

## **Adriana Alves de Paula Martins**

Universidade Católica Portuguesa (Viseu)

### **J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* or Memory and Language at the Crossroads of Colonial and Post-Colonial Discourse**

«[T]he most fascinating and subtle aspect of the transformative function of post-colonial writing is its ability to signify difference, and even incommensurability between cultures, at the very point at which communication occurs.»

(Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*)

When Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, he could not imagine his novel about the memories of a shipwrecked man's adventures would come to be considered a proto-novel of colonial literature, when the latter, according to Elleke Boehmer (1995), has played a relevant role in the dissemination of imperialist ideology in the metropolis and in the colonies. Moreover, by creating a fiction which, above all, could be considered reliable by the readers of his time, Defoe chose the journal as a privileged sub-genre in order to confer credibility on the testimony given by the novel's protagonist. The writer could never have dreamt that, so many years after the publication of his best-seller, literary critics and writers would bestow so much attention onto this work, using it to reflect upon the condition of artifact and truth of any literary representation. That was exactly what happened when, in 1986, J. M. Coetzee focused on one of the matrixes of what Barbara Foley (1986) called «pseudo-factual novels» in order to do a very interesting exercise of citation (Antoine Compagnon, 1979).

It is on this exercise that I concentrate my attention in this essay. My aim is to examine the devices used by the South African writer to write back (in Bill Ashcroft's sense) *Robinson Crusoe*, subverting Defoe's narrative and

the ideological meanings it has been projecting since its publication. In other words, I intend to analyze how Coetzee, through the introduction of a female perspective – Susan Barton’s – which would be unthinkable in Defoe’s time, and through the fictional modelization of a dumb Friday, addresses the conception, reception and interception of patriarchal and imperialist memories in Barton’s attempt to register not only hers, but also Crusoe’s and Friday’s experience of life on an unknown island, thus discussing the boundaries of language in colonial and post-colonial discourse.

Let me now return to *Robinson Crusoe* and to the afore-mentioned consideration of Defoe’s novel as a prototype of colonial literature, so that the importance of Coetzee’s rewriting process may be better understood. The characterization of Defoe’s novel mainly results from the fictional modelization of Robinson Crusoe, for the protagonist embodies the model of the colonizer to be. For instance, he is presented to the reader as a hero, as someone who was able to endure and survive on his own, overcoming huge difficulties and transforming the remains of the ship into useful tools and objects that could bring him relief on the unknown island; indeed, the island is a place he started to master as if he were a colonizer when he tried to reproduce the European way of life there. Bearing in mind the burden of the Puritan influence on Defoe’s time, and the interpretation of Robinson’s stay on the island as a necessary step in a process of redemption (Robinson left his father’s house without his consent, for he wanted to get to know the world and become rich), Robinson’s journal functions as a kind of relief from his solitude. In other words, through his journal, the protagonist not only leaves his testimony (conferring verisimilitude on the narrative), but also mitigates his loneliness, since the journal implies a dialogue with the self. In this sense, Friday’s appearance in the narrative represents a kind of blessing, for the native represents the companion Robinson needed to endure life on the unknown island. The point is that, in Defoe’s narrative, Friday is never treated as equal to Crusoe. From the beginning of their relationship, Robinson tries to teach Friday his language (he does not make any effort to learn Friday’s) and one of the first words taught is «master», which signals the type of relationship that was established between the two characters. In sum, Robinson regards himself as a kind of colonizer and Friday as a kind of slave, the indigenous person who needed to be civilized and converted to Christianity (the process of civilization clearly being meritorious).

Apart from the relationship between Robinson and Friday, which announces the typical imperialist relationship that would rule the contact between colonizers and colonized, Coetzee's interest in Defoe's novel also rests on two other elements: the limits of literary representation, on the one hand, and, on the other, language as an effective means either to disseminate or to resist the imperialist rhetoric. In fact, Coetzee writes back *Robinson Crusoe* addressing the issue of memory (mainly of the characters' life on the island) through the discussion about language and authorship. In other words, his reflection upon the control of language and upon the acknowledgement of authorship raises the issues of gender and race in the novel from a post-colonial perspective.

Two strategies are used by Coetzee to address the afore-mentioned issues in *Foe*: the characters' fictional composition and the *mise en abyme*, which leads to the analysis of the literary writing process. As regards the fictional modelization of characters, Coetzee changes Crusoe's name into Cruso and maintains Friday as a native who lives with Cruso (I shall pay more attention to Friday's characterization later on in this essay). The main novelty in Coetzee's novel is the introduction of Susan Barton, who is transformed into the main narrator and who is responsible for the female perspective in the novel, which would be implausible at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Defoe published his novel. Besides, the South African author adds to his narrative a writer whose name is Foe, playing a game of references with Daniel Defoe's surname.

In the initial discussion of the fictional modelization of characters I would like to focus my attention on Susan Barton. She is a woman who left Europe for Brazil in search of her daughter, whom she could not find. Although she sometimes relies on men and on occasional sexual favors to survive (women had no other alternative at the time), she is characterized as an assertive woman who knows what she wants and as someone who is able to live an independent life despite the restraints imposed on women within the context of her society. It is the depiction of her shipwreck and her arrival on Cruso's island that frames Coetzee's novel, introducing the innovative female perspective. It is mainly due to Susan Barton's curiosity that Cruso's and Friday's experience and relationship are transformed into matters of discussion, opening the path to the reflection on the boundaries of fictional discourse and on the ideological uses of language.

It is through her eyes that Cruso (unlike Robinson Crusoe in Defoe's novel) is presented as an old, tired and mysterious man who lives on a barren island where the inhabitants can hardly manage to survive. Curiously, despite all the difficulties and obstacles he encounters, Cruso does not make any effort to leave the island. In fact, he seems to be rooted there. He does not want to be bothered or to leave a written testimony of his stay on the island, and conforms to his status of shipwreck survivor as if he were only waiting for his death. Unlike in Defoe's narrative, in Coetzee's *Foe* Cruso plays a secondary role, for, after his death, the focus is on Susan and Friday.

Friday is the native who finds Susan Barton on the shore. He lives with Cruso, helping him to build the terraces, the only sign of his presence that Cruso wants to leave on the island. If, at the beginning of her stay, Susan is curious about Friday, his background and the nature of his relationship with Cruso, she then develops a kind of aversion towards him when she learns from Cruso that Friday cannot speak, since his tongue has been removed from his mouth as the result of atrocious violence. It is interesting to note that, from the beginning of the narrative, Friday represents the Other in Susan's eyes, but it is after she learns about his being mute that Susan cannot bring herself to deal with his different condition. One of the possible reasons to explain such a weird reaction might be her inability to communicate with him and his inability to clarify what really happened to him, that is, how he lost his tongue. Whenever she asks Cruso about the violent event, he gives her different and contradictory explanations that prevent her from learning the truth and understanding whether Cruso himself had anything to do with the heinous act. When Cruso, already very ill, and Susan are rescued by some Europeans, Friday goes with them, but Cruso dies in the middle of the trip. Thus Susan becomes responsible for Friday, and starts her attempt to publish a book describing her experience on the island. She is confident that the book can be a great success, and that it will provide her with enough money to have a comfortable life and to send Friday back to Africa or Brazil, returning him to his people and making him a free and happy man.

Believing she is unable to tell her story in a convincing and persuasive way, Susan looks for Foe, a writer famous for knowing exactly how to please his readership, transforming a merely good story into a real best seller. Moreover, Susan knows that, in her society, it is considerably difficult for a woman writer to be accepted by publishers. Foe, however, has had to

escape because of his many debts and, while Susan desperately tries to contact him, she decides to move into Foe's house with Friday in order to survive. There, she starts writing letters to Foe. In those letters, which remain unsent, Susan tells Foe all the details of her experience and she slowly becomes aware of her capacity to write. In fact, in Coetzee's novel, the reader is confronted with three different texts about the same issue, which are subtly intertwined to question the ideological meanings underlying literary representations: Coetzee's and the reader's memories of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; Susan Barton's representation of her life with Cruso and Friday on the island and, afterwards, with Friday after Cruso's death; and Susan Barton's reflections on the story Foe was writing about her memories.

Coetzee addresses the issues of gender and race when Susan realizes Foe is adulterating her story for the sake of the reading public's pleasure and the resulting profits in terms of sales. One of the distressing points has to do with Susan's belief that the main interesting aspect of the story is to speculate about who cut Friday's tongue, whereas Foe maintains that her search for her daughter in Brazil is a more appealing theme. Insisting on privileging Friday's experience of suffering, Susan is, to a certain extent, denouncing the deplorable treatment natives were subjected to by the white men in the name of economic interest. It is an indirect way of acknowledging the Other's existence and rights as a human being. On the other hand, when Foe needs more details about Susan's adventure in Brazil, he is stressing the importance he gives to events happening to a white person, leaving the native aside on purpose, which suggests that, in his opinion, the Other's experience is not relevant. By questioning Foe's perspective as a writer who is aware of his audience's taste, Coetzee is suggesting that the reading public might be resistant to alterity as well. By confronting Susan's and Foe's viewpoints and allowing Susan's representation of events to prevail in the narrative, Coetzee reinforces her characterization as a strong and independent woman, who is able to defend her beliefs and who refuses to play the role of victim always dependent on men, while, at the same time, he focuses his attention on Friday.

Friday's muteness, more than addressing the issue of the pretense superiority of whites versus the inferiority of non-whites, raises the issue of language as a means of resisting imperial rhetoric. Silence (Benita Parry, 1996) is usually associated with victims, thus allowing the literary text (especially in postmodern and post-colonial literature) to give voice to the victims

of history. In *Foe*, the opposite happens and it is necessary to understand why.

Friday is made dumb, which transforms him into a disabled person in a white society. The point is that, as Crusoe proposes several versions to explain how Friday became dumb, Susan desperately tries to communicate with him, but to no avail. Friday does not attempt to communicate with her, simply because he does not want to learn the code through which she is able to communicate. He seems to refuse to undergo a process of acculturation on various levels, which is illustrated, among other examples in Coetzee's narrative, by his refusal to wear shoes. In fact, Friday wants to remain the Other. Despite Susan's inability to establish any type of dialogue with Friday, she discovers what the condition of being the Other is like (think about the various times in the novel when Susan and Friday are thought to be gypsies). The most illustrative passage as far as this aspect is concerned is the one when Susan, after a difficult and oppressive day during which everything seemed to go wrong, releases her energies by dancing in an apparently awkward way as Friday usually did. It is then that she realizes that Friday is not the unhappy person she believes he is, and that he has his own ways of experiencing joy, even though he does not want to share them with her or any other person. Hence, Friday's silence, instead of being seen as a physical disability, should be interpreted as a form of resistance against a forced acculturation, as a form of signifying difference and asserting the importance of a non-verbal code of communication. He does not want to assimilate the European way of life. Crusoe did not demand that from him on the island, which might explain why they got along so well.

Despite their cultural differences and difficulties of communication, Susan and Friday are not really very different from each other. Friday lives in his own world, which is impenetrable to Susan and also to the readers, for the latter are unable to learn Friday's code. Susan does not mind being mistaken for a prostitute in order to live her independent life and attain her aims. Besides, she does not give in to Foe when he insists on asking her to talk about her experience in Brazil when she was looking for her daughter, for she makes it clear to him from the beginning that she wants him to write a book about life on the island. Despite the fact Foe is to be the writer of her memories, she does not abdicate from her right to correct him, preventing him from adding adventurous episodes that did not take place or transforming

whatever he thought possible into something *real*, even if in the domain of representation.

In one of her discussions with Foe Susan argues that her silences were different from Friday's. According to her, Friday's silence is helpless (J. M. Coetzee, 1986: 122), for he could be what people wanted to transform him into. If, on the one hand, both Susan's and Friday's silences converge on the assertion of the rights of those who have been dominated within the context of colonial discourse (Susan as a woman and Friday as a mute black native), on the other hand (and unlike Susan), I do not consider Friday's silences helpless. The moment I accept that his muteness and his disinterest in communicating using the white people's code mark his right to be different from Europeans, I cannot regard his silence as helpless. It is symptomatic that, when Foe tries to teach Friday how to write in an attempt to make him communicate and fill in the blank regarding his past, Friday first reproduces the letter *o*, whose shape reminds us of a zero (which suggests the void) or a hole (which might comprise everything, including silence). The zero and the hole make me think about the shape of Friday's opened mouth, representing a private world. It is the same gaping mouth that is mentioned in the last chapter of Coetzee's novel, which stresses the importance of the transformative multiplicity of representations (Italo Calvino, 1990), highlighting the provisional aspect of Coetzee's writing back of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* from a post-colonial perspective which rejects the patriarchal and colonialist treatment given to women's and natives' memories.

Through the introduction of a contemporary narrator in the last chapter of his self-reflexive novel, Coetzee questions not only the politics of writing, but also the politics of reading (Sue Kossew, 1996). In other words, Coetzee, as a reader of *Robinson Crusoe*, questions the way Friday was portrayed by Defoe and the ways Defoe's readers have accepted that mode of representation. By depicting Friday communicating in his own code by the end of the narrative, saying the unsayable or the unnamed, Coetzee challenges the reader not only to reassess the codes and the underlying ideological meanings that have configured the representation of colonial memories, but also their pragmatic impact throughout time.

**References:**

- Ashcroft, Bill *et.al.*, *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- Ashcroft, Bill *et.al.*, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- Ashcroft, Bill, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1995).
- Calvino, Italo, *Seis Propostas para o Próximo Milénio (Lições Americanas)*, trad. José Colaço Barreiros (Lisboa: Teorema, 1990).
- Coetzee J. M., *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1986).
- Compagnon, Antoine, *La seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979).
- Defoe, Daniel, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1719]).
- Foley, Barbara, *Telling the Truth. The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986).
- Kossew, Sue, *Pen and Power. A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996).
- Parry, Benita, «Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee», G. Huggan & S. Watson (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee* (Hampshire/London: Macmillan, 1996), pp.37-65.