

What is left behind – The role of Friday in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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In this article the controversial character of Friday in the rewritten story of Robinson Crusoe Foe, is read as the remnant or l'objet petit a from the Lacanian symbolic realm to the real. The novel itself is read as an allegory of the symbolic coming of age of man where the inherent gap between meaning and language gives birth to a structural trauma.

The following can be read as an attempt to analyse the construction of 'identity' in the field of literature, in this case within the novel *Foe* by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee. This analysis is done from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, building upon one of the most important relationships within Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely that between language and identity.

In the novel *Foe* (1986) identity is strongly linked to narrative. In relating her story of shipwreck and her life on Cruso's island, Susan Barton explores the boundaries of reality and truth contra fiction. Simultaneously she questions the implications 'story' has on identity itself. Barton is fuelled by her quest for substance, for identity. In this quest she has to deal with the integration of language within consciousness. A consciousness that was first strictly imaginary, internal and abstract. I will demonstrate that *Foe* can be read as an allegory of the symbolic coming of age of man where the inherent gap between meaning and language gives birth to a structural trauma as is described by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Coetzee made significant changes when rewriting Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. He for instance introduced a female voice. A voice that is also principally responsible for recounting the history of Cruso and his island (minus the 'e' in the original, the name can be seen as a form of deliberate character castration, according to Kim Worthington in *Self as Narrative* (254)). Critics have seen this change as a means by which relations of power (between for instance woman and man, master and slave et cetera) in the novel are foregrounded. I think the novel can be seen as an intention of posing the question of narration in general, of our access to language as human beings and

the problems concerning language one encounters along the way. I believe it questions the source of all creativity and I want to analyse the novel accordingly.

A feeling of necessity to tell her story defines Susan Barton. Without her narrative the island of Cruso does not exist. Without it, more importantly, she herself is not truly a '*substantial being*'. This quest for substance is crucial, it lies at the core of the novel and can be read as an ultimate quest for identity itself.

Story-telling can be seen as a means of establishing one's identity, of making the narrative of life '*real*' or '*substantial*' and thus acquiring a place or context in reality. Susan encounters several problems while telling her story, in forming her identity, that relate to the workings of the mind, such as memory. More importantly she discovers that language resists true meaning i.e. that there exists an impossible relation (or gap) between language and meaning or mimesis.¹ This desire to recount is already present in Susan shortly after her arrival on the island of Cruso:

What I chiefly hoped to find was not there. Cruso kept no journal, perhaps because he lacked paper and ink, but more likely, I now believe, because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or, if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it. (...) "Suppose" said I, "that one day we are saved. Would you not regret it that you could not bring back with you some record of your years of shipwreck, so that what you have passed through shall not die from memory (*Foe* 16-17)

Susan's strong inclination to recount her life-story remains present throughout the novel. After her return from Cruso's island she desperately tries to find a writer (Foe) who can transform her story into a novel of survival that will be accepted by the public. This can be seen as a metaphor for society in general while her '*story*' represents her persona that is reaching maturity. Writing this life story can be seen as an allegory of finding or constructing her true identity. Besides making this story '*socially accepted*' or creating a socially accepted identity, Susan also tries to discover what is true and what is fiction in her attempt to merge her inside experience with the external medium of language.

This enterprise encounters numerous problems when Foe, the writer, has to hide out for creditors and Susan cannot locate him for a

¹ This is what Lacan calls the prison of language to which we as humans are subjected to.

long time.² When she does find him eventually, they differ in opinion about the emphasis the ultimate story should bear. The struggle that occurs between Susan and the writer Foe for control of the historical narrative has again received critical attention mainly “*as an allegory of female appropriation of the (phallic) pen of masculine writing*” (Worthington 254).

Personally, I see the problematic relationship between Susan and Foe as a metaphor for the relation between the subject and the symbolic order. This relationship is driven by the subject Susan (and hence her subjective fantasies) and the symbolic order (coherent language or the writer Foe) which belong to the realm of reality.³ Seen as such, the disappearance of Foe and Susan’s search for him can be read as the search for adequate representation. When Susan ultimately finds him, or when she finds language, she struggles with Foe – who subjects her story to all sorts of rules and regulations; an allegory for the rules and regulations of language itself –, because she feels the instrument of language resists actual meaning or experience.

Foe and its narrative structure

Problems surrounding the representation of a story in general and more particular, the representation of Susan’s story are central in the book, ultimately suggesting that the search for substance or identity is not at all an easy task. This is also evident when we look at the structure of the novel. The novel is divided in four parts, each narrated from a different point of view. The first part seems to be a transcription of the story of the island, narrated by Barton. The final paragraph reveals that the story has been told to a man named Foe. The name Foe is obviously derived from Defoe, the original conceiver of the story *Robinson Crusoe*, although it also means ‘*enemy*’.⁴ Since Foe is

2 In light of the rest of my argument: analysing the character Foe as a product of Lacan’s the symbolic stage Foe’s hiding out for creditors is an interesting symbol because the word ‘*credit*’ actually means ‘*trust*’ or ‘*faith*’. (Wolters Dictionary) His hiding out for creditors seems to suggest he broke that trust, i.e. that he cannot be ‘*trusted*’. Because of his connection with language it suggests language in general cannot be trusted.

3 Later I will discuss some of Lacan’s notions concerning the imaginary and symbolic order versus the real.

4 Note that the original story is someone else’s story (*Foe* is a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*), suggesting that a story in itself is always subjected to rewriting, it is never truly told, it yields the moment it acquires meaning (see the theory concerning Lacan’s *l’objet petit a.*) Coetzee in this way already makes a statement concerning language with the novel itself being a non-original text.

Barton's 'voice' through which she desires to recount her story, you could also see the character Foe as the prison of language that is therefore an eternal *enemy* (*Foe* is also the title of the novel, which makes the book itself a *contradictio in terminis* -due to it being an ultimate speech act of language it becomes also the enemy of language as the book in itself resists meaning).

In foregrounding the problematic narratorial voice any coherency is lost in the novel, it's simply not clear who is telling what. Every single way of telling the same story is employed turning the text itself into a question mark. This seems exemplary for the concept of the novel, which in my opinion deals with the impossibility of narration and the problems concerning language in relation to meaning. By continually confronting the reader with problems regarding structure, (who is telling what? what is 'real' and what is 'fantasy'? et cetera) the reliability of the novel is questioned and the emphasis comes to lie on the problems surrounding narration and identity in general. Explicit reflection of the characters with regard to this concept strengthens this emphasis. Coetzee's novel is a literal parody on the writer Defoe, making use of the recital of Susan Barton, the real heroine of the story. The name Foe now also acquires another meaning; that of 'im-personator' or 'forger'.

Lacanian elements - *l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage*

According to Lacan, language is the principal condition for the unconscious. He argues that the unconscious is, like language, a structure of signifiers. For Lacan all human communication is inscribed in a linguistic structure; even body language, which according to him is fundamentally another form of language. (*An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* - Evans 96-97).

The core of this thought, this linking of the unconscious with language, is based on Freud's theory of the unconscious. According to Freud, every manifestation of meaning has to do with either certain natural rules of language or chaotic chains of association. In his 'free association'-method, which plays an important role in psychoanalysis, ultimate meaning can be uncovered and the origin of symptoms can be found. Lacan, however, believed that language is never completely insightful. Meaning cannot be unequivocal and is therefore always ambiguous. For Freud the unconscious is the effect of a second-

any repression that has its origin in the '*Wunsch*' or '*drive*' of man. This drive fills us with a physical energy that continually seeks discharge.

According to Lacan, however, representations force themselves upon us and thereby limit us. The unconscious for Lacan is not a place where all conscious questions find an answer or where conscious actions acquire a motive. He believes that there are no answers to be found in the unconscious if these answers are altogether absent in the conscious. He thereby emphasizes the restriction which we encounter as a result of representation or manifestation of meaning on its own. His unconscious in the words of Paul Moyaert in *Ethiek en sublimatie* is:

De marking van de onophefbare onmogelijkheid om het verlangen van de mens op een bepaalde manier te verstaan. Het onbewuste is de blijvende lacune in de zich nooit sluitende keten van reden (betekenaars). (Moyaert (2) 19)⁵

This vacancy or void does not exist on its own, it's the effect of language or of the fact that man is a linguistic being. When one begins to speak, one enters into an unstoppable motion and the unrelenting tension of the unsaid is born. Seen as such, Lacan's unconscious has the same origin as language itself. To further strengthen this theory Lacan turns to linguistics because here he thought the key could be found with which to give meaning to the unconscious. For this reason he radicalizes theories of linguists such as Saussure, Chomsky and Jakobson.

Friday's silence

Teresa Dovey argues in her article "J. M. Coetzee: writing in the middle voice" that Coetzee's novels always exploit the notion of the *divided* subject of Lacan, the split between text and narration, or utterance and enunciation, in order to gesture towards the possibility of escaping complicity with the dominant discourses, while at the same time making reference to the self of writing (as in the novel *Foe*). They also exploit the Lacanian definition of the function of language

5 *The marking of the unrelenting impossibility to understand the desire of man in a particular way. The unconscious is the enduring vacancy in the never closing chain of reason (signifiers).* (my translation)

as being ‘*not to inform but to evoke*’, with the subject seeking, via speech, ‘*the response of the other*’ an ‘*I*’ which requires the response of a ‘*You*’ in order to achieve identity. (Dovey 19) She sees this as a way in which Coetzee’s novels can locate themselves as specific modes of discourse, each attempting to communicate within a particular historical moment. In this way, she argues, Coetzee’s novels are able to express their desire for a response from the victims of colonisation. Furthermore, Lacanian theory concerning the subject’s construction in language allows one to posit a material and transformative role for the subject in society, via the *dialectic* between self and language. (Dovey 19)

Dovey reads the character of Susan Barton as a character of marginality or weakness. According to her, Barton attempts with the narration of her story to obtain a position of power by means of writing her own story but also by trying to write the story of Friday, who has had his tongue cut out, and has also possibly been castrated. Representing a feminist discourse, she wants to establish her radical Otherness from masculine discourse, but recognises at this point, that within discourse, one inevitably expresses the self via the Other which is the word, the third position between two subjects.

From this perspective, radical Otherness is not possible as a mode of articulation: it can be figured but not spoken. Friday, the speechless colonized victim becomes the means of figuring this Otherness, and she dreams of restoring him, paradoxically via language to the “*time before Crusoe, the time before he lost his tongue*”. (Dovey 25)

Following Dovey’s train of thought we can read Friday’s character as that which cannot be spoken or Otherness that cannot be integrated in the framework of language. I have already commented upon the character of Foe being the instrument to which Susan turns in order to write her story, and to which she appeals when she tries to make Friday speak. Foe is literally the instrument of language; Friday’s character stands for that which resists representation. Susan hopes that the novel which Foe writes (his art) can give a voice to Friday:

The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday. (*Foe* 118)

Dovey sees Susan's gesture towards Friday to restore his language principally as a restoration of the colonized to a pre-colonial sense of wholeness and identity. Telling Friday's story is for Barton hopelessly intertwined with constructing an identity for herself in writing as their histories are bound up together; for it's due to the conquests of her people that the '*barbarian*' Friday lost his tongue in the first place. Dovey therefore sees Friday's character as a means through which Coetzee has touched upon colonial discourse:

It is important to recognise that Friday's speechlessness does not mean that the colonized subject does not have a voice of his/her own. It suggests rather, that the colonized subject has no discursive authority within the field of western discourses. If Susan Barton's feminine discourse, along with its strategic silences, represents the attempt to speak as Other, to evade masculine discourse, Friday's tongue less, castrated body is testimony to this novel's resolve not to speak for the Other. The concluding image of the novel gestures towards a future time when an equal exchange will be possible, as Susan Barton lies face to face with Friday underwater, and feels "a slow stream, without breath, without interruption", coming from inside him and beating against her eyelids, against the skin of her face. (Dovey 26)

I suggest however that besides posing as the silenced barbarian of colonial discourse the character Friday can be interpreted in many other ways. I would like to investigate his character more generally as a symbol of that which resists representation or language, to read him as *l'objet petit a*, the remnant left behind by the introduction of the symbolic in the real where one signifier attempts to represent the subject (in this case Susan and her story) for all other signifiers, but where a surplus is always inevitably produced. Lacan named this surplus *l'objet petit a*. I would argue that the gesture Susan makes in trying to restore Friday's language is indeed an attempt to reinstate wholeness and identity, but not just to a state preceding colonisation, but to a pre-imaginary, pre-Oedipal, state where desire is not yet born. Her ultimate failure in trying to make Friday speak, lies in the absence of his tongue, or with his denial of language related systems. Friday's character can be read as the effect of language, as the inherently empty unconscious object that is forever bound to a chain of

representations. He is that which resists representation, he is the void that constitutes desire.⁶

His Otherness is also emphasized by his being male and black, which places him directly opposite Susan (who is white and woman) indicating the impossibility of a real fusion between Susan's subject and *l'objet petit a*, or to name or characterize that which stands outside language, making it distressingly alien.

Friday as *l'objet petit a*

A lack is the condition for any desire. The most prominent lack in human life is defined by Jean-Paul Sartre as the '*manque de l'être*', or the very core of human frustration, but how does this lack come into being?⁷

Lacan claimed that desire is eternal and immortal; it's too great to be fulfilled by a finite object. Moreover the object of desire is forever linked to a chain of signifiers or representations. Desire is also unconscious because it's something that escapes from its aim to an object, something that escapes the logic of the imaginable. It moves, so to speak, endlessly through the chain of signifiers that is trying to grasp it. The object yields the moment it's grasped by meaning, thus making it inherently suggestive. Such objects Lacan named *l'objet petit a*.⁸ When reading Friday as *l'objet petit a* we can taste this suggestiveness (this continual yielding in the chain of signifiers) in the following fragment:

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

6 This void is also characterized by Paul Moyaert in the quote I used earlier.

7 "*Le désir est manque d'être, il est hanté en son être le plus intime par l'être dont il est désir. Ainsi témoigne-t-il de l'existence du manque dans l'être de la réalité humaine.*" Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (1943), II, 1, § 3, Gallimard, coll. "Tel", p. 126. Sartre analyses the human desire originating from an intrinsic bond with the unrelenting absence-of-being (manque à être).

8 *Objet petit a* is defined as the leftover, the remainder, the remnant left behind by the introduction of the symbolic in the real. (Evans 125)

he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born. (*Foe* 121-122)

L'objet petit a can never fully be understood and can never fully coincide with the representations unto which they are bound. Desire therefore has nothing to do with concrete objects, but is being caused by “*de aura van associatieve verbanden die zich in en rond een lichamelijk geïncarneerd object concentreren en kristalliseren.*” (Moyaert (2) 22).⁹

When a child enters the symbolic order and language is employed, a lack is automatically born. This lack, according to Lacan, constitutes the very first desire. A part can never be integrated in the symbolic; this part instigates a vicious circle that is the reason of all frustration. Desire remains unconscious; it's made of something that exceeds the logic of reason or that which we can transfer into words. The subject of desire is unconscious because it knows no reflection onto itself; it misses any basis of definition.

The same can be seen during psychoanalysis when a client tells his story. As a result of the recount the client will acquire an identity (something Susan also desires with her story telling), but at the same time a loss comes into being. This loss is connected to the client's own personality because the identification with the recount or story also means an objectification towards his or her own personality. Frustration will occur because the story can never be a direct expression of one's intrinsic self. All language is mediated, it's a station where some luggage has to be left behind. The client's story is a presentation, it's the analyst's job to try to find the hidden rhetoric of this story.

This luggage or *l'objet petit a* can never be signified in the symbolic. It's the nucleus of an everlasting desire which finds its roots in the pre-symbolic order (the state that precedes the installation of language). During the transition into the symbolic something is lost, but at the same time this desire places itself in a particular way towards the lost part. The two acquire so to speak a unique relationship. According to Lacan, this relationship expresses itself in the ‘*fantasma*’ or fantasy. Here the subject will approach *l'objet petit a*, it will reinforce its desire, but this action will at the same time foreground

9 “*an aura of associative connections which concentrate and crystallize themselves around a material object.*” (my translation)

the impossible realisation of the desire. This is exactly what happens in the relationship between Susan and Friday.

After they are both rescued from the island and have entered the ‘civilized world’, Susan tries desperately to get Friday to speak, she wants to signify him with the symbolic, but he resists this signification. By employing fantasy (fantasy and fiction bearing more or less the same meaning in the novel) Susan tries to fulfil her wish; this is why the writing of the novel is so important for Susan, because it will not just include her words but it will also ‘place’ Friday in a narrative, it will define him. This definition constitutes Susan’s desire, it’s Friday who is the only remnant of her real self; her story of Cruso and the island:

The story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right. It commences with my being cast away there and concludes with the death of Cruso and the return of Friday and myself to England, full of new hope. Within this larger story are inset the stories of how I came to be marooned (told by myself to Cruso) and of Cruso’s shipwreck and early years on the island (told by Cruso to myself) as well as the story of Friday which is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative (I picture it as a button-hole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button). (*Foe* 121)¹⁰

This constructed relationship towards *l’objet petit a* will become the eventual instrument of our desire. However, it deals with a constructed relationship, so our desire can never be fully realised, hence desire is always a desire towards desire! It is also a desire towards the desire of the Other, with which it is connected through a symbolic relation. Desire in this way becomes a psychic reality and is insatiable. The complete merging of the desire and the object of desire (the instrument that sustains this relationship) is impossible. All love is therefore in the end an illusion and the actual object of desire inherently destructive. The desire is always a desire towards... where the ending is principally indefinite.

10 The word *maroon* literally means *to cut off/ to put ashore on a desert island and leave behind* (Dikke van Dale English- Dutch –my translation) This can also be read as a symbol of birth, meaning that Susan is born onto the island.

The Empty Core of the Real

*“Unlike the symbolic, which is constituted in terms of oppositions such as that between presence and absence, there is no absence in the real. (...) It is that which resists symbolization absolutely.”*¹¹

This resistance of symbols and hence the resistance to language, is exactly what takes place in the very last part of the novel *Foe*. This obscure part in my view is an allegory of the last stage of Lacan’s trinity; the real. Here, coherency is ultimately lost and meaning is challenged. Beginning, middle and ending seem to merge together turning this relatively short piece into the empty core of the novel.

Josephine Dodd claims that Coetzee ruthlessly silenced the voice of Susan in this last part, making it exceptionally difficult to read from a feminist point of view.¹² She accuses the literary theory surrounding Coetzee to be completely gender-blind and asks why he left a woman on the island instead of a man. I could think of a few reasons.

First of all, human beings come both as men and female. Writing a story about the development of the psyche without including both would seem inadequate. Secondly, Cruso and Foe represent primitive and patriarchal influences and are deemed both masculine. Susan is made woman to emphasize her union with them through her body for she sleeps with both. After these bodily unions she inadvertently reaches another stage.

In the last part of the book however, gender plays no role whatsoever, the role of oppositions has vanished, there is no presence or absence, no beginning or ending, no masculine or feminine. It seems short-sighted to critique Coetzee on his use of the female character Susan. This book is not about female creativity, it deals with creativity itself. All oppositions (including the opposition male-female) had to play their role in this story to come to the point where opposition dissolves.

In reading Friday as *l’objet petit a* or the void that constitutes desire, we have deemed him inherently silent, a role that seems befitting considering his resistance to language. However, his character is not entirely silent or entirely void. Consider for instance the following fragment where Friday draws an image:

¹¹ Evans 159

¹² In Josephine Dodd “*The South African Literary Establishment and the Textual Production of ‘Woman’*” 161-162.

While Foe and I spoke, Friday had settled himself on his mat with the slate. Glancing over his shoulder, I saw he was filling it with a design of, as it seemed, leaves and flowers. But when I came closer I saw the leaves were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot; row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes. (*Foe* 147)

So Friday may not have words, he has eyes; he sees, he ‘gazes’. Lacan argues in “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*” in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* that there is an intimate relationship between the *objet petit a* (which coordinates our desire) and the Gaze (which threatens to undo all desire through the eruption of the Real). At the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. It’s that lack at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. However, because the *objet petit a* (the object of our desire) is ultimately nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections, to come too close to it threatens to give us the experience precisely of the Lacanian Gaze, the realization that behind our desire is nothing but our lack: the materiality of the real staring back at us.

That lack at the heart of desire at once allows desire to persist and threatens continually to run us aground upon the underlying rock of the real. Friday here functions as a reminder that behind the real (the world of language Susan becomes a part of) is unrelenting desire. A desire that is based on an illusion, an empty image. Here Friday points to Susan’s empty desire, the empty illusion of language.

Michael Brown in his article “Why the photographer does not see: Lacan, the *objet petit a* and the gaze in Antonioni’s *Blow-up*” states that the gaze is not the act of looking, nor is it contained in what the subject looks at, but rather it’s the moment of circular recognition that pinpoints the subject as a desiring being.¹³ Lacan would point to the gaze as this *objet petit a* as it comes to symbolize the central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration. The lack leaves the subject ignorant as to what is beyond mere appearance. Friday tries to take away this ignorance in Susan by means of his drawing, he emphasizes her empty eternal desire; she has become a being consumed by desire.

Another example of Friday’s symbolic ‘speech’ is apparent in the following fragment in the first part of the novel:

13 <http://www.lacan.org/brown.htm>

But Friday was not fishing. After paddling out some hundred yards from the shelf into the thickest of the seaweed, he reached into a bag that hung about his neck and brought out handfuls of white flakes which he began to scatter over the water (...). (*Foe* 31)

This ritual, this scattering of white flakes over the water, could be seen as a symbol of his marking the unconscious water with the holes or gaps that are inherently part of it. The island then could be read as Susan's conscious, the water surrounding it as her unconscious psyche. Antoine Mooij defines Lacan's unconscious in his book *Taal en Verlangen* in the following way:

Het onbewuste is datgene wat in het verhaal, systematisch, onder tafel valt, en het is te interpoleren in de leemtes die dit verhaal laat. (...) Het is datgene wat ontbreekt in het verhaal, omdat het niet op directe wijze verteld kan worden, maar wat niet op directe wijze verteld kan worden is op indirecte wijze nog aanwezig. (Mooij 104-105)¹⁴

Surprisingly, these holes are also sometimes described as white; "*Het verhaal laat dan systematisch lakunes, leemtes, witte plekken.*" (Moyaert 104)¹⁵ Friday is that which cannot be figured or spoken, his ritual of the scattering of the white flakes is his way of showing these white gaps.

When Susan has almost completely surrendered herself to the story of Foe, or when she has entered the symbolic, the following fragment marks the end of the third part of the novel:¹⁶

'No, she is substantial, as my daughter 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.'

14 *The unconscious is that which within the story, systematically, falls under the table, and it can be placed in the holes or lacunas this story instigates. (...) It is that which is missing within the story because it cannot be told directly, but what cannot be told directly is still present indirectly. (my translation)*

15 *"The story systematically leaves lacunas, white spots, empty spaces." (my translation)*

16 She has surrendered herself to language (Foe) because "*Het bestaan van de taal en van verhalen, van de symbolische orde, is de mogelijksvoorwaarde van spreken. Daarom is dit spreken nooit oorspronkelijk, nooit scheppend.*" (Mooij 97-98) *"The existence of language and stories, of the symbolic order, is the condition of speech. That is also why speech is never original or creative."* (my translation) A thought that can be linked to Freud's famous paradigm about the unconscious: *Das Ich sei kein Herr in eigenem Hause.*

‘You have omitted Friday.’

I turned back to Friday, still busy at his writing. The paper before him was heavily smudged, as by a child unused to the pen, but there was writing on it, writing of a kind, rows and rows of the letter o tightly packed together. (...)

‘Is Friday learning to write?’ Foe asked.

‘He is writing, after as fashion.’ I said ‘He is writing the letter o.’ ‘It is a beginning’ said Foe, ‘tomorrow you must teach him the letter a.’ (Foe 152)

Gayatri Spivak discusses this fragment in his article “Theory in de margin; Coetzee’s *Foe* reading Defoe’s *Foe/Roxana*”. He interprets the letter *o* as the ‘*omega*’; the terminus of a specific form of historical consciousness of settler South Africa.¹⁷

I would also mark it as the end of a specific form of consciousness, the imaginary, where Friday still is deeply connected with Susan. It’s indeed the last letter of the alphabet; an omega, an inevitable end of a specific relationship between Friday and Susan, but Friday will never learn the letter *a* because for him there is only loss. In this last part Susan has indeed ‘*omitted*’ Friday, she has entered the symbolic and has joined Foe in the same world of signs. Friday can be read as the object of desire that places itself in the trail of physically incarnated objects. Those objects are forever changing in the chain of signifiers, for this reason they can always fall back in the indifference and become insignificant matter. When Susan has omitted him, Friday will become just that.

In the fourth and last part of the novel all voices are gone. It’s no longer Susan or Foe who speak, it seems to be the omniscient narrator of the book, Coetzee, who speaks beyond the story, making this part extremely obscure. He visits the house where Foe, Susan and Friday live.

“*From his mouth issue the sounds of the island.*” (Foe 154) Friday is in his alcove turned to the wall with his teeth clenched. The one who speaks (note the irony in this sentence) manages to unclench his teeth and hear the sounds of the island from his mouth, speech of some sort.

And with a sigh, making barely a splash, the character floats in the water with the white petals of Friday. He gets trapped in seaweed and underwater finds the dark mass of a wreck. He enters and finds Susan

17 In Kwaku Larbi Korang’s “*An Allegory of Re-Reading: Post-Colonialism, Resistance and J.M. Coetzee’s Foe*” 191.

Barton and her dead captain (was the story real or fiction?) Friday as a slave is in the corner, with a chain around his throat:

‘What is this ship?’ But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday. He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a finger-nail across his teeth, trying to find a way in.

His mouth opens. 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. (*Foe* 157)

Was the ship a slave ship? Making it a reference to the colonial past of South Africa and of oppression worldwide? Or should the wreck be read as a symbol for the unconscious of humanity, lurking in the deep, with the body of a bound slave (*l’objet petit a*) together with his dead mistress and master (fantasy and language)? “*It is that which resists symbolization completely.*”

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