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**THE PITFALLS OF A POSTCOLONIAL POETICS:
J. M. COETZEE'S *FOE* AND THE NEW LITERATURES
IN ENGLISH**

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads J. M. Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe* as a prime example of cosmopolitan postcolonial literature. The first part, entitled "Narrative as Communication," focuses on aspects of "telling." It offers a detailed description of the novel's narrative design which frames a fictional constellation of *de facto*, potential, and disabled storytellers and writers. The second part, entitled "Colonizers and Colonized," shifts the focus to aspects of "being." It explores the political implications of the processes of narrative appropriation staged through this cast of characters. The third part, finally, entitled "Pitfalls and Potentialities," uses the categories of "telling," "being," and "writing" for a systematic exploration of the ways in which Coetzee's postmodernist slant on postcolonial problems illustrates the pitfalls as well as the potentialities of a postcolonial poetics as embodied in many texts of the emerging new literatures in English. In a very fundamental way, Coetzee's novel *Foe* questions processes of making sense of the world by means of narrative *and* the cultural conditioning of these processes by means of writing. By reflexively drawing attention to its own and *Robinson Crusoe*'s status as writing, *Foe* fosters an awareness of the materiality of writing and its social effects, such as, most importantly, the regulation of modes of access to public author-positions.

J. M. Coetzee is certainly one of the most prominent figures in the emerging canon of the new literatures in English. As a white South African who received an academic education in Great Britain and the United States and returned to South Africa in 1971 at the age of 31 before he began publishing fiction, Coetzee is well equipped to inhabit that cosmopolitan postcolonial "Third Space" of "in-

betweenness" that has been demarcated by theorists like Homi Bhabha and writers like Salman Rushdie.¹ In spite of Rushdie's and Bhabha's enthusiasm, however, the position of "in-betweenness" is not an unproblematic one in the complex ecology of perspectives brought forth by the postcolonial condition of the so-called "post-modern" world, and like Salman Rushdie, Coetzee has been attacked for being too much in compliance with Western attitudes.²

While there can be no doubt that Coetzee's prominence in the new canon depends (like Rushdie's) to a certain extent on this compatibility with Western traditions and interests,³ it is also quite clear that Coetzee puts his familiarity with the canon of Western literature and his alertness to the major intellectual currents of the West from the 1960s to the present to new uses that are definitely motivated by the peculiar colonial and postcolonial condition of South Africa in the late twentieth century. As one critic puts it:

Coetzee has consistently ... confounded the very logic of choice [between postmodernism and postcolonialism] by simultaneously choosing both options, by adopting post-modern strategies, which he has then used for postcolonial purposes⁴—

¹ See, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 9-18, and the narrator's voice in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (London: Picador, 1984 [1983]) esp. 28f.

² For overviews on Coetzee's standing in South African literature and the debate about postmodernism and postcolonialism cf. David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 9-34 and Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 1-27.

³ Cf. Derek Attridge, "Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of Canonization," *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, eds. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996) 168-90 [orig. publ. in *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*, ed. Karen R. Lawrence (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992) 212-38]. See also Eva-Marie Herlitzius, *A Comparative Analysis of the South African and German Reception of Nadine Gordimer's, André Brink's and J. M. Coetzee's Works* (Münster: LIT, 2005).

⁴ Cf. Richard Begam, "Silence and Mut(e)ilation: White Writing in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 93, 1 (1994): 111-29, 112.

and, one might add, by focusing on postcolonial problems, which he has then used as a starting point for a critique of "postmodern" attitudes.⁵

While these concerns pervade all of Coetzee's books,⁶ their most radical combination can be found in *Foe*, Coetzee's fifth novel, published in 1986.⁷ Here, the "fateful encounter between colonizer and colonized," which is characteristic for all of Coetzee's "strange allegories of the colonial condition,"⁸ is linked to one of the founding texts of colonialism, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). In fact, *Foe* purports to be an alternative version not only of the events in Defoe's novel but also of its genesis. The reader "sees" Crusoe's island through the eyes of one Susan Barton who is washed ashore on

⁵ See, for example, Bo Lundén, *(Re)educating the Reader: Fictional Critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville's Dr Copernicus, Coetzee's Foe, and Byatt's Possession* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1999).

⁶ So far, Coetzee has published eleven novels (*Dusklands* 1974, *In the Heart of the Country* 1977, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 1980, *Life & Times of Michael K.* 1983, *Foe* 1986, *Age of Iron* 1990, *The Master of Petersburg* 1994, *Disgrace* 1999, *Elisabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* 2003, *Slow Man* 2005, and *Diary of a Bad Year* 2007), five thematic volumes of essays and criticism (*White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* 1988, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* 1996, *What Is Realism?* 1997, *The Novel in Africa* 1999, and *The Lives of Animals* 2001), three collections of essays and interviews (*Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* 1992, *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* 2001, and *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005* 2007), and two installments of an ongoing memoir (*Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* 1997 and *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* 2002), and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 2003.

⁷ The central importance of *Foe* in this respect has been confirmed by all monographs on Coetzee's fictional oeuvre so far. Cf., fairly early, Arnim Mennecke, *Koloniales Bewußtsein in den Romanen J.M. Coetzee's* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1991) as well as Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee* 1993 and Head, *J.M. Coetzee* 1997. In fact, Coetzee himself returns to the theme in his 2003 Nobel Lecture entitled "He and His Man." Cf. <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture.html>>, accessed 19 Oct. 2004.

⁸ Erhard Reckwitz, "South African Literature," *Companion to the New Literatures in English*, ed. Christa Jahnson (Berlin: Schmidt, 2002) 17-46, 22. On the allegorical character of Coetzee's fiction cf. Mennecke, *Koloniales Bewußtsein* 1991, 7-9 and Head, *J.M. Coetzee* 1997, 20-27.

the island after she has been cast away by mutineers about a year before. Cruso, Friday, and herself are rescued and taken back to England. Cruso (spelt, in Coetzee's novel, without the "e" at the end of the name) having died shortly before their arrival, Susan Barton sets about trying to find someone who is able to put the story of the island into writing, and she finds an author by the name of Foe. The rest, one might say, is history, except that Susan's story is completely different from the one we all know, and the Cruso of her account (i.e., the one without the "e") is a completely different person from the figure which has passed into the collective consciousness of the West.⁹

What is the point of such a rewriting? This is the question which the following remarks will tackle in the light of the postcolonial/"postmodern" interface mentioned earlier. I will begin with a detailed description of the novel's narrative design which frames a fictional constellation of *de facto*, potential, and disabled storytellers and writers; i.e., Susan Barton with her account of her stay on the island on the one hand; Cruso and Foe with their future narratives, which a reader of *Foe* (the novel) will inevitably have in mind, on the other; and finally Friday, who is a mute presence in the novel because his tongue has been cut out. The implications of this constellation of characters will be dealt with in the second part. In a third and final part, I will then try to systematize the ways in which Coetzee's postmodernist slant on postcolonial problems may serve to illustrate the pitfalls as well as the potentialities of a postcolonial poetics as embodied in many texts of the emerging new literatures in English.

Narrative as Communication ["Telling"]

At the beginning of the novel, the reader is plunged into a retrospective first-person narrative with the following words: "At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard" (5).¹⁰ The ensuing memoir, whose narrator introduces herself as "Susan Barton ... a woman alone" (10), recounts her stay with Friday and Cruso on Cruso's island until the three of them

⁹ For Coetzee's own critical account of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, cf. his introduction to the 1999 Oxford UP World's Classic edition of the novel, reprinted in J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001) 20-26.

¹⁰ Page references in the text are to the following edition: J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

are "rescued" (Susan Barton enthusiastically, Cruso and Friday against their will) about a year after her arrival.

Obviously, this memoir with its numerous deviations from the description of Crusoe's island as many readers know it (Crusoe with the "e," that is), offers a striking rewriting of Defoe's novel in itself, a rewriting that is largely based on the substitution of a female perspective for Crusoe's male one.¹¹ The memoir does not, however, make up the text of the novel *Foe*, where it is only the first of four parts. In fact, the reader is alerted to the memoir's piecemeal status from the very beginning, as it appears in quoted form throughout. Even the most casual reader will, at one stage or another, be bothered by the persistent recurrence of quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph. The question is: who quotes the memoir? Can we really say without qualification that "Susan Barton begins the novel with quotation marks, a self-citation," as Gayatri Spivak states at one point in her highly sophisticated reading of the novel?¹² I for one doubt this, and the unfolding of narrative situations in the remainder of the novel suggests that it is actually some narrative or authorial force beyond Susan Barton who is responsible for the quotation marks. Right at the end of the memoir, however, we learn that it is addressed to Mr. Foe,¹³ and Susan Barton concludes it with a claim of ownership and authority: "Think of me what you may, it was I who shared Cruso's bed and closed Cruso's eyes, as it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island." (45)

In these final sentences of the memoir the major thematic preoccupations of the novel are unequivocally stated: it is, as one critic puts it, "paying more attention to the telling of the story than the story itself,"¹⁴ and the resultant metafictional dominant is

¹¹ For a convincing reading of the feminist dimension of the novel, cf. Peter E. Morgan, "Foe's Defoe and *La Jeune Née*: Establishing a Metaphorical Referent for the Elided Female Voice," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35, 2 (1994): 81-96.

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*," *Consequences of Theory*, ed. Johnathan Arac, Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991) 154-80, 162.

¹³ Cf. the many instances of reader address that seem more situational than rhetorical: 9, 11, 14, 15, 26, 33, 38, 40, 42.

¹⁴ Cf. Atwell, *J. M. Coetzee* 1993, 104, who in turn refers to Ina Gräbe, "Postmodern Narrative Strategies in *Foe*," *Journal of Literary Studies* 5,

focused on questions of "power, authority, and ownership."¹⁵ And this, of course, is the heart of Coetzee's combination of postmodernist and postcolonial concerns: representation is not only, as in many metafictional postmodernist novels, an epistemological problem. As her memoir in part I of the novel demonstrates, Susan Barton has quite impressive expressive capabilities so that her "problem ... is not primarily a lack of voice or a lack of art, of representation in its aesthetic and semiotic sense."¹⁶ This additional focus adds a distinctly postcolonial flavor to Coetzee's brand of postmodernist metafiction.¹⁷ What little plot there is in the novel revolves around this problem and stages situations in which narrative serves as a medium of communication and as a bone of contention between Susan Barton and Mr. Foe. "I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me" (40), insists Susan fairly early on, but as she had to pass herself off on the ship as Mrs. Cruso for propriety's (or, from her point of view, convenience's) sake (cf. 42) she has to seek out someone like the aptly named Mr. Foe after her return to London in order to gain access to a public author-position.

The resulting conflict-laden relationship is traced in parts II and III of the novel. In a manner similar to part I, part II quotes a sequence of letters from Susan Barton to Mr. Foe. Here, the reader learns that the quoted memoir of part I is actually a text *written* by Susan Barton for Mr. Foe,¹⁸ and a little later she even comes up with a title for her work in the typical period manner: "The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related" (67).

2 (1989): 145-82, 147f., who reads this as a clear symptom of "postmodernism's favoring of the signifier over the signified."

¹⁵ Cf. Patrick Corconan, "Foe: Metafiction and the Discourse of Power," *Robinson Crusoe: Myths and Metamorphoses*, eds. Lieve Spaas, Brian Stimpson (New York: St. Martin's, 1996) 256-66, 257. See also Michela Canepari-Labib, *Old Myths - Modern Empires: Power, Language and Identity in J. M. Coetzee's Work* (New York: Lang, 2005).

¹⁶ Brian Macaskill, Jeanne Colleran, "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*," *Contemporary Literature* 33, 3 (1992): 423-57, 444.

¹⁷ In this sense, the novel is clearly in tune with Spivak's observation that "the deconstructive position ... has its historical case in post-coloniality." Cf. Spivak, "Theory in the Margin" 1991, 172.

¹⁸ In her seventh letter to Mr. Foe, Susan Barton mentions the "memoir I wrote for you" and boasts that she "completed that memoir in three days" (63).

And still, the memoir can only be *her* story. It takes a Mr. Foe to make it *history*.¹⁹ Having accosted Mr. Foe on the street after hearing that he is "the author who ha[s] heard many confessions" (48), Susan Barton's emphasis in her letters to Foe is on preserving the integrity and continuity of her perspective, because it is this integrity and continuity on which the truth of her tale rests. She imagines a first visit to Foe's house in Stoke Newington and speculates at length about what is going to happen to her story there both literally, i.e., in the sense of Foe writing it down on paper so that it can be put away in a chest, and imaginatively, i.e., in the sense of Foe inevitably changing it in some way (49-52). However, when Susan finally arrives at the house in Stoke Newington, it turns out differently from what she imagined it to be (cf. 65), and, what is more, Mr. Foe is no longer there: he has been forced to abandon his house in order to evade his creditors.

At this point, the unfolding implied dialogue of her correspondence with Foe has come to an end after only two weeks. Dependent as she is on the financial support of Foe (cf. 47, 49, 64), Susan Barton decides to move secretly into his house with Friday in order to wait for his return. Lacking an address and a response, Susan's remaining letters turn for long stretches into a kind of mind diary²⁰ in which she reflects upon Foe's absence, her own attempts at writing her story, and, again and again and with increasing frequency, the fate of Friday. In fact, a long stretch of the mind diary is addressed no longer to Foe but to Friday (79-87), and part II of the novel culminates in Susan Barton and Friday's abortive trip to Bristol where she intends to set him free and send him back to Africa. This project, which was also part of her motivation for selling her story, fails when Susan realizes that Friday cannot escape his condition because he has been cut off from his origins.²¹ Her final comment quoted in this part of the novel sounds like an oblique commentary on the postcolonial situation: "Thus it has become ... between Friday and myself. I do not love him, but he is mine. That is why he remains in England. That is why he is here" (111). There is, of course, a measure of guilty responsibility on Susan Barton's part, because it was at her bidding that Friday was tracked down on the island and

¹⁹ For this slightly stale but nevertheless apt pun see also Macaskill/Colleran, "Reading History" 1992, 440.

²⁰ Cf. Mennecke, *Koloniales Bewußtsein* 1991, 190.

²¹ There is also the practical danger of re-enslavement, because for his voyage back Friday would have to rely on the very same forces that turned him into a slave in the first place (cf. 110f).

forced onboard and to England. On the other hand, however, there is also a strange bond between Susan and Friday, a bond that has been forged by shared experiences—on Cruso's island, and, even more so, on the road to Bristol where they were both equally treated as outsiders and "gipsies." But then, this is only as Susan experiences it—neither does she know nor do we as readers learn anything about Friday's feelings.

It is only after this that Susan Barton's memoir- and letter-writing voice, which the reader witnessed in quoted form in parts I and II, comes into its own as the narrative voice of the novel. In part III the first-person narrator Susan Barton utters, without quotation marks, a conventional first-person narrative in the past tense. As opposed to her letters, and also parts of her memoir, Susan Barton's narrative voice proper is not inclined to reflect upon its own limitations and potentialities, and what metafictional speculation there is in part III—and it is quite a lot—unfolds in long stretches of dialogue between Susan and Mr. Foe. At the beginning of this narrative, the originally imagined and later failed scene of visiting Foe in his lodgings (cf. 49/65) is presented as having actually taken place after Susan has found Foe's hiding place on return from Bristol. She and Friday move in with Foe, and a fruitful working relationship of collaboration and cohabitation unfolds in which Susan develops an understanding of herself as a muse who "fathers" her own story on Foe (cf. 139f.). Both come to realize, however, that there is a hole at the heart of the story: the hole of Friday's enforced silence.²² Part III of the novel ends with Susan Barton's and Foe's attempts to teach Friday how to compensate for the loss of his tongue by means of writing. This is, unavoidably and in spite of the emancipatory intentions motivating this project, a colonizing gesture in itself, as the cultural frame of reference for this mode of communication is apparently alien to Friday's cultural background. As might be expected, the results are ambiguous. After Friday has filled the paper in front of him with circles that appear to Susan as "rows and rows of the letter *o* tightly packed together," she observes to Foe: "He is writing, after a fashion...."

²² Cf. "On the sorrows of Friday, I once thought to tell Mr Foe, but did not, a story entire of itself might be built ..." (part II, 87); "In the letters ... I told you of my conviction that, if the story seems stupid, that is because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue" (part III, 117). See also Chris Bongie, "'Lost in the Maze of Doubting': J. M. Coetzee's Foe and the Politics of (Un)Likeness," *Modern Fiction Studies* 39, 2 (1993): 261-81, 264: "Friday's voice ... constitutes the novel's (absent) kernel."

He is writing the letter *o*." "It is a beginning," Foe answers, "tomorrow you must teach him *a*" (152).

Oscillating between beginnings and endings, this scene could—in all its ambiguity—have been a suitable ending for the novel's postmodernist engagement with the postcolonial condition, but it is not. There is, in fact, a fourth part that comprises only five pages. Here, the past-tense beginning of Susan Barton's narration of part III is re-enacted in the present tense. The first-person narrator of these pages enters a house and moves into what is clearly discernible for the reader as Mr. Foe's lodgings as described in part III, except that both Foe and Susan Barton are dead in bed. Their "skin, dry as paper ... stretched tight over their bones" (153) suggests that they have been dead for a very long time. Friday, however, is not yet dead. The narrator bends to listen, with his ear to Friday's mouth, and hears "from his mouth, without a breath ... the sounds of the island." (154)

Strange as this may seem, however, it is still not the end. After a break marked by two asterisks,²³ the unnamed narrator enters the house once again. A memorial plaque on the house saying *Daniel Defoe, Author* suggests that we have reached the "ultimate frame"²⁴ of the novel, which is located in a late-twentieth-century present. On the basis of this prominently placed clue, it seems most plausible to identify the unnamed "I"-narrator of part IV as a stylized authorial voice that stands in for the empirical author of the novel, J. M. Coetzee. Entering the house, the narrator finds the same characters as before, if in slightly altered positions. This time, however, he chances upon Susan Barton's unpublished memoir crumbling in a box on the floor. After reading the first sentence with its proper address ("Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further."), the narrator appropriates the following sentences for his own narrative: "With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard" (155). Diving into the sea surrounding Cruso's island he comes upon a sunken ship where he finds the bloated corpse of Susan Barton and, finally, Friday. This time, the narrator realizes that he has reached "the home of Friday," which is "not a place of words" but "a place where bodies are their own signs." The novel then ends with the following lyrical paragraph, full of strangely defamiliarized symbolical connotations:

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his

²³ Asterisks are also used to demarcate breaks in Susan Barton's mind diary in part II of the novel.

²⁴ Cf. Head, *J. M. Coetzee* 1997, 123.

body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

Colonizers and Colonized ["Being"]

At the end of *Foe*, the reader is left somewhat bewildered. However, as I hope to have shown with my description of the unfolding narrative situations, the final shift toward a new first-person authorial narrator, as well as toward Friday as central protagonist, has been carefully prepared in the course of the novel. Moving from situationally embedded retrospective memoir in part I through "letters ... written to the *Moment*"²⁵ and even more introspective passages of mind diary in part II, toward Susan Barton's conventional, illusionistic first-person narration in *Robinson Crusoe*-mode in part III, the novel stages a process of narrative appropriation, which is then questioned and put in relative perspective in part IV. Within this elaborate metafictional design, the protagonists are bound to remain, as Coetzee himself has emphasized, somewhat flat "figures in books."²⁶ Nevertheless, the seemingly archetypal relationships of master-slave and man-woman are shown to be framed by the historically determined social relationship of colonizers and colonized, and, at the same time, the novel addresses repeatedly the question of the characters' "substantiality." "When I reflect on my story," writes Susan Barton in her second letter to Foe in part II, "I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers?" (51). At the heart of this self-description lies Susan's perceived difference from Cruso who came to the island and simply was, not longing to be gone at all and not longing to preserve and communicate his experience in narrative form.²⁷ Even so, Cruso acts as a colonizer

²⁵ Cf. Samuel Richardson's preface to his epistolary novel *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753/54).

²⁶ Quoted in Mennecke, *Koloniales Bewußtsein* 1991, 7.

²⁷ An exasperated Susan Barton stresses this again and again in her memoir: "What I chiefly hoped to find was not there. Cruso kept no journal... I searched the poles that supported the roof, and the legs of the bed, but found no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon" (16).

who claims dominion over his island and its inhabitants, as his patriarchal rebuke of Susan's urge to act independently indicates: "While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct" (20). By and large, Cruso manages to maintain his position without words, by simply taking it as a given.²⁸ Accordingly, he has only taught Friday to react to a couple of words (21), and it is clear from the very beginning that Susan Barton's urge to narrativize his island disrupts the foundations of this order.²⁹

On the island, however, in her day-to-day existence, Susan remains under Cruso's reign, and her little forays into independence are met with the complacency of the ideologically secure and powerful. In a highly symbolic sequence of scenes, for example, Susan is first stung into her heel by a black-tipped thorn on her way from the beach to Cruso's hut. After having been rebuked for walking about on the island alone and without shoes, and after having waited for a long time for Cruso to live up to his promise of making her a pair of shoes, she finally makes them herself, only to be rebuked a second time by Cruso who simply says: "A little patience and you would have had better shoes than that" (25). Susan, however, realizes that it is patience that turns her into a prisoner. Accordingly, she has no patience for Cruso's rejection of storytelling, and in the end it seems as if her fixation on her future narrative account on the island breaks the magic spell that Cruso's self-sufficient "gaze on the waters" has erected against "rescue"—even if Susan herself ascribes the breaking of the spell to Cruso's final and fatal illness (38). From this point onward, Susan Barton colonizes Cruso's island in a realm beyond the merely factual by turning the nonexistent story of his mode of being into her story.

Returning to England, however, Susan Barton finds herself in a similar situation as on the island, only this time she has to implore Mr. Foe to return to her the substance that Cruso seems to have somehow

²⁸ On the Puritan premise that "clearing ground and piling stones is little enough, but it is better than sitting in idleness," Cruso spends his days clearing and building terraces with Friday in spite of the fact that they have no seed: "The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed" (33).

²⁹ There are also signs of Cruso's subconscious uneasiness about this seemingly natural order of things, as for example when he is rolling about in a fever fit bellowing "*Masa* or *Massa*" (29). Susan cannot make sense of this at the time, but the reader knows full well that the original Cruso (with the "e") taught Friday to call him *Master*. Cf. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 1994, 149.

robbed her of (51). Although, from what might be termed a phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective, she is quite sure of her status as the substance "behind" her story, she needs Foe's narratological perspective to arrange her surface structure, as it were.³⁰ In this need, however, she is at the same time afraid of being colonized by him. In fact, Mr. Foe, as readers know, will eventually come up with a very different story from the one that Susan Barton had in mind, a story in which Crusoe extends his dominion over the discursive practice of narrative and extinguishes Susan Barton in the process. However, this particular history, i.e., *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner*, as published by one Daniel Defoe in 1719, is never talked about in Foe, but here are several occasions which suggest that Mr. Foe has various plots of his own in mind for the public version of Susan Barton's narrative. The most elaborate of these plots is a five-part structure that is focused not on the island but on Susan's lost daughter (cf. 117), and the informed reader will detect parallels to Defoe's later novel *Roxanna* (1724).³¹ The "real-life" relevance of these schemes for Susan is illustrated by the fact that the lost daughter straight out of *Roxanna* does actually appear on Susan's doorstep, claiming to be her daughter. Although Susan does not acknowledge this young woman who bears her name as her daughter (cf. 72-78, 89-92, 129-36), her confrontation with this second Susan Barton makes the question of substantiality all the more pressing. All this goes to show that there is a continuity between Crusoe and Foe as ideological forces that regulate the realms of "being" and "telling" respectively, and the novel emphasizes this with parallel scenes of cohabitation in which Susan manages to retain her independence of spirit, but which are nevertheless symptoms of her subordinate position. On the other hand, in the process of narrative appropriation traced in parts I-III of the novel, Susan comes to resemble Foe to a certain extent: both Susan and Foe are caught up in the process of producing meaning by means of narrative, a process that necessarily subdues or marginalizes the stories of others, especially if one has, like Foe, the power and the authority to transform a private tale into a public one.

³⁰ For this distinction cf. Bongie, "Lost in the Maze of Doubting" 1993, 266f.

³¹ There is also a boy in Foe's employment who is later obviously destined to become the Colonel Jack of Defoe's novel of that name (1722) (cf. 127f.), and there are two references to an early story by Daniel Defoe entitled "A True Revelation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal" (1706) (cf. 58f, 134).

And finally there is Friday, who in his otherness presents a challenge to both the margin of storytelling as represented by Susan Barton and to the mainstream of storytelling as represented by Mr. Foe. It is Friday and not Crusoe whom Susan Barton meets first after being washed ashore on the island, and her description of this scene introduces motifs of otherness and redemption that are in stark contrast to Friday's distinctly non-negroid, even European complexion in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*:³² "A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him.... He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked, save for a pair of rough drawers" (5f). Throughout the book Friday remains an inscrutable shadowy presence, displaying obedience, indifference, and only occasional gestures of autonomy. The latter seem to be inextricably bound up with the remnants of long-lost cultural and religious customs; Susan Barton is particularly taken by a strange ritual of scattering petals onto the sea (31), which is then explicitly referred to again in the context of the authorial narrator's final enigmatic dive into the sea in part IV. On the other hand, Susan is persistently worried by the question of cannibalism³³ after Crusoe has introduced the topic in a fever rant, but there is no evidence whatsoever for this in the novel: it seems to be a purely discursive phenomenon. However, when Susan finally tries to make contact with Friday by imitating his brand of music-making and dancing, she does not achieve anything beyond a feeling of empathy and understanding: Friday does not react at all to her advances (95-98, 103f.). He does, however, grow fond of slipping into Mr. Foe's robes and wigs for his dancing (52), and finally, in the course of her and Foe's attempt at teaching Friday how to write, Susan finds him seated at Mr. Foe's desk with robe and wig, writing circles or o's (151f.).

Has Friday in some mysterious way usurped Foe's position? Looking back from the end of the novel it seems that he has, and it has even been suggested that the unidentified authorial narrator in part IV is actually Friday staging his authentic author-position.³⁴

³² Cf. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 1994, 148f.: "He had a very good Countenance, not a fierce and surly Aspect; but seem'd to have something very manly in his Face, and yet he had all the Sweetness and Softness of an *European* in his Countenance too, especially when he smil'd. His hair was long and black, not curl'd like Wool.... The Colour of his skin was not quite black, but very tawny ... his Nose small, not flat like the Negroes."

³³ Cf. Part I: 12-14, 23, 35, 43; part II: 53-55, 81-83, 94, 106; part III: 127.

³⁴ Cf. Bongie, "Lost in the Maze of Doubting" 1993, 279.

Friday's final written *o* in part III would then link up with the belief of Defoe's Friday in his god *Benamuckee*, of whom he says "*All Things do say O to him*,"³⁵ and this intertextual reference has, as Richard Begam points out,

the effect of opening up an entirely new ... perspective on Friday's writing: the O represents not an empty cipher but a divine circle, and by repeating it ... Friday expresses not his own nullity, his sense of isolation and self-alienation, but a fundamental unity with all of creation.³⁶

It goes without saying that Defoe's uncompromisingly Christian Crusoe (i.e., the one with the "e") immediately endeavors "to clear up this Fraud."³⁷ Coetzee's eponymous Foe, on the other hand, is not interested in clearing up this fraud. "It is a beginning," he says, and the final section of the novel "voices" Friday's silence in a literary gesture toward a postcolonial utopia in which all author-positions are allowed to at least leave their mark, even if they are unintelligible in terms of the dominant discourse and thus necessarily "overwritten" by it.³⁸ And at the same time one should not forget that all the preceding pages of the novel have served to illustrate the unavoidably compromised and compromising character of authorship.³⁹

Pitfalls and Potentialities ["Writing"]

It should by now be clear that Coetzee's novel *Foe* is not interested in "what truly happened" on Crusoe's island. Instead, it questions in a very fundamental way processes of making sense by means of narrative and the cultural conditioning of these processes by means of writing that leads to discursive practices regulating modes of access to public author-positions. It is on these historically shifting but insurmountable premises that, as one critic puts it, the

³⁵ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 1994, 156.

³⁶ Begam, "Silence and Mut(e)ilation" 1994, 123f. See also Spivak, "Theory in the Margin" 1991, 171.

³⁷ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 1994, 157.

³⁸ In view of this "overwriting" there is a strong sense of mourning in *Foe* and postcolonial writing in general. Cf. Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (Albany: State U of New York P. 2004).

³⁹ Cf. Head, *J. M. Coetzee* 1997, 126-28.

"beginnings of a (post)colonial poetics"⁴⁰ are "infinitely rehearsed" in the novel, and this is why I chose to speak in my title, rather negatively, of "The Pitfalls of a Postcolonial Poetics." On the other hand, the novel as a whole suggests that in spite of these discursive limitations there is still room for hope, and this utopian space is located in that same difference between "telling" and "writing" that Susan Barton identifies as problematic on two levels. On the one hand, the difference between "telling" and "writing" poses problems with regard to what she terms "liveliness": related orally, Susan reflects in her memoir,

my story passes the time well enough, ... but what little I know of book-writing tells me its charm will quite vanish when it is set down baldly in print. A liveliness is lost in the writing which must be supplied by art, and I have no art. (40)

On the other hand, as we have seen, it is exactly this compensatory power of art that poses problems with regard to the question of truth. In this mixture of impoverishment and corruption, writing cannot but create an entirely different version of reality that is further de-referentialized by its decontextualized reception.

All these issues come to a head when Susan Barton and Mr. Foe decide to teach Friday how to write. At first Susan tries to make him identify pictures with particular words, such as *house*, *Africa*, *mother*, and *ship*, but she soon begins to doubt whether her images are in any way compatible with what is stored in Friday's mind. At any rate, her efforts only result in Friday putting down something which resembles "s-h-s-h-s ... or perhaps h-f" (146). A little later, however, Friday chooses to "write" something down voluntarily, and his "writing" poses quite an interpretive challenge for both Susan and the reader: he fills a whole slate with what Susan first takes for "a design of, as it seemed, leaves and flowers" but later identifies as "row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes." (147) Is this a gesture of emancipation by Friday or a projection on the part of Susan? We cannot know for certain, but, in a way that anticipates the end of the novel, the semantic and symbolic indeterminacy of Friday's utterance opens up a communicative space in which new perspectives can emerge, a space that would inevitably be characterized as "poetic" or "aesthetic" from a Western perspective.

This space, however—and this is where Coetzee's postcolonial slant on postmodernist tenets reemerges—will have to be reconnected

⁴⁰ Bongie, "'Lost in the Maze of Doubting'" 1993, 280.

to the sphere of "being." Ironically, it is Foe who states this necessity, and he does so in overtly political terms:

There is no need for us to know what freedom means, Susan. Freedom is a word like any word. It is a puff of air, seven letters on the slate. It is but a name we give to the desire you speak of, the desire to be free. What concerns us is the desire, not the name.... If we devote ourselves to finding holes exactly shaped to house such great words as *Freedom*, *Honour*, *Bliss*, I agree, we shall spend a lifetime slipping and sliding and searching, and all in vain.... But you must ask yourself, Susan: as it was a slaver's stratagem to rob Friday of his tongue, may it not be a slaver's stratagem to hold him in subjection while we cavil over words in a dispute we know to be endless? (149f.)⁴¹

If we take this statement seriously, the eponymous Foe of Coetzee's novel is, as Gayatri Spivak has it, "everyone's Foe, the enabling violator."⁴² Authorship is compromised but necessary, and the emerging new literatures in English will have to move into this precarious imaginative space carefully while Coetzee's blend of postmodernism and postcolonialism suggests that a sufficient degree of reflexivity is imperative. Just as Susan's *hous* as taught to Friday strives unsuccessfully to suggest an identity of referent and word by leaving out the unspoken "e" at the end, so Coetzee's *Cruso* without the "e" is not closer to the truth of the island than Defoe's *Crusoe* with the "e." However, by reflexively drawing attention to its own and *Robinson Crusoe*'s status as writing, *Foe* fosters an awareness of the materiality of writing and its social effects. It is this sensibility that Coetzee considers an indispensable feature of literariness if

⁴¹ The worrying implication of this postulate is that a postmodernism that tends to universalize its epistemological preoccupations might represent "a new kind of intellectual imperialism, a natural extension of late capitalist expansionism in the information society." Cf. Head, *J. M. Coetzee* 1997, 15.

⁴² Spivak, "Theory in the Margin" 1991, 175.

literature is to claim a position of rivalry with history, and it is in this sense that Coetzee's novels widen the epistemological concerns of postmodernism to embrace history in a specifically postcolonial brand of "situational metafiction."⁴³

⁴³ Attridge, "Oppressive Silence" 1993, 17. An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture at the University of Bonn on 3 February 2003. I would like to thank Antje Kley for providing a folder's worth of material at very short notice when it was needed.