarianism.”

activity of narration – and is the ground of (self) conceptualisation? This is not only to ask how one might speak or write the other without reinscribing the violence one seeks to critique; or to ask whether a silent other can be heard or read; or even to ask how the attempt *not* to represent the other might be ethical. It is also to ask about how silence or blankness – in the terms discussed above – might *affect* a reader and invite a different kind of hearing or, at the least, a reconsideration of what it means to listen.

Four

“[I]t is possible that some of us are not written, but merely are”

(Foe to Susan in *Foe*, p. 143).

With this in mind I would like to consider the enigmatic fourth and final part of *Foe*. In this Susan no longer narrates. Instead an unnamed, first-person and present-tense narrator provides two variations on a scene in which s/he discovers the bodies of the characters who ‘lived’ in the pages preceding. As I have argued elsewhere, Coetzee’s reader is here invited to adopt the position of unnamed narrator opened up by the pronoun ‘I,’ to undertake “the task of descending into that eye [I]” as Foe advocates at the end of Part Three (p. 141).¹⁷ In the first variant, the narrator ascends a staircase that is “dark and mean” (a present tense echo of Susan’s earlier description of the approach to Foe’s home at the start of Part Three) and, on reaching the upper landing, stumbles over the body of “a woman or a girl” (p. 153) who, described as “weigh[ing] no more than a sack of straw” (p. 153), recalls, perhaps, Susan’s refusal to be a “stuffed” woman, “hollow, without substance” (p. 131).¹⁸ The narrator then finds the bodies of an unnamed man and woman in bed, described in textual metaphors: “The skin [is] dry as paper [T]hey are quietly composed” (p.

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¹⁷ See Worthington, *Self as Narrative*.

¹⁸ “Substance” and “substantiality” are crucial words in the novel. See, for example, 125, 131, 132, 152. At the end of Part Three, Susan says to Foe, talking of the ‘invented daughter’: “she is substantial and I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world.” Foe’s telling reply is “You have omitted Friday.” (152).

153).¹⁹ While there is nothing to definitively link these unnamed bodies with the daughter, Susan and Foe from the preceding narrative, we seem to be encouraged to do so given the described setting and number, age and gender of the bodies.

The next body discovered by the narrator is alive (just). It is the (named) body of Friday who is still warm and has a faint pulse. Ironically, against Susan's claim that the daughter, she and Foe are "all alive ...all substantial ... all in the same world" (p. 152), it is the 'other-worldly' Friday who lives here while the others are lifeless. The narrator then "tr[ies] to part" the "clenched" teeth of Friday with a fingernail, an apt metaphor for Susan and Foe's attempts to make Friday speak. However it is not just Susan and Foe who are implicated in this attempted forced entry into Friday's hole/mouth; the reader is too. I suggest that Coetzee offers here a representation of the reader's (present-tense) experience of reading the preceding three parts of the novel – "I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar: *as she said*, the roar of waves in a seashell" (p. 154; my emphasis) – an experience in which we too (may) have attempted to give Friday voice. In this final part, Friday stirs and "[f]rom his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island" (p. 154). The passive grammatical construction makes clear that what "issues" is not a voluntary utterance on the part of Friday; furthermore, what issues is *not speech*, but only "sounds" the *meaning* of which is unfathomable. As readers confronting this still-alive body we would do well to remember a conversation between Susan and Foe in Part Three of the novel. Here they discuss God's authorship/writing of the world and Foe says to Susan, "it is possible that some of us are not written, but merely are" (p. 143).

In the second variation, the narrator again enters a house; Defoe's (paternal) authority frames the whole: "At one corner of the house, a plaque is bolted to the wall. *Daniel Defoe, Author*, are the words ..." (p. 155), perhaps signaling our retrospective entry as later reader. The narrator discovers what appears to be a box full of the letters Susan has (not) written to Foe in Parts One and Two of the novel, or perhaps the manuscript of her castaway account. The top page reads "Dear Mr Foe, at last I could row no further" (p. 155). Notwithstanding the important preface supplement, designating the addressee of whose existence the reader did not learn

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¹⁹ And here we might remember Susan's anguished assertion in Part Three: "I am not a story, Mr Foe" (131).

until the end of the first section, these words return to the first moment of the reader's interpretative descent into Coetzee's text, Susan's *quoted*²⁰ words at the start of Coetzee's novel: "At last I could row no further.... With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard" (p. 5). The narrator in this final section thus enacts, or repeats (with the notable supplement identifying the addressee) the interpretative entry made by the reader-writer on the first page of the Coetzee's novel, reiterating Susan's words almost verbatim, but with an important change in tense: "With a sigh, making barely a splash, I *slip* overboard" (p. 155). Are we here invited to "slip" into the submerged text(s) within Foe's text, itself submerged in Coetzee's?

Having entered the water, the narrator swims to the "dark mass of [a ship] wreck," and passes into "the hole" (p. 156, such a crucial word in what precedes)²¹ where s/he discovers the bodies of "Susan Barton and her dead captain" (p. 157). This overt naming of the bodies is a cruel trick on those readers who wish to read Coetzee's novel as providing a female counterpart to Defoe's. These words annul the 'truth' of everything in the forgoing narrative and radically revise the self-proclaimed "substantiality" of the *character* Susan and her story. Perhaps Susan never returned to England from the island or perhaps, dead *en route*, she never even inhabited the island in the first place. Either way, the 'true' woman's story, supposedly silenced in (De)Foe's rewriting but given 'voice' by Coetzee, was not true at all. Susan never spoke her alternative woman's story: she was/is only spoken for/written by Coetzee.

Confronting the submerged body of Friday the narrator tries to speak with him, asking "what is this ship?" (p. 157). The watery realm Friday inhabits is then described, in a phrase that has troubled many readers of the novel, myself included, as being "not a place of words.... It is a place where bodies are their own signs" (p. 157). This could, of course, appear to invite an essentialist reading of the kind I

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²⁰ Cf Attwell: "quotation marks before each of [Susan's] paragraphs remind [...] us constantly that this is not the immaterial language most fiction uses as its medium, nor even a representation of speech, but a representation *in writing of writing*. [...] When, towards the end of the novel, the quotation marks disappear, the reader is forced to ask question which fiction seldom invites: on what occasion and by what means are *these* words now being produced, and to what audience are they directed?" ("The Silence of the Canon" 73; emphasis original)

²¹ Susan speaks of "the story of Friday, which is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative" (121). The "hole" might also suggest the tongueless mouth of Friday.

attribute above to Gubar. But that Friday's silent body is one that can only be 'made to speak' by the appropriative writing of/giving voice by others – whether Foe, Susan, Coetzee or the reader – is, as I have argued above, insisted on throughout *Foe*. Surely, then, Coetzee is not suggesting the possibility of access to signs the meaning of which are immanent but unspoken, especially because *bodily*?

What might it mean to suggest a body is its *own sign*? And as the above indicates, I wish to avoid the 'Gubaresque' suggestion that blank bodies/texts can somehow autonomously articulate resistant agency by means of (chosen) silence. For, of course, a body that is read/understood *as* a sign is already one subject to interpretative inscription. I think the key here lies in the deceptively simple possessive, "own." Coetzee does not suggest that bodies meaningfully sign (to others) via a materiality that is somehow exempt from interpretation.²² (One only has to read *Waiting for the Barbarians* to understand how emphatically this is not the case.) As Spivak insists in the essay discussed above, signing – "speech" – is by definition intersubjective; there can be no "own sign" that *means* without being read by another. An "own sign," then, may be one owned by the subaltern, othered self, yes – but must remain unreadable, meaningless, unless *re-signed* in appropriation or ventriloquism.

It is remarkable, but also surely one of the lessons of Coetzee's novel, with what regularity readers nonetheless engage in ventriloquial possession of Friday, or his silent body. Indeed, it is extremely hard to resist the desire to impute meaning to Friday's silence or his "sound." In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, the narrator again "pass[es] a fingernail across [Friday's] teeth, trying to find a way in" (p. 157). The novel concludes thus: "His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me [the narrator].... Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face" (p. 157). The conclusion has often, and to my mind very mistakenly, been read as some sort of plenitudinous, pre- or extra-linguistic act of communication on the part of Friday (and Coetzee), as the subaltern's expression of a truth/self somehow outside of the representational

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²² Coetzee warns against assuming "that we can exit from the linguistic field, which includes the field of fiction in/on which we subsist" ("Achterberg's" 78).

violence of Susan/Foe/Coetzee/his reader. For some readers then, the “slow stream” that emits from Friday’s mouth is his ‘true’ voice; “without interruption.” Blank and voiceless Friday, in these terms, finally ‘has his say’, ‘speaks his voice’, *voices himself* – without speaking, while remaining blank to those with authoritative power. Just like Gubar/Dinesen’s princess.²³

Sue Kossew, for example, suggests that Coetzee manages not to speak *for* Friday yet *allows* him voice by metaphoric sleight of hand: “the author-figure ... of the final section ... avoids speaking for Friday, *allowing* his voice to emerge only in this metaphoric way” (p. 175; my emphasis). She continues:

The poetic power of the metaphor expressed via the narration could itself be seen as *a way of speaking* which *expresses* something of the slumbering power of *Friday’s voice*, as do his other non-verbal means of *communication*. [...] [This] *allows* the voice to become the source of its own *discursive power*.... (p. 176-77; my emphasis)

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In this reading, Coetzee evades the charge of speaking for the other, while representing his voice nonetheless – through metaphor. Friday is understood as having “voice” and articulating “discursive power” while abstaining from discourse; he somehow he maintains the power of “non-verbal ... *communication*.” He thus communicates to Coetzee’s reader, if he failed to do so to Susan and Foe. Given my comments above, this “solution,” the proposition of an “alter/native” (Kossew 177) voice for Friday in silence that nonetheless communicates, does nothing to treat of readerly interpretation. Metaphors are read and interpreted too.

I want to return to the role of the reader which is too often, as I have suggested, ignored or obfuscated in the fixed attention paid to the politics of *writing* with its focus on authorial authority, and I propose to do so (again) via Spivak – and Parry (with Gubar in the margin). Spivak has commented extensively on *Foe*, and was one of the novel’s earliest, and remains one of its most nuanced, commentators. She writes, for example, of “the contrast ... between the colonialist [say, Susan or

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²³ Some recent examples: “Here Friday’s body speaks for itself” (Singh xx); “Friday speaks, but not in the words of the colonial oppressor” (Upstone 176); “Coetzee gives Friday back his voice” (Hertel 91).

Defoe] – who gives the native speech – and the metropolitan anti-imperialist [his critical commentators, perhaps] – who wants to give the native voice” (“Theory in the Margin” 13).²⁴ It is precisely the nature of this ‘giving voice’ (or the desire to do so) that troubles Spivak. It is particularly instructive, in this light, to read Spivak alongside (against) Parry, another formidable Coetzee critic. Parry, Spivak suggests, censures critics like herself (and Homi Bhabha and Abdul Jan Mohammed) because “they will not *let* the native speak” (16; my emphasis). In response, Spivak offers this “particular word” to Parry: “her efforts (to give voice to the native) as well as mine (to give warning to the attendant problems) are judged by those strange margins of which Friday ... is only a *mark*” (p. 16; my emphasis). A mark, not a sign; a sound, not speech or writing²⁵ – and much hangs on this distinction. Recognizing and responding to the strangeness of those “strange margins,” marked but not signed by Friday, is precisely what is at stake.

In a provocative essay on speech and silence in Coetzee’s writing, Parry suggests Coetzee’s critics (she includes Spivak) all read Friday as a “victor” rather than a “victim” and credit Friday with “possessing extraordinary and transgressive psychic energies” despite (or because of) his silence (p. 156). She argues that in the many critical accounts of Coetzee’s novels the various silenced and silent characters,

all signify [or rather are interpreted as signifying] not a negative condition of lack and affliction, or of sullen withdrawal, but a plenitude of perception and gifts ... [and] the outflow of sounds from the mouth of Friday gives ... tongue to meanings? desires? which precede or surpass those that can be communicated and interpreted in formal language. (p. 153-4; question marks original)

In such readings, she argues, “Friday does not cross the threshold into logical and referential discourse, remaining instead in that paradisaical condition where sign and object are unified, and where the body, spared the traumatic insertion into language, can give utterance to things lost or never yet heard...” (p. 155). In this

²⁴ This essay is reprinted, largely unchanged in Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (174-97).

²⁵ In this regard, it is notable just how often critics attempt to interpret the *marks* Friday makes on the slate he is given during literacy lessons, and offer interpretations of these as “alter/native” signs (147).

respect she finds Coetzee politically delinquent: “the potential critique of political oppression is diverted by the conjuring and endorsing of a non-verbal signifying system” (p. 153); finally, Coetzee’s writing “is marked by the singularity of a textual practice which dissipates the engagement with political conditions it also inscribes” (p. 164). In short, Coetzee is to be reprimanded for relegating his oppressed (non-white) characters to ineffable silence – again, for not *letting* them speak.

Not all of Coetzee’s oppressed characters are silent, of course, as Parry notes. (White) women speak in the novels, or rather are given voice by Coetzee, like Susan in *Foe*. On this “imitation of a woman’s writing” (p. 158), when set against the ostensible refusal to grant speech to the (non-white) “dispossessed” such as Friday, Parry writes,

... the effects of bestowing authority on the woman’s text, while withholding discursive skills from the dispossessed, is to reinscribe, indeed re-enact, the received disposal of narrative power, where voice is correlated with cultural supremacy and voicelessness with subjugation; just as the homages to the mystical properties and prestige of muteness undermine the critique of that condition where oppression inflicts and provokes silence. (p. 158)

In response, I’d suggest, first, that Parry confuses Coetzee’s critic’s interpretations (misreading some) with his textual representations. Second, to suggest that Susan’s female narrative in *Foe* is “bestow[ed] authority” is a significant misunderstanding of Coetzee’s novel which quite clearly portrays the *political* failure (in gendered terms) of Susan’s authorship. We should not forget that Susan is silenced at the end of *Foe*, her story’s credibility – her speech – is utterly undermined, her identity is annulled, and her body is lifeless. She is exposed as an “insubstantial” dummy, ventriloquized not only by Foe/Defoe but also by Coetzee and his readers: a “stuffed” woman.

To my mind, Parry’s argument founders on her inability to see past the *trope* of authorial/textual dominance. Within these terms a ‘writer’ (by which term I include the reader as interpretative writer) is wholly authoritative and has just two

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options: to grant to or withhold speech from the “dispossessed.” The writer may “let” an other speak via representation in his/her writing (opening to the charge of ventriloquism) *or* the writer may decline to represent the other/ the other’s speech (opening to the charge of silencing or relegating the other’s voice to the realm of the ineffective “ineffable”). It is an impossible double-bind for the writer, who in both scenarios is accused of bad faith and even political betrayal.

What underwrites both accounts – granting speech, inscribing silence – is the assumption of authorial fiat: the writer writes with full authority and his or her characters / the text is merely the passive product of that authoritative inscription. This assumes that writing is monologic; or rather it ignores that the *meaning* attributed to writing (or speech) is a dialogic product (and always deferred). I submit that Coetzee does not simply reify the (authoritative self) writer/ (passive other) text binary that sustains tropes of textuality and voice, but crucially emphasizes the role of the reader in the dynamic of meaning creation.

For all the reasons given above it is, I think, mistaken to understand Friday’s (textually represented) “sound” or “stream” as *signifying* anything – whether unrepresented truth or the expression of an unmediated intentionality, unless that signification is imposed by a reader. Friday *sounds* but does not speak. His “stream” is described by the narrator as the result of an act that is passive, not intentional: “His mouth opens,” he does not “open his mouth”; the stream erupts, he does not expel it. What or whether it means for him can only ever be guessed at, imputed, (violently) imposed on the impenetrable body/text. It is his body’s “own sign.”

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FIVE

A face is imposed on me without me being able to be deaf to its appeal nor to forget it Consciousness loses its first place.

(Levinas “The Trace of the Other”)

If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other.
Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power.

(Levinas “Time and the Other”)

But this need not relegate Friday – or his represented body – to the realm of the politically ineffectual. To ponder the impossibility of understanding Friday’s “own sign,” and the complicity of our attempts to know it, is perhaps the point. Here it is instructive, I think, to turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas. This is not to suggest Coetzee has read or even alludes to Levinas’s work in his writing.²⁶ Rather, Levinas’s work grapples with issues not dissimilar to those discussed above and provides a fruitful (philosophical and metaphoric) language with which to consider these further in Coetzee’s novel. My comments in what follows should certainly be read alongside Michael Marais’s exemplary Levinasian reading of *Foe* in “Disarming Silence,” although I disagree with the claim that Coetzee alludes to Levinas in any direct way (137). Levinas accepts, indeed it is the founding premise of his work, that writings of the other (as a metaphor for conceptualisation) are always violent (re)readings (and vice versa). As as Derrida asserts in his well-known essay “Violence and Metaphysics” (a response to Levinas’s early *Time and Infinity*), “[t]he other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality (mine *and* its). It is such as soon as it comes into language – but has not Levinas taught us that there is no thought before language?” (“Violence”, p. 143; emphasis original).

This said, for Levinas our engagements with others are not only acts of masterful (and violent) ‘textual’ self-consciousness. Importantly, too, however paradoxically, it is only *within* language (‘writing’ or ‘speaking’) that one experiences one’s responsibility to the other. I have similarly argued above that for Coetzee (reading as) writing is always a violent act that, nonetheless, invites an ethical encounter. The question then becomes what might mitigate despair at this

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²⁶ I am by no means the first to read Coetzee’s work in light of Levinas’s writings; in fact this is an increasingly common critical approach. The work of Michael Marais, in his many readings of Coetzee’s novels, is exemplary; see, especially, in relation to *Foe*, “Disarming Silence.” See also Meffan and Worthington; Jordaan and Drichel.

(linguistic) violence (cf. early Spivak), if not abstention from speaking or writing, imagined as expressive (cf. Gubar), or denial imagined as betrayal (cf. Parry)?

Levinas urges refusal of an ontology that presupposes the pre-eminence of intentionality, nothing less than a radical revision of post-Cartesian notions of the self: he argues for subjectivity (and so ethical engagement) as constituted (also) in the experience of *bodily* proximity with the other, or in the excess (Spivak's "strange margins") – onto which this opens.²⁷ Against the violence of knowing (as writing/speaking) Levinas posits "*touching*, interpreted not as palpation but as caress, and language, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact" ("Substitution" 80; emphasis original). This claim is of course figurative, utilising metaphors "to describe *proximity* [of self and other] as irreducible to consciousness and thematization. [It] is a relationship with what cannot be resolved into 'images' and exposed," a relationship with the other that is always "incommensurate" ("Substitution" 80; emphasis original). Intersubjective relations, he argues, are too often predicated on *desire*²⁸ for possession of the other (if not bodily then via the self's cognitive inscription). Ethics, for Levinas, lies in the (recognition of the) failure of that desire, the "failure of possession" ("Time and the Other", p. 51). In terms of the above discussion, in *facing* what Parry calls the "ineffable" other we recognize that we cannot *own* the other's body, its "own sign," regardless of the desire to possess it. In this respect, I strongly contest Parry's assertion that Coetzee's writing "valorize[s] the body *as an agent of cognition*" ("Speech and Silence" 158; my emphasis). "Cognition" is precisely what the alterity of the (metaphorical) affective body of the other resists.

The "face," a crucial and central concept for Levinas, particularly in his early work, is guarantor of the other's sensible, material being, the site where proximity is experienced, at the level of the skin, of the touch that is felt, a "contact" that affects, before it is known or re-*cognized*. In ethical engagement with the other, "[a] face is

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²⁷ See Critchley *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, 63-4. Ethical subjectivity "is *lived* in the sensibility of a *corporeal* obligation to the other" (64; my emphasis); "It is because the self is sensible, that is to say, vulnerable, passive, open to wounding, outrage and pain, but also open to the movement of the erotic, that it is capable or worthy of ethics" (64). This is not to return to an essentialist notion of the body as underwriting a shared conception of subjectivity, but rather to suggest that in bodily proximity we are exposed to an experience of an other's (self) ownership that refuses our possession.

²⁸ Such a crucial word in *Foe*, as suggested above.

imposed on me without me being able to be deaf to its appeal nor to forget it Consciousness loses its first place” (“The Trace of the Other”; qtd in Robbins, p. 12). In these terms, the face of the other denotes (the possibility of) an affective relationship premised on not *speaking for* the other, or *allowing* the other speech. The ethical encounter,

... realizes and sustains ... the proximity of person to person, the proximity of one’s neighbour or the welcome we prepare for one another. It is a mode of thought that cannot be reduced to an act of knowing in which truths are constituted (Levinas *Outside the Subject*, p. 1)

Put another way, the ethical encounter is a mode of listening, rather than the giving or taking away of voice. Crucially, for Levinas, the response of the self to the face / body of the other is *not realized*, in both the senses of that word: it is not ‘understood’ and not ‘achieved.’²⁹ Levinas asks, rhetorically, whether this responsive relationship can be “be characterized as a failure?” and continues:

Once again, the answer is yes, if one adopts the terminology of current descriptions, if one wants to characterize the erotic [union with the other] by ‘grasping’, ‘possessing’, or ‘knowing’. But ... [i]f one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing, and grasping are synonyms of power. (“Time and the Other”, p. 51)

Here, then, is the crucial paradox of Levinas’s thought, productively read, I think, with respect to Spivak’s (notorious) claim that the subaltern cannot “speak” (or be “heard” or “read” in her later formulation): commun(ica)tion with the other, as an attempt to speak (for)/write that other, cannot succeed. Or rather, to be ethical, it *must fail*. It must not be realized unless as conquest. In his later work, and arguably in response to Derrida’s critique, Levinas turns his attention to language and representation, language (re)conceived in Derridian terms as a process in which

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²⁹ Cf. Marais, “the image of reading in *Foe* is couched in the ethical terms of an encounter with the face” (“Disarming Silence” 138).

meaning is continually deferred – always “interrupted”, “reiterated” – in the movement of *différance*.³⁰

Levinasian ethics is fundamentally hermeneutic in conception. It begins with the problematic of the violence of writing and posits the solution of ethical reading which, in short, questions its own interpretative authority. If, as the above implies, one can posit an ethics at the heart of Coetzee’s novel that shares an affinity with the thought of Levinas, can one begin to derive a politics from this aesthetics? And what might such a politics look like? For a start, it would be a politics that refuses the reification of the binary of self and other, via metaphors of authorial mastery of the passive text, a binary in the face of which there is, for the other, only suicidal abstention, the refusal to ‘voice’ (unless in the impossible assertion of unmediated self-expression, as for Gubar, or a benevolent ‘giving voice’ in re-presentation) or abject silence.

Ethics, so conceived, is experienced precisely as the realization that one cannot father the text, as the failure of desire for possession and ownership, and that beyond the self’s knowing or signing is an excess – or margin of strangeness – that we cannot master. But, we might well ask, how might this realization be ethical – or for that matter political? Levinas’s work is again instructive. He suggests that the failure to know/possess the other can be reconceived in positive terms as the opening of the reading/writing (conceived) self (the “said” of self-certainty) to the disruption of the other’s affective presence (a “saying” the meaning of which cannot be fixed). This, he argues, invokes radical self-questioning which “calls *me* into question” (“Ethics as first Philosophy” 83; emphasis original). Ethics, he argues

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³⁰ In *Otherwise than Being* and the works that follow it, Levinas strives to articulate the interruption of (conscious) being by that which is otherwise, beyond being (as consciousness). He formulates empirical language, language that adequates the other, as “the said”. The said designates, thematizes, imposes teleology, reduces the ethical/other to an object in the self’s inscriptions. Against this he posits language as performative, as interruptive process, as an *accusative* (ethically and grammatically) to which calls for response. While the “saying” is itself a linguistic figure, it metaphorically denotes that which cannot – and in terms of Levinasian ethics must not – be finally said. If “[i]n language qua said everything is conveyed before us ... at the price of a betrayal” (*Otherwise* 6), nonetheless “the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted” (*Otherwise* 47), it “imprints its trace on the thematization itself” (*Otherwise* 46-7).

again and again, is “the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other” (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 43).³¹

It is then less a matter of what a sign *signifies*, or what might have been said, if allowed. Rather, what matters is the disruptive *effect* of a body/ “own sign” on a *reader* who acknowledges the other’s existence as otherwise *owned* – as “beyond [the self’s] being” (or knowing). Friday’s silence, like his body’s “own sign,” doesn’t (needn’t) signify or be made to signify in interpretation: it *affects*. The challenge in reading (as in writing) Friday (the other, the dispossessed) is to resist the attempt to own his sign in representation or interpretation, and to acknowledge the failure of possession or ownership. Fridays “sound” is a ‘saying’ that is *felt*, not ‘said.’ It is felt moreover, in Coetzee’s novel, by the narrator on the “skin of [the narrator’s] face” (the words with which the novel ends, 157). Friday, paradoxically, like Levinas’s metaphorical “face”, can be understood to represent the unrepresentable, disruptive effect of the unknown and unknowable other on the reading/writing self. ‘I’ don’t need to know his (intended) *meaning* for this to occur. In fact the opposite. It is precisely his alterity and unknowability, that calls *me* – this reader, at this moment in time – into question.³²

I am suggesting, then, that Coetzee extends theoretical claims about the violence of writing by promoting what might be called and ethics – and aesthetics – of affective reading that doesn’t (only) focus on the problems that inhere in the writing of the other, in the giving or finding of his/her voice. I am by no means suggesting Coetzee is an acolyte of Levinas, far from it, but rather that the two writers share an understanding of affective reading that each attempts to articulate in ways that, for all their differences, share some significant metaphors and understandings and are fruitfully considered together. There are many other critical

³¹ This is not to deny that the body of the other, the text, *can* always be imagined as owned by the writer/reader. It is to understand, first, that such reduction is inadequate, unethical, and simply reasserts the will of the conceiving ego. Such ‘reading’/‘writing’ affords certitude only by denying the effect of that bodily/textual encounter, which is precisely the disruptive opening up to self-critique.

³² *Waiting from the Barbarians* offers another portrayal of the affective face in the Magistrate’s final encounter with Colonel Joll (146) and throughout the text the body of barbarian girl frustrates the Magistrate’s (and reader’s) desire for possession. Michael K’s emaciated body functions similarly in *Michael K.* Marais writes of encounters with those “irreducible to logocentric conceptuality” (133) as ones that result in the “insecurity of responsibility” (137).

approaches might lead to a reading not dissimilar to that I've tentatively sketched in this essay. One such example is Derek Attridge's very fine account of *Foe*, which reads the novel via questions of canonicity (fundamentally questions about inclusion and exclusion, of who is (not) allowed to 'write' or be 'read'). He suggests that for readers uncomfortably aware of their cultural inclusion in a dominant group, "there is no simple remedy to be understood in terms of investing Friday with speech" (p. 86). Further,

Coetzee's novels do not represent a yearning for some realm of richness and plenitude beyond language, a meaningfulness behind the emptiness of our conscious lives. They attempt strenuously to avoid both terms of the colonizer's contradiction ...: that the other is wholly knowable, and that the other is wholly mysterious; that the other has no boundaries, and that the boundaries of the other are impenetrable. (p. 89)

With respect to Friday's silence he argues, "its powerful *effects* are everywhere" (82; emphasis original), effects that encourage us to contemplate "political and cultural procedures that will allow us not just to hear each other's stories, as the liberal humanist dream would have it, but to hear – and this will entail a different kind of hearing – each other's silences", p. 90).

I have argued, then, as Attridge argues too, that Coetzee urges a reconsideration of self-other relations that begins with a reconceptualisation of the reading subject (s/he who reads the other) – always already a writer – called into question by the affective "own sign" of an unreadable mark, a speechless sound, or silence. Rather than exclusion or the granting of inclusion, what is promoted is a politics of intersubjective interpretation – a hearing or reading in which, *faced* with the silent and unreadable text/body of the other, an ethical reader forgoes the self-certitude of authorship. In this, the mastery of consciousness, and the subject as consciousness, is called into question by the alterity that is a "strange margin" marked by the silent other. We are encouraged to 'hear' differently, to attend to silence. This is a long way from a textual politics that either seeks an impossibly

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unmediated expressive autonomy for the “speaking” other (Gubar), or seeks to “allow” that other speech (Parry).

As I understand Coetzee’s work, writing is always represented as the violent apprehension of otherness. But writing is also represented, again and again, as the *failure* to represent the own other, marked by his/her body. It is this failure that *Foe* exposes to scrutiny. Acknowledging the failure of writerly authority, the failure to own in interpretation the mark of otherness, opens *me*, the (writing) reader, always, to (self) questioning. And this (self) interrogation is precisely what mitigates ostensible authorial power. In that opening, in that recognition of endless reiteration and reevaluation, lies the possibility of new narratives for the reading self and a politics that begins in self-questioning and the refusal of authority.

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