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To Speak or Not to Speak: An Encounter with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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For critics and authors, there has always been a tension between silence and voicing experience. For critics, silence can indicate discrimination; the voices that have been omitted from the canon, for instance. For authors, silence can be a place to appropriate space, and fill a place with unheard voices. But if the silence is purposeful, critics can often find themselves dragging texts into a place where they don't want to be. For authors, appropriating a space can result in attention being drawn to the original space; writing moves to a new space but drags that oppressive, provocative and possibly inspiring space along with it. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847, 1969) is reinforced by Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966, 2000). Without *Jane Eyre*, would *Wide Sargasso Sea* have the same impact? Has *Wide Sargasso Sea* become part of the canon because of its relationship with an already established classic novel? My concern, as both author and critic is: Is it worth becoming part of the canon, which would subsequently strengthen the idea of canon and what it has represented to many unheard voices, for the sake of having the unheard voice heard? What does it mean to speak or to *be*, not *remain*, silent; what are the consequences of voicing experience or *choosing*, rather than being *forced*, to be quiet? My own research is on expressing the female voice through the subversion of genre and I am perplexed and intrigued by what the outcomes of my creative and critical writing may be, but through J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1988), I hope to interrogate the tension between silence and voice and discover why, sometimes, silence is appealing.

Foe, a re-imagining of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719, 2008) and *Roxana* (1724, 1996), is written mainly from the perspective of Susan Barton, who, on a return trip from the New World in an unsuccessful attempt to find her abducted daughter, is cast adrift during a mutiny and finds herself on the island where Cruso and Friday (muted, according to Cruso, by slavers who have cut out his tongue), have been living. They are eventually rescued, although Cruso dies on the trip back to England. Susan, with Friday in tow, then attempts to get her story published by an elusive Mr. Foe, but it becomes clear to her that Foe will have to adapt her story in order to make it publishable. This disturbs her at first, but she then comes to accept it as necessary. The characters of Susan, Cruso, Friday, Foe and even Coetzee (whose narratorial voice makes an appearance at the climax of the novel) each

demonstrate an aspect of the knotted process of voicing experience, and the power struggle which is inherent in any relationship. For Susan, directly after her experiences on the island, the truth of her story is imperative, "I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me...If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it?" (Coetzee 40). But the story she tells isn't solely hers, it is Crusoe's and Friday's as well. Neither of them is able to voice their experience; indeed, Crusoe was unwilling to voice his experience in life, preferring to remain self-contained and elusive. He refuses to make any effort to be rescued from the island, refuses to search the wreck of his ship for tools that may better his situation and has not recorded any of his experiences feeling that, "Nothing is forgotten ... Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering" (Coetzee 17), suggesting that his story is for himself and no-one else. He chooses what to remember and what to forget, no-one else makes this decision for him. But he is also responsible for Friday's story, as the only person aware of Friday's history. Therefore when Susan chooses to accept that her story, written in letters to Foe, will be altered in order to make it more commercial, it is not only her character that will become warped. Crusoe and Friday are affected also. Foe, in turn warps the story even further, especially if we are led to believe that the story becomes what the reader knows are the canonised plots of *Robinson Crusoe* and, to a lesser extent, *Roxana*.

This example begins to demonstrate how the characters within *Foe* are, to an extent, in control of their literary interpretations but also manipulated by the standards of literary production. It is difficult, therefore, to place any of the characters solely into a position of either complete authority or powerlessness. Susan, in particular, is intriguing. A much discussed character in a much discussed novel, she has been described as having "no problem with subjecting people to narrative manipulation; she just wants to be the one doing the manipulating. She wants to narrate the world and ends up as somebody else's [Foe's] character" (Macleod 5). Others have noted that her voice is usurped by Coetzee at the climax of the novel when he, not she, dives into the wreck, "commit[ting] the very act of appropriation he [Coetzee] has sought to expose" (Dodd 161). That, "she has an obscure sense that her experience will remain lacking in reality until it is told as a publicly validated narrative ... but the longer she waits, the more conscious she becomes that to depend for her identity on a process of writing is to cast doubt on that identity" (Attridge 77). Is she a manipulator? A pawn in a patriarchal game of how to write the best story? Would she be real if she wasn't read? I am unconvinced by the arguments relating to her authority or her

powerlessness as it seems acceptable to be both and neither. As an author, I am more concerned with her motivations. Derek Attridge writes:

Every writer who desires to be read ... has to seek admittance to the canon – or, precisely, *a* canon, since any group approval of a text is an instance of canonization ... canons are not monolithic entities but complex, interrelated, and constantly changing systems ... Awareness of this necessity, conscious or not, governs the act of writing quite as much as the need for self-expression or the wish to communicate ... unless we are read, we are nothing. (75 Author's own emphasis)

Susan has a desire for her story to be told because she feels it will cement her identity; her calamity is that in order to be read, she must cease to be author and pass on the role to Foe and Coetzee, putting the truth of her identity in jeopardy. But this is because of the canon she seeks admittance to. It is a privileged canon; one that she understands would reject her as author, but one that she desires admittance into. Admittedly, in the time-frame of the novel she has little choice. The recognition of other canons came about much later, when we learnt that women like Susan were silenced, not absent. But Susan is not willingly silenced. It is my belief that if there was another canon for her to seek admittance to, that would give her similar amounts of respect (and possibly fortune), she would choose it. She *is* in control of the process, as her sexual encounter with Mr Foe demonstrates: "It is always a hard ride when the Muse pays her visits ... She must do whatever lies in her power to father offspring," (Coetzee 140). She becomes both mother and father, preventing anyone else's involvement in her creative birth. But this does not mean she had a choice. She may have created the voice, but she had to quieten herself in the process. The kind of silence she allows to be inflicted upon her is no choice. She has only one option if she wants her story to be told and that is to succumb to Foe and his version of her.

Friday's silence is similarly conflicted, but his silence holds a different kind of power to Susan's. Friday's muteness has different effects on the other characters in *Foe*. Susan is simultaneously disgusted and intrigued by it; Cruso is as unquestioning of it as he is of his situation or of the role he plays as master to Friday's slave. Friday, unable or unwilling to respond verbally to these reactions, communicates instead with his body. On the island, he sprinkles petals and flower buds onto a particular part of the reef, in what Susan speculates is a gesture of remembrance (Coetzee 31). He dances, "holding out his arms and spinning in a circle, his eyes shut" in Foe's robes (Coetzee 92). The meanings of these actions are untranslatable because of his muteness and so are inscrutable. He is the sole possessor of understanding, which gives him a kind of control that he is not afforded in other areas of his

life. Anne Carson notes in her essay “Variations on the Right to Remain Silent”, that during her trial, Joan of Arc responded to a question posed to her with the line: “The light comes in the name of the voice” (2008). Carson feels that this “is a sentence that stops itself. Its components are simple yet it stays foreign, we cannot own it” (2008). Friday’s actions are similar. They are composed of very simple elements, we recognise them as a dance or an offering, and yet we cannot own an understanding of them. Friday does not want to be read, and so can relish certain parts of his identity as untarnished by an author or narrator. This argument can be taken a step further if we are to believe, as Lewis Macleod does, that Friday does actually have a tongue and that he has chosen to be quiet (7). The suppositions for Macleod’s argument are as follows: Cruso is unreliable. He is sick and old and mysterious and the implication is there for the reader not to trust him, casting doubt over the truth of the explanation for Friday’s muteness. When Cruso instructs Friday to open his mouth to show Susan, she comments, “it is too dark to see”, and admits, “when [Cruso] asked me to look, I could not” (Coetzee 22, 85). The subject of the missing tongue isn’t broached again and the possibility of Friday *choosing* to be mute becomes apparent. If Friday has a tongue but chooses not to use it, his mastery over himself is made greater. He is outside of discourse and so is unmisrepresentable. He has chosen to be untranslatable, which is very different to simply being untranslatable.

The control that both Susan and Friday have over their identity is still usurped by Coetzee, the character and narrator who appears in the last section of the novel and who ultimately controls them both. “IV”, the last section of *Foe*, begins as “III” does, but in the present tense. “The staircase was dark and mean” becomes “The staircase is dark and mean”, indicating to the reader a change in narrator and time, but not of place (Coetzee 113, 153). As previously mentioned, Josephine Dodd has commented on this ending as an appropriation of Susan’s voice, Dodd feeling that Coetzee is not following his own example. She also feels that Coetzee, who is, at this point, character, narrator and author, “vampirises” Adrienne Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck”, describing his use of it as a “creative misprision” (Dodd 161-162). But if Coetzee had chosen not to include himself in this fictional representation of literary production, he would have been glossing over a part of the creative act of writing.

My own creative experiences have led me to believe that the author is in charge of her/his characters, even when perhaps they feel they aren’t. The oft-quoted authorial expression, ‘the book/short-story/poem wrote itself’, describing the unconscious ways of creating writing, is a misnomer. I do not want to diminish the strange and powerful ways of

inspiration and creativity, nor do I wish to suggest that characters aren't real for authors; having conversations with one's characters about the plot in which they are involved is not implausible, but this doesn't mean that there is an equality to this relationship. An author can tell her/his characters to, "shut up. Leave me alone. I am doing this" and the characters must obey (Toni Morrison qtd. in Shappell 78). Responsibility to those characters is also inherent in this relationship. Quite obviously, Coetzee only has indirect experience of the female voice or the black African voice, but in his role as author he is responsible for the voices of these silenced people. This is an integral part of the writing process and Coetzee has to include himself in the novel in order to be true to this process, and honest about the power struggles that exist within writing. Therefore every author appropriates their characters' voices. Coetzee is the same as Foe, the grand manipulator, but by recognising this and including it in the fictional realms of his creative production, the reader becomes aware of the author's binds, her/his responsibilities and the fictionality of fiction.

Dodd's idea on the "vampirisation" of Rich's poem by Coetzee also draws attention to another inescapable aspect of the creative process: plagiarism. The author is always present when writing, and so are all of the influences of their personal "idiocanon" (Attridge 75). The texts an author has encountered and desires her/his writing to be a part of, is often considered in the writer's mind during the creative process. Jonathan Lethem's essay "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism" discusses the subconscious re-use of others' works, describing inspiration as "inhaling the memory of an act never experienced" (2007). It is entirely possible that Coetzee was inspired by Rich's poem; there is no doubt that "IV" and "Diving into the Wreck" are similar. Both write of sinking into the sea, exploring a wreck and a face that presides over the exploration. As Lethem suggests, it is possible to imagine that Coetzee once saw this poem and was struck by it, he "inhaled" it. Then months, perhaps years later, he found remnants of it falling unheard from his mind to the page. What seems just as likely is that Coetzee has used it on purpose to reinforce his ideas. Certain lines from "Diving in the Wreck" seem to illuminate the oblique and complex occurrences in "IV" of *Foe*, such as, "I came to explore the wreck./The words are purposes./The words are maps./I came to see the damage that was done" (Rich). This seems to suggest that words, in this case, authored words, are solid and laden with agenda or purpose that direct towards certain signs and symbols. When considered with this particular paragraph at the climax of *Foe*, where Coetzee the character/narrator has dived to the wreck of Crusoe and Friday's ship, the reader is directed towards the implications of the authorial choice of maintaining silence, "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” (Coetzee 157). These lines from Rich and Coetzee, swirling together in this underwater place that expresses itself without words, make a comment on the act of writing through their own writing. They seem to be saying that words are useless things that carry the weight of their own cultures, and when using them to try to translate the experience of someone who is outside of that culture, words cannot do justice. The body says it all instead. Coetzee’s re-use, or plagiarism, of Rich’s words becomes anything but a misprision; instead they reinforce Rich’s poem. The words in *Foe* encourage the reader to look again at “Diving into the Wreck” and reassess what we thought we knew about both texts. This kind of plagiarism or the reconstruction of another’s words doesn’t represent “vandalism”, as Dodd sees it, but “marks of love”, suggesting respect rather than a literary plunder (Letham). And although Rich’s authorial voice is lost in the midst of *Foe*, “Diving into the Wreck” is reinforced through Coetzee’s nod towards it. In the same way *Foe*, in trying to comment on the lost voices in the stories of Daniel Defoe, reinforces *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxanna*, the texts that it is trying to appropriate.

The last stanza of Rich’s poem reads as follows:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

Coetzee’s plagiarising of Rich’s poem has led me to this stanza, which doesn’t appear in “IV” as readily as lines from the other stanzas do; but through his use of it I am led to Rich’s words, and then to thoughts on what it is to be an author; that as authors, we can either accidentally or purposely, “by cowardice or courage”, seek out silences. Whatever the reason may be that we find ourselves in this position, we are there and we have a responsibility to document what we find but to also be aware that we carry our own ideas with us, “a book of myths”, that will undoubtedly influence our interpretation. We can write these silences, re-imagine these silences, but this will simultaneously disrupt and reinforce the silence. And

inevitably, the author is lost; s/he has her/his authority usurped by the readers whose thoughts and ideas replace the author's; "our names do not appear".

As a critic, it seems that silence is only powerful when it is truly chosen. Susan, Crusoe and Friday have no choice about their representation. Each is forced into a particular position because there is little choice left to them. Friday, perhaps, comes closest to retaining his identity because he represents himself through his body. Free from language laden with clichés, stereotypes and layer upon layer of meaning created by cultures, Friday avoids storytelling in the traditional sense. Through this he creates the sensation, the emotion, the physical experience of his situation rather than describing it in words where the experience would be diminished because it has been translated from the language of the body to literal language; it would inevitably lose part of itself during this act of translation.¹ Friday retains mystery and power unlike any of the other characters in *Foe* because of this. But through the attempted translations of Susan, Foe or Coetzee parts of Friday become illuminated. We, the reader, never understand him fully; but perhaps, through the poetry of Rich re-used by Coetzee, or Susan's one-sided conversations, or Foe's attempts to teach Friday to spell, we understand different dimensions of him. The complexity of him is discovered through his relationships with others who are trying to translate him into the language of their own discourses. As an author, the secret power of the untranslatable sentence is alluring, but a sentence that holds meaning only to the author, that no-one else can penetrate or misunderstand, defies the act of communication that authors strive for. Furthermore, if we are to believe that the "author is dead", then readers will inevitably have mastery over these enigmatic words by prescribing meaning themselves (Barthes). "The voice comes in the name of the light", is a sentence that stays foreign to us on a basic level of logical understanding, but on other levels we understand it, it makes us feel something. The last paragraph of *Foe* is similar:

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 (Coetzee 157).

We feel the meaning of this paragraph, understanding it at a deep, indescribable level. It is this silence, which is a silencing of logic, which the author should strive for. It is more powerful than a sentence with only one, indecipherable meaning because it is translated over

and over again by individual readers. The silence deepens as it is read, the mystery remains and its power is not lost through multiple understandings.

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¹ Jacques Derrida's response to the question 'Che Cos'è la poesia' also discusses the idea of translation and its effects through poetry.