Arguing for that Unheard. In Search of Friday in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

The paper follows a famous question of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – i.e., 'Can the Subaltern Speak? – and attempts to find an answer to it by a careful scrutiny of the John Maxwell Coetzee's Foe *which address the issue of writing the subaltern back into history – the subject to the hegemony of the Empire being Friday, the character created by Daniel Defoe in his acclaimed novel* Robinson Crusoe. *The emancipatory drive of postcolonial discourse, the drive to re-empower the disenfranchised, has resulted in the undertaking of the number of projects which aim at giving voice to the subaltern who had been written out of the record by conventional accounts. With the collapse of the Empire, the subaltern announced the arrival of new literature characterized by the rejection of colonial system of knowledge, imperialism's signifying system and even the language of the invaders. The paper discusses the politics of resistance based on the deliberate denial to give voice to the subaltern, as exemplified by John Maxwell Coetzee's* Foe. *A careful analysis of the novel shows the whole enterprise of giving voice to the native as unachievable and totally objectionable and argues in favour of the subaltern's silence being perceived in terms of triumph and victory over the dialectics of power.*

A Dead Bird

In her Nobel Lecture in December 1993 Toni Morisson told the honorary guests assembled in Stockholm the following story:

> Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise. In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without

> peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." She does not answer, and the question is repeated. "Is the bird I am holding living or dead?"
>
> Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive. The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter. Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." (Morisson, 1993)

As Toni Morisson explained in the subsequent part of her lecture, the dead bird stands for language by means of which people all over the world tell their stories. But the truth that the old woman wants to convey is as follows: it is not really important whether the bird is living or dead because the true responsibility for language is carried ONLY by those who hold/use it. Language can become an instrument of menace and subjugation; it can be designed for the estrangement of minorities. Language can be racist, sexist, theistic – put into service for the immoral and wicked purposes. It can "drink blood, lap vulnerabilities, tuck its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind." (Morrison, 1993) But all of this can only be achieved by the effort of will of those who use language. Obviously, language can become an instrument through which power is exercised, but there is always a human agency which makes it work in this particular way. What Toni

Morisson says in her lecture is that the responsibility for the story and its impact relies entirely on those who tell it.

How to write so as to avoid the unfathomable and merciless apparatus of power? How to write for – in support of – the Other without writing for – assuming power over – the Other? Is it at all possible to represent the colonized (or any) Other without manipulating and obliterating his/her strangeness and deviance? Do we have the right to write for the Other and in this way to integrate him/her into the code which our (dominant) culture makes available? All of these questions seem to be of primary importance to the South African writer J. M. Coetzee. There is no other contemporary novelist I can think of who is so much preoccupied with political and administrative systems and, especially, the people these systems exclude or fail to contain. What seems to underpin all of his work is the question of what kind of strategy should be employed so as to remain outside the current power relations, but, at the same time, to be able to represent and speak for the Other.

Coetzee himself simultaneously holds a peculiar insider/outsider status. Despite his Afrikaans heritage, he admits that "no Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner" (Kossew, 10) clearly because of his severe criticism of Afrikaner nationalism. But although he writes in English, Coetzee is not of British ancestry. The only reason why English became his first language was the insistence of his mother, who decided to bring up her son in an English speaking community. But Coetzee's position is even more complicated. In "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" the writer, who like no one else rejects the idea of master/slave relationship and puts all of his efforts into "arguing for that unheard," (Coetzee 1990, 134) acknowledged that he belonged to a closed-hereditary caste of the South African masters:

> Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you cannot resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually doing it. (Coetzee 1992, 96)

Is he not, by the simple fact of being an outsider, predestined to be the only figure acknowledged to speak for those who are on the margin? What is the means by which the writer of such a complex identity can speak for the Other without inscribing him/her into the imperialist discourse? The answer given by Coetzee is the following: "to me truth is related to silence." (Coetzee 1992, 65) The only way to be a writer and at the same time not to be an imperialist is to keep the colonized Other silent. For Coetzee silence is not a sign of submission but a "counterstrategy through which the other preserves, even asserts, its alterior status and in so doing interrogates the fixity of dominant structures and positions." (Marais, 74-75) In *White Writing* Coetzee asked a rhetorical question: "Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity than of highly problematic South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?" (Coetzee 1988, 7-8) In all of his novels Coetzee confronts this issue in the same manner – it is only the language of silence which is capable of preserving the Other's alterior status and defending him/her against the assimilation by the West.

This paper attempts to analyse the approach toward and representation of Friday – the embodiment of the colonial Other – as undertaken by Coetzee in his novel *Foe*.

Guardian of the Margin

Foe consists of four chapters, three of which are narrated by Susan Barton, a female castaway who joins Cruso (Coetzee's spelling) and Friday on the island, and who obviously does not appear on the pages of the *Ur*-text *Robinson Crusoe*. It is entirely through her eyes that we see Friday and we witness her unstoppable attempt to "educate him out of darkness and silence." (Coetzee 1987, 60) But as there are two Susans – one being the daughter of her epoch whose mind is suffused with racial and stereotypical images, the other a liberal feminist – there are also two visions of Friday with which we become acquainted via her narrative. Let me then first have a closer look at the first of these.

The first person Susan encounters on the island is Friday. From the very beginning Susan projects all colonial preconceptions about the native people upon him. She starts with the West's key representation of

primitivism, namely cannibalism, and believes that the gaze of Friday directed towards her is the gaze of a cannibal who approaches her body as a potential source of fresh meat:

> (he) regarded me as he would a seal or a porpoise thrown up by the waves, that would shortly expire and might then be cut up for food. (Coetzee 1987, 6)

Even Friday's gestures such as touching her arm are considered to be attempts at trying and assessing the potentiality that her flesh offers to a hungry native. Actually, until the very end of the novel, Susan will not be able to get rid of this prejudice. The seed of cannibalism which has been planted in her mind by Western imperialism does not allow her to "look on Friday's lips without calling to mind what meat must once have passed them." (Coetzee 1987, 106) The other notions that Susan associates with Friday are slow-wittedness, laziness and dullness. One of the main ways of describing Friday is by means of comparing him to various animals (a "dog", a "frightened horse." [Coetzee 1987, 37, 42]) This perpetuates Friday's inferior status and the necessity of his being under constant guidance and instruction. When she first finds out about Friday's mutilation and tonguelessness, she is filled with distaste and abomination:

> But now I began to look on him – I could not help myself – with the horror we reserve for the mutilated. (…) I covertly observed him as he ate, and with distaste heard the tiny cough he gave now and then to clear his throat, saw how he did his chewing between his front teeth, like a fish. I caught myself flinching when he came near, or holding my breath so as not to have to smell him. Behind his back I wiped the utensils his hands had touched. (Coetzee 1987, 24)

But at the same time the suffering and mutilated body forces her to modify her opinions and judgements. Friday – both his body and actions – remain a mystery to her. But this mystery is not approached with complete indifference and unconcern, but rather, with the desire to uncover the past and give voice to the truth. The crucial moment in

Susan's development is the scene of Friday scattering white petals over the water which the narrator concludes with the following statement:

> Hitherto I had given to Friday's life as little thoughts as I would have a dog's or any other dumb beast's (…) This casting of petals was the first sign I had that a spirit or soul – call it what you will – stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior. (Coetzee 1987, 32)

It will be the discovery of Friday's "spirit or soul" that will engage all her attention and activity. But the real abandonment of most of Susan's colonial and racist ideas and the emergence of empathy and liberal attitude towards Friday will only take place in the second chapter of the novel, when Susan realizes that the ideology of the West situates her in a similar position to the one occupied by the colonized Other.

The first chapter presents Susan as remaining among the caste of the oppressors. We cannot overestimate the significance of one of the initial scenes in the novel in which Susan is riding on Friday's back and in this way confirming both her status as an excluder and Friday's condition of the excluded. For most of the time her attitude is not much different from that of Cruso – with the exception of the Susan's withdrawal from using physical violence towards the native. While for Cruso, Friday remains a servant who obediently follows his footsteps and to whom practically only two words are directed – namely WATCH and DO, for Susan the black man is the object of dominance, repugnance and, infrequently, pity. How does it happen then that Susan Barton ultimately becomes the „agent of the Other-directed ethics?" (Spivak, 182)

It seems to me that the first realization about Friday's humanity comes with the awareness that she herself – because of her femininity – is also half-colonized by the Western world. It does not happen simply by chance that Susan's interest in Friday's story – meaning his origin, mutilation, rituals – comes when Cruso explicitly grants her the role of "his second subject." (Coetzee 1987, 11) When she is not allowed to leave the hut because of the apes, which, according to Cruso pose a threat to her life, she rhetorically asks herself: "was a woman, to an ape, a different species from a man." (Coetzee 1987, 15) Throughout her stay on the island Susan tries to reject the marginal position she is granted in

Cruso's kingdom. "I am castaway, not a prisoner," (Coetzee 1987, 20) Susan states, as if to prove her right to oppose the dominant discourse as well as assert her own rights and status in the face of an oppressively hegemonic system. Both on the island and, in particular, after the return to England, Susan realizes that, being a woman, she also occupies some sort of margin. Of course, it is a different margin to the one occupied by Friday, yet equally oppressive and arresting.

What Coetzee appears to imply is that only from the position of the margin one can attempt to speak for those who are on the margin as well. As I will show in the final part of this paper, the voicing of the Other is an impossible enterprise. One is capable of approaching the colonized Other, but only when one finds oneself outside the dominant discourse. In other words, some kind of understanding of the condition of exclusion can only be reached from the similar position of exclusion. In being self-consciously marginal Susan reminds me of another character from Coetzee's novels -- Magda from *In the Heart of the Country*, who declares:

> We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. *That* is the origin of our feeling of solitude. I, for one, do not wish to be at the centre of the world, I only wish to be at home in the world as the merest beast is at home. Much, much less than all would satisfy me to begin with, a life unmediated with words: these stones, these bushes, this sky experienced and known without question: and a quiet return to the dust. Surely that is not too much.
>
> (Coetzee 1977, 135)

Susan and Friday are both metaphorically and literally castaways of history and literature, history and literature being obviously belonging to the kingdom ruled by foe.

In *Foe* Friday exists entirely in the realm of facts which inevitably give rise to a number of ultimately unanswerable questions. While all the three characters (Cruso, Susan and Friday) remain on the island, the only things that can be said about Friday are the following: he is Cruso's obedient slave and servant; his tongue has been cut out; he scatters petals over the water; when Cruso is ill, Friday sits motionlessly and plays his flute. But what can we tell about him on the basis of these few facts? Why

did Friday submit to Cruso? Was he shipwrecked with Cruso? Was he a cannibal saved from being devoured by other natives? How did Friday lose his tongue? Was he mutilated by Cruso, slave traders or maybe, according to one of Susan's hypotheses, he belongs to the African tribe among whom the men are mute and the speech is reserved for women? What's the meaning of Friday's act of casting the petals over the water? Is this a place of worship for Friday? Or perhaps it is the place where the ship went down and where the members of his family and tribe died a terrible death chained below deck … Almost the same number of facts and innumerable questions concerning these can be uttered in relation to the events taking place after the penniless Susan and Friday arrive in England (Cruso dies before they reach the shores of his native land.) Friday sits in the cellar, misjudging space and remaining in the corners, sometimes playing the tune he played on the island on his flute, at other times whirling around dressed in Foe's wig and clothes. (At this time Susan and Friday move to the abandoned home of famous writer Daniel Foe, who is hiding to avoid being imprisoned for debt, but to whom Susan is resolved to sell their story). Both Susan and the readers of Coetzee's novel are forced to reach the same conclusion which the medical officer from Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* arrives at, i.e. he (Michael, Friday) "means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me." (Coetzee 1983, 226)

Consequently, the second and third chapters of *Foe* concentrate entirely on Susan's attempts to discover the meaning of Friday. She wants to listen to his story and bring him back to life by evoking the memories which died under the colonial rule of Cruso. Her only aim is

> to build a bridge of words over which, when one day it is grown sturdy enough, he may cross to the time before Cruso, the time before he lost his tongue, when he lived immersed in the prattle of words as unthinking as a fish in water; from where he may by steps return, as far as he is able, to the world of words in which you, Mr Foe, and I, and other people live. (Coetzee 1987, 60)

In this respect Susan is reminiscent of two other characters in Coetzee's fiction who purport to save the vulnerable and suffering they happen to encounter and return them to their proper place. The Magistrate in

Waiting for Barbarians expresses the following statement: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on the girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let her go." (Coetzee 1983, 31) By tending the barbarian girl's wounds, washing her broken feet and legs and rubbing her body with almond oil, the Magistrate wants mostly to understand and "decipher" the Other he faces. By confronting the mutilation of Friday and the barbarian girl, both Susan and the Magistrate respectively want to hear the stories that the wounds of the oppressed tell and bring them back to the time before the oppression and torture were perpetrated by those in power. Nevertheless, while the Magistrate succeeds in returning the girl to her tribe, Susan will never fill the gap in the narrative caused by Friday's silence. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, a position similar to those of Susan and the Magistrate is held by the doctor, who appears to be the only one truly interested in Michael's story. As he himself admits:

> I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring its wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask. You are precious, Michaels, in your way; you are the last of your kind, a creature left over from an earlier age (…)
>
> (Coetzee 1983, 207)

But what differentiates Susan and the medical officer in *Life and Times of Michael K* is the awareness of the nature of the Other (Michael and Friday respectively) and the chances of giving them back to the world. Perhaps one of the most important statements expressed by Coetzee's character in all of his fiction is the opinion of the doctor in *Life and Times of Michael K.* The line refers to Michael but can be extended to all the marginalised figures which populate the pages of his novels. "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level –of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it." The doctor subsequently adds:

> Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to I that is merely a road, and only you know the way. (Coetzee 1983, 228)

The difference between Susan and the doctor is that Susan wants Friday to find his home in the world created by those in power, in the world of colonial discourse. As I will show in the following section, Susan's attempts have to fail because she believes that both she and Friday can become terms in the system according to their own rules. She does not yet realize that by becoming such a term, she irretrievably loses her own individual meaning.

Throughout the whole novel Friday remains a mystery, an enigma whose past and present are open to a number of interpretations, the truthfulness or falsity of which will never be confirmed. Susan's obsession with truth and one's individual story becomes first explicit on the island, when she interrogates Cruso about his life and adventures and expresses deep dissatisfaction when all her attempts at unveiling Cruso's secrets fail dramatically. The desire to hear the stories which are enclosed in the mutilated body of Friday governs all her actions after she and "her man" (Donoghue, 1) arrive in England. Still, Susan's motivation is quite complex and ethically ambiguous. Her attempts at giving a voice to Friday do not stem exclusively from a moral imperative, but first and above all from the fear that her individual story may not be of enough interest to Daniel Foe. The book about the sojourn on the island is to make Susan wealthy and famous – she is the first female castaway – but she is simultaneously aware of the fact that her story does not have enough substance. There are too many holes and puzzles in the narrative and the only way to avoid the manipulation and transformation of truth is to fill them with Friday's voice. Being only "a ghost beside the true body of Cruso," (Coetzee 1987, 51) she needs another witness and storyteller who will confirm and add the missing parts to her testimony. Susan realizes that the faculty of speech has been irretrievably lost to

Friday, but throughout the whole second part of the novel she attempts to bring his story to life in a number of ways. She talks to him all the time, believing that:

> if I make the air around him thick with words, memories will be reborn in him which died under Cruso's rule, and with them the recognition that to live in silence is to live like the whales, great castles of flesh floating leagues apart one from another, or like the spiders, sitting each alone at the heart of his web, which to him is entire world.
>
> (Coetzee 1987, 59)

She wants to teach him that the world is not "a barren and silent place," (Coetzee 1987, 59) and that is precisely the reason she engages herself in improvising some mode of communication with the native – by means of music (playing the flute), dancing, drawing or physical intimacy. All her endeavours end with unequivocal failure – drawings do not give her access to the story of Friday's mutilation; in playing the little reed flute Friday sticks to a simple tune of six notes and does not enter into a tonic conversation with Susan; he does not show even a spark of desire for her body. The only moment which brings her closer to the understanding of Friday's condition is when, on their way to Bristol, Susan imitates Friday's dance, and comes to a conclusion that this trance is aimed at removing oneself, or one's spirit, from the clutter of life and the world. But whether this is true or simply one of many unverifiable hypotheses, we cannot be certain. The only one who would be capable of confirming Susan's guess, Friday, does not agree to join her in the dance.

On their way to Bristol, when Susan wants to send Friday to Africa but in fear of his being enslaved again later abandons the plan, the two characters find the body of a dead child in the ditch. It seems to me that the scene with the dead child only anticipates Susan's failure and her ultimate death as an agent and storyteller. This becomes particularly explicit in the third part of the novel, in which the one who purported to be an anti-imperialist/feminist with the desire of giving the native his own voice, becomes finally imprisoned in the discourse of the foe – the discourse of empire and metropolis. The third chapter of *Foe* becomes the battlefield where Susan's desire to present Friday in his own terms enters into a conflict with Foe's attempt to imprison both characters (Susan and

Friday) in his oppressive system. When Susan and Friday visit Foe in his hiding place, they embark upon the debate concerning their story and the indispensables necessary for completing and writing it down by the writer. Susan believes that "the true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday." (Coetzee 1987, 118) She claims that only the native can fill the gap or hole in the narrative created by his silence. Without the words he has "no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others." (Coetzee 1987, 121) Susan professes to assume that as long as one is capable of expressing oneself and giving voice to one's story, one escapes the danger of becoming a story. Authorship and freedom of each and every individual is only asserted by the possibility of telling the story in accordance with one's own desires. This is precisely why Susan does not believe that the girl whom she meets is her lost daughter. She is aware that by accepting the girl and confirming her motherhood she will irreparably deprive herself of the right to father her story. She will be shaped according to the desire of someone else (the writer, other people, God) and her individual story will be substituted by that told by "another and darker author." (Coetzee 1987, 143) Instead of writing ourselves, we will become written. Her fight for Friday's voice is simultaneously the fight for her own voice. Till the very end of the novel she presumes that she is a victor – she denies the motherhood of the girl; she professes herself to be a father of the story, and Foe is labelled as her mistress or wife whose function will be reduced only to giving birth to the story begotten by her; while having sex with Foe she occupies the upper position. She naively believes that Foe will not rob her of her tongue and that both she and Friday will father their offspring.

But Foe is a dangerous and mischievous foe, the "patient spider who sits at the heart of his web waiting for his prey to come to him." (Coetzee 1987, 120) He knows very well that it is not Susan's but only his power to "guide and amend." (Coetzee 1987, 123) Although Susan maintains that she can govern her story, she forgets that she is still imprisoned in the discourse fathered by Foe. No matter what she wants to say, she always does it in a language which is "manufactured from the resources of a particular culture," (Attridge, 172) in this case, a patriarchal, colonial and inherently tyrannical one. Her language is produced by the dominant discourse and by this very fact that it can be heard/comprehended by her foes. This language is prone to

manipulation, subjugation and being purged of its uniqueness and alterity. At the end of Chapter Three Susan believes that she has managed to achieve her aim – Foe will tell a story according to her desires and her rules. But she is also convinced of the fact that in a certain way she has found a way to build the bridge between her story and the one kept silent by Friday. Yet, feminist and post-colonial projects seem to be incommensurable. (Bongie, 270) Encouraged by Foe and under his guidance and surveillance, she starts teaching Friday the art of writing. Determined to "open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds," (Coetzee 1987, 142) she succumbs to the temptation of showing Friday that he can form letters by means of his fingers. She obediently follows Foe's argumentation quoted below:

> Speech is but a means through which the word may be uttered, it is not the word itself. Friday has no speech, but he has fingers, and those fingers, even if the slavers had lopped them all off, he can hold a stick of charcoal between his toes, or between his teeth, like the beggars on the Strand. The waterskater, that is an insect and dumb, traces the name of God on the surfaces of the ponds, or so the Arabians say. None is so deprived that he cannot write. (Coetzee 1987, 143-144)

When Foe encourages Susan to leave Friday at his dwellings, go for a stroll and come back to him to report how goes the world, at the same time he asks her to become "(his) spy." (Coetzee 1987, 150) By instructing Friday in the art of writing, she becomes Foe's collaborator in the act of imprisoning and re-colonizing (re-, because Friday has been previously granted freedom by her) of the native. But neither she nor Foe realize that Friday, in spite of his muteness, is a more powerful and resistant character than they can ever imagine. When on the last page of the third chapter he is writing the letter *o*, Foe self-confidently asserts that "it is a beginning (…) tomorrow you must teach him *a*;" he is completely blind to the fact that by writing *o* Friday practically closes the discourse. *O* stand for omega, the sign of an end, the sign of the rejection of false authorization offered by Foe and Susan and based on accepting the dominant discourse. While Foe naively believes that by beginning with *a*, alpha, Friday will soon arrive at producing the story of himself, Friday's

writing practice can be understood as the final refusal to be imprisoned in the nets of meaning offered by Foe.

In this way we have arrived at the most important and difficult aspect of Coetzee's novel, namely the issue of silence as a primary mode of resistance of the colonial Other. As I have already indicated in the introduction to this chapter, "the true authority, indeed potency of the tale belongs to those (…) who cannot speak or articulate that authority." (Coetzee 1992, 10) In his belief that it is only marginality that frees one from being imprisoned in the maze of power relations, Coetzee remains quite unique and, consequently, his position has frequently been the object of serious attacks from his fellow-writers and critics. In her review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer expresses the view that although Coetzee had written a marvellous work that left nothing unsaid about the suffering of human beings in South Africa, "he does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves." (Gordimer, 142) It is the silent withdrawal of Coetzee's characters from participation in the discourse and swerving from an ethno-national or racial grounding – in particular by the refusal to participate in constituting an African and black subjectivity (Korang, 152) – that a number of Coetzee's readers find intolerable.

Surely, the silenced characters, by their decision to remain mute, make themselves unable to be heard in the linguistic code exercised by the dominant discourse. But, as Benita Parry suggests, "otherness cannot be expressed in the discourse ordinarily available to us because it has been simultaneously constituted and excluded by that discourse in the very-process of that discourse's self-constitution." (Parry, 41) The silence is not an absence or incapacity of speech. Muteness is, at least in my opinion, a different kind of speech which is a gesture of resistance and self-protection. It is a form of power, not exercised to rule and submit, but rather to protect the Other's alterior status and guarantee his/her safety. Silence is not mute but, on the contrary, it is "so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places." (Coetzee 1983, 191) It is true, as Foe believes, that "as long as he (Friday) is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish." (Coetzee 1987, 148) But the fact of being the victim and the object of oppression does not exclude a moral and ontological victory. At heart,

Friday remains the only free character in Coetzee's novel. If he accepted the discourse offered by Susan and Foe, he would surely end miserably like other black men in *Foe* – the other "Negroes" in London who "walk along Mile End Road on a summer's afternoon, or in Paddington," "play for pennies in a street band," become members of "strolling bands." (Coetzee 1987, 128) By the very fact of his inaccessibility and impossibility of being "manufactured," (Attridge, 172) reduced to the figural world of Barton and Foe, Friday avoids being imprisoned. Or, in other words, he becomes imprisoned – ultimately, he becomes a character in Defoe's novel – but this inevitable imprisonment will not be committed with any form of his participation in the project. Unlike Susan, whose collaboration with Foe will end with the complete erasure of her presence on the island and whose story will be reshaped in accordance with Foe's desires – she will be imprisoned on the pages of Defoe's novel *Roxanna*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her brilliant reading of Coetzee's *Foe* concludes:

> For every territorial space that is value coded by colonialism and every command of metropolitan anticolonialism for the native to yield his "voice," there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked. "The native," whatever that might mean, is not only a victim, but also an agent. The curious guardian of the margin who will not inform.
>
> (Spivak, 190)

Remaining "the agent of withholding," (Spivak, 190) Friday triumphs over the other two characters. His muteness is the source of his indeterminate potency and allows him to keep the power to "overwhelm and cancel Susan's narrative and, finally, Coetzee's novel as well." (Attwell, 112) If he decided to give Friday the voice and, as a result, tell his own (Coetzee's) and not Friday's story, Coetzee would become the same oppressor and violator as Foe. C-OE-tzee would literally become F-OE.

Coetzee's politics towards the Other can be summed up in the following way – "to put the experience of absolute otherness into words – (…) – would be to reappropriate it with the familiar, and to lose exactly that which makes it other, and therefore of greatest possible

significance." (Attridge, 180) But we may still ask ourselves the question: if the use of language inevitably entangles us into power relations, is there any other way in which one can approach the Other? Can we approach Friday? The answer to this question can be found in the fourth and final chapter of Coetzee's *Foe*.

The final few pages are no longer narrated by Susan. As we know she failed in her attempt to give voice to Friday and unconsciously became an instrument in the hands of the enemy – Mr Foe. In this unusual section we encroach upon the realm of the narrator *per se*. We, the readers, become the addressee of the utterances produced by the unnamed narrator who enters Foe's house. Actually, he enters the house twice. And it is the second visit to Foe's dwelling that becomes of the utmost importance. The first time the narrator invades the fictitious world as we abandoned it in the third chapter – Susan and Foe lie in the bed side by side while Friday remains in the corner. The narrator opens Friday's mouth and listens to the sound of the island: "the roar of waves," "the whine of the wind," "the cry of the bird." (Coetzee 1987, 154) But the story of the island is not Friday's story. The sound of the island is not his sound. In order to reach the real story which has never been written, the narrator, whom I associate with Coetzee, enters the house for the second time. This time Susan and Foe lie in embrace, "face to face, her head in the crook of his arm" (Coetzee 1987, 155) which suggests Susan's ultimate submission to the power of Foe and the failure of her feminist/liberal project. But in order to reach Friday's story the narrator literally slips overboard and enters Susan's narrative. He descends underwater and in the wreck of the ship he encounters Friday – "half buried in the sand" and with "the chain about his throat." (Coetzee 1987, 157) This is the home of Friday – the place where no words are uttered and where "bodies are their own signs." (Coetzee 1987, 157) Magda from *In the Heart of the Country* states in one of the first pages of her narrative:

> I live inside a skin inside a house. There is no act I know that will liberate me into the world. There is no act I know of that will bring the world into me. I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe, thousands upon thousands of corpuscles weeping, gnashing their teeth.
>
> (Coetzee 1977, 10)

In my opinion this is precisely the image that we find in the final paragraph of Coetzee's *Foe*. The narrator opens Friday's mouth and declares:

> From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (Coetzee 1987, 157)

Finally, we arrive at the place where Friday speaks his language. But it is not any language we know. It is the language of his body. What Coetzee claims is that the encounter with the Other is the encounter with his/her body because the knowledge of the Other is impossible to achieve. What we are left with is precisely the encounter with the suffering body, which takes the authority. In one of his interviews with D. Attwell, J.M. Coetzee states:

> And let me be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (Coetzee 1992, 248)

When Susan first tried to show Friday how to write, she realized that instead of copying the letters Friday drew a row of eyes set upon human feet. Dominic Head suggests that these walking eyes indicate the displacement of the enslaved and colonized. (Head, 122) But in my opinion eyes stand for themselves. They are not any kind of sign, but merely eyes – the suffering gaze of Friday or other victimized people. In the same way I refute the interpretation of the final scene of *Foe* proposed by D. Attwell, who maintains that Friday's reduction to the body signifies the arrival of body-politics in the form of African nationalism and anticolonialism. (Attwell, 116-117) In my opinion, every attempt to interpret the final pages in the way different from that explicitly stated by Coetzee – "bodies are their own signs" – puts us in the position of

Susan and Foe; in the position of speculation, and not acquiescence. B. Macaskill and J. Colleran also identify another interesting aspect of the letter *o* written by Friday at the end of Susan's narrative, namely that, of all letters, *o* is most similar to the eye. (Macaskill & Colleran, 83) The letter *o*, walking eyes, tonguelessness, castration – all of these elements direct us toward the Other whom we cannot know but whom we can encounter. Approaching the Other is not possible by means of dialogue but through meeting – a face to face encounter. The relationship with the Other is always a mystery, and, since we are not able to understand him/her or communicate with him/her without being imprisoned within the dialectics of power, we have to rely on the respect towards the body. It is the body which recalls the responsibility. It is the face before me, which in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, "summons me, calls for me, begs for me." (Hand, 83) The relation with the Other has to overflow comprehension because it is not the relation with one's beliefs, religion, gender, nation and ethnic origin, etc., but the relation with the Other's body, his/her face which, as Levinas teaches, makes it unable for us to kill. The true essence of man is presented and condensed in his/her face. Body is all inclusive. It encapsulates somebody we "see, hear, touch and violate; hungering, thirsting, enjoying, suffering, working, loving, murdering human being in all its corporeality." (Peperz & Critchley & Bernasconi, 9)

The apotheosis of the suffering body also finds its confirmation in the most recent novels by Coetzee. Moreover, Coetzee, apparently following the ideas of Martin Buber, inscribes animals into the category of Other as well. Both in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* in particular, the South African writer claims that although we do not share a language with the animals, we can connect with them at a certain level of consciousness. Just as we should recognize and respect the Other on the grounds of his/her having a suffering body, likewise we should recognize animals' "fullness, embodiment???, the sensation of being […], of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world." (Coetzee 2003, 78) At the very end of the readers' search for Friday, they are instructed by Coetzee to accept Friday's silence; that the desire to name and describe Friday is the desire to possess. Without violating his Otherness, they can only look at his body and allow his wounds to give utterance to crimes lost and never heard of.

"No meeting, not in this life"

In the years 1984 and 1985, when Coetzee was working on *Foe*, the silencing of dissent in South Africa reached perhaps its greatest and most terrifying efficacy. Both the land and its oppressed people became immersed in a silence which could not be broken by any means. Massive detentions and iron-fisted law enforcement, together with the state of emergency instituted in 1985, led to the situation in which the world saw less and less of South Africa in newspapers, magazines and television news. The world knew less and less about the suffering and persecution of the indigenous people of South Africa. Those in power imposed the silence both on Africa's history; on its past and on its present.

The silence which pervades the pages of Coetzee's fiction is not only the kind of silence I've described above. It is not only the language of defeat and the result of the oppressive politics of those in power. It is a tool through which the Other can escape and ultimately challenge the annihilation and subjugation encoded in the language of tyranny. Silence preserves the uniqueness and untranslatability of the story of the Other; especially a story which was written with blood and wounds. What Coetzee seems to imply in *Foe* is that certain experiences – especially traumatic ones – cannot be translated and communicated into another language. Susan Gallagher directed my attention to the fact that the Dutch word "apartheid" (meaning apartness, separateness) has never been translated into any other language. (VanZanten Gallagher, 1) This fact has also been commented on by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Racism's Last Word":

> [n]o tongue has ever translated this name – as if all the languages of the world were defending themselves, shutting their mouths against a sinister incorporation of the thing by means of word, as if all tongues were refusing to give equivalent through the contagious hospitality of word-for-word (Derrida, 292)

As the language of extreme violence and evil cannot be translated into any other language, likewise, the language of suffering and unbearable anguish cannot be uttered in language other than its own. And although

it is the language of silence, it nevertheless "shouts as if there were a thousand people screaming together." (Parry, 44)

Coetzee's vision of the human relations, the relation of I to Thou, is permeated with extreme pessimism. This relation can by no means be reciprocal. The communication with the Other by means of language will always remain imprisoned within the dialectics of power. At the end of this chapter I would like to quote the final paragraph from Coetzee's Nobel Lecture which was given in Stockholm on the 7th of December, 2003, and which, in my opinion, leaves no doubt about the writer's belief in the impossibility of interpersonal communication:

> He yearns to meet the fellow in the flesh, shake his hand, take a stroll with him along the quayside and hearken as he tells of his visit to the dark north of the island, or of his adventures in the writing business. But he fears there will be no meeting, not in this life. If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave. (Coetzee, 203)

I began this paper with a story told by Toni Morisson, the story about the old black woman and the bird – standing for the language – imprisoned in the hands of the children. If we substitute the children in this story for Friday and the old woman by writers/readers, then, according to Coetzee, we have acknowledge the fact that what Friday holds in the cup of his hands is not a bird – be it dead or alive – but emptiness. Silence.

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