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Narrative Art as a Colonizing Process: An Analysis of the Meta-Fictional Objective of J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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An analysis of Coetzee’s novel reveals that the meta-fictional narrative contained in Foe portrays narrative writing as a colonizing act, while the internal narrative it contains depicts colonization as the act of writing or creating an identity for the colonized other (Coetzee, Doubling the Point 247). The progression of the novel is poignantly described by George Packer as quoted in Penner, “Foe reads as if Coetzee started out to reinvent Defoe’s famous tale through a woman’s eyes, became intrigued with the linguistic and philosophical implications, and ended up writing a commentary on the elusiveness of his own project” (129). Coetzee admits in Doubling the Point, “Where I do my liberating, my playing with possibilities, is in my fiction [not in criticism]. To put it in another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel—to work in the kind of novel form—in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas” (246).

One of the ideas that Coetzee “plays with” is that there is no absolute truth in a narrative or in life—only constructed accounts of individual perceptions exist. One of the first places that the reader encounters the notion that Susan is relating only her perceptions occurs when she says, “They say Britain is an island too, a great island. But that is a mere geographer’s notion. The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Crusoe’s island” (Coetzee, Foe 26). Later, she demonstrates an understanding that she is perceived by others, and that these perceptions are more important in society than who she really is: “I laughed when he said this—what kind of woman was I, in truth?” (Coetzee, Foe 42). Susan and Foe relate their unique perceptions of their own first meeting during their banter on pages 138-139, further reinforcing that life is a series of varying views.

This also applies to the narrative. That is, stories are constructions of truth bent to the perceptions and desires of the storyteller. Susan asserts that, “to tell the truth in all its substance…” one must have imagination and mastery of language (Coetzee, Foe 51). Later in the book, she gains a deeper understanding of the role of the storyteller, and this is demonstrated when she tells Foe, “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.” (Coetzee, Foe 121).

Susan realizes that one of the few freedoms she has is the autonomy to tell her own story and that of her castaway companions. She colonizes them as she constructs a story that meets her desires: “All of which makes up a story I do not choose to tell. I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you [Foe], do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire,” (Coetzee, Foe 131). She only maintains this tenable power, however, when she is relating her story to Foe. Once he writes it for the rest of the world, her autonomy is lost.

Coetzee shows that truth does not matter, only the appearance/substance of truth is important in life and in art. One cannot have this substance without a story, and that story can be told only from the position of colonizer. It will contain a construction of the identity of the colonized through the perception of the colonizer. The substance of truth that is necessary for a person to define his own identity must be constructed through a story told from the colonial perspective of that person to a colonized individual. Without a subjective audience, one has nothing to confirm the truth of his/her being. The only substance of truth that can be constructed or told in a narrative is that of the colonizer or subjugator.

All storytellers are colonizers and all subjects of stories are colonized. Coetzee advises the reader that words are tools used in subjecting the other to one’s will or colonizing him/her (Coetzee, Foe 60). Susan attempts to persuade Foe of this point:

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” (Coetzee, Foe 118).

Foe and Barton, by the end of part III, have not succeeded in giving Friday a voice, and given the events in part IV, it seems that they never do.

Cruso also lacks a voice in the story. He becomes a colonized other. Susan asks: “Who but Cruso, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso’s story?” (Coetzee, Foe 51) “Truly,” the answer is no one. Ver-
colonized other, which, once affected by colonization, cause they put us in mind of what we would rather for­be a non-colonial experience in the modem world. Coetzee

To tell the story of another is to not only colonize, but also to kill or arrest change in him/her. Susan 's wish", Susan, as having a soul-, and to do so deconstructs the colonizer's perceptions of his/her role in the world. It does so by forcing the colonizer to realize that his/her role is dependent upon the role of the colonized, a role assigned to him/her by the colonizer and which does not meet his/her desires. Therefore, the story of the colonized must never (can never?) be told to the colonizer if roles are to be maintained. As Durant points out, the history of colonization is "the history of the forgetting of the humanity of certain peoples," (435). The character of Friday speaks to this when talking to Susan about Friday, "[W]e deplore the barbarism of whoever maimed him, yet have we, his later masters, not reason to be secretly grateful? For as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish" (Coetzee, Foe 148).

To destroy the colonizing relationship, the desires of the colonized must be made known to the colonizer. But, as is represented by Friday's missing tongue and subsequent silence, the story/desires of the colonized cannot be told to the colonizer because to do so the colonized must use the language of the colonizer. Therefore, "Friday's story is unavailable, unless it is to be appropriated and misrepresented" (Head 121) to be told by the colonizer. For the colonizer, to tell the story of the colonized inevitably is to create a comfortable truth regarding him/her—not to tell his/her true story. In Susan's perception, Foe attempts to colonize her reality to make it a part of the greater story he will tell the world of her by concocting the young Susan Barton and planting her in his life to "make his fiction come to life and persuade her of its validity" (Penner 120). Here, he attempts to not only write her identity, but her experience in the world in order to suit his desires.

The History of the colonized (as represented by the story of the parentage of the young Susan Barton) is known only through stories told by the colonizer (the father). The colonized can only be known to the world in terms of the identity constructed for him/her by the colonizer. The colonized individual is "unnatural" to the reader/audience (mother), only a writer (father) (Coetzee, Foe 91). Individuals in modern society are constantly being written by the colonizing other. Through Susan's rejection of the mysterious girl claiming to be her daughter, Coetzee articulates the idea that the only believable history is that which imitates art. She writes, "Full of stories of mothers searching for sons and daughters they gave away once long ago. But there are no stories of daughters searching for mothers. There are no stories of such quests because they do not occur. They are not part of life" (Coetzee, Foe 77). Susan uses this as justification for refusing to believe in the young Susan Barton is her daughter. "Thus, to be plausible, life must imitate art," (Penner 121). If this is regarded as reasonable—life imitates stories—and, all true events have stories told about them, then is it not true that nothing has existed unless a story has been told about it? Is story-telling a condition of existence? If lack of evidence, of a story, is evidence of lack of existence, then it may be that Friday does not truly exist or have a past outside himself nor partially outside the minds of Susan and Foe. His story is not told, therefore, he does not exist outside the partial story/identity of him that Susan and Foe maintain through their interactions with him. But if Friday dies, will he cease to have existed? Perhaps he will then be only an idea of a partial existence in the mind of the colonizing others.

The final idea, that to tell a story about a person is to end his/her life or make them static, is dealt with most importantly by Coetzee in the fourth section of the novel when he supplants Susan as the narrator. To tell a story is to colonize, which in itself is an act of objec­tification and classification that takes what is insubstantial in life and freezes it in art and in the mind of the colonizer (Penner 118). Such is the nature of the narrative. To tell one's story is to necessitate his/her death (Penner 127). This is true whether the subject is living or not. Cruso dies one-third of the way into the book, and as such, his story is left to be told by Susan (Coetzee, Foe 45). Paolo Pasolini, in an essay describing why that of Oedipus is a story, articulates the na­ture of this storyteller-subject relationship:

The moment the subject dies, there occurs a lightening synthesis of the span of his life. Thousands of actions, expressions, sounds, voices, words are lost forever, and no more than a few tens or hundreds survive. The enormous number of words of his life are lost in an infi­nite and silent abyss. But some of these words linger on, miraculously; they are inscribed in memory like epigrams. They hang forever in the light of a morning, or in the sweet shadows of an evening: his wife, his friends, when they remember them, shed a tear. The task of the storyteller is to select the relevant words, the ones which by chance survived the disaster. "Thus the necessary condition that makes a story of his life. Death has sanctified a version of what he once was" (Pasolini 6-7)

The storyteller, in selecting details of a subject to include in a story of him/her, creates this "condition" of death in the subject. Cruso is dead in reality, but the other subjects of the colonizing narrative are still alive and yet, are made static by the stories that write their identities. As such, Susan as narrator 'kills every character in the novel, while Coetzee, after Defoe, does the same.

But it is not just the characters whose existences are arrested. It is everything in the world of the narrative as well. As Penner points out, "Until a reality, even a reality embroidered with colorful lies, is fixed in the durable pigments of words, it is protean, shifting, van­ishing [...] Barton's principal concern [the principal concern of the novel?] is the relationship of fiction to life. Revising her earlier insistence...on the primacy of truth in art, she now accepts the truism that "what we can accept in life, we cannot accept in history"" (Penner, 118). To write a story is to create a history, to send things into the past and make them static. Here, they can be objectified, classified, made both mythic and comprehensible. In addition, they must be shaped and distorted until they are acceptable. The only character whose story escapes this end­ing is also the most symbolic character in the novel, Friday. He is subject to Susan's writing of him while they are still alive, a fact of which Susan is well aware: Friday has no command of words and thus can never pronounce [sic] 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 laudryman and he be­comes a laudryman. What is the truth of Fri­day? You respond...he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself...what he is to the world is what I make of him. (Coetzee, Foe 121)

But as for being laid down in Susan's narrative and "living" forever, forever, after a manner his story alone eludes this end (Coetzee, Foe 58). Perhaps the most abstract part of the novel, section four serves to sug­gest that because Friday's muteness protects him from becoming haltingly contained in a narrative, he "lives forever, after a [different] manner." At the end of the novel, three hundred years after the other characters
Suppose, 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? And if we are never saved… would you not wish for a memorial to be left behind, so that the next voyagers to make landfall here… may read and learn about us, and perhaps shed a tear?… with every day that passes, our memories grow less certain… what memories do you even now preserve…? (Coetzee, Foe 17)

At the end of this speech, Susan feels that Cruso is unmoved, and indeed, he does not agree with her logic. He replies, “Nothing is forgotten…nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering.” (Coetzee, Foe 17).

This suggests that writing, as asserted earlier, is not only a colonial act of construction which takes the elusive and changing and forces it into an enclosure which stifles its vital reality, but also, contradictory to Susan’s beliefs, one of allowing to forget. Writing something down makes it constantly accessible whenever one desires to read it. As such, one does not have to labor to remember it or store it in the mind for recall. Rather, one can forget or ignore it at any or every moment one chooses, for it is in no danger of being lost—it is written down. And one can choose when to revisit it, if ever. Michiko Kakutani is quoted in Penner as saying, “the operative forces of Foe are not so much history or politics as art and imagination—how can one individual’s story be apprehended and translated through language by another?” (113). One may conclude from a close reading of Foe that the “apprehension and translation” into narrative art of realities and lives, including (or especially), those colonized lives of pain, such as Friday’s, can be done only at the inevitable risk of distorting them or allowing them to be altogether forsaken. As a child of post-colonial civilization, if one resolves to attempt a process of departure from colonial activity, one must, as Coetzee seems to have realized in the course of his novel, relinquish the right to tell the story of the colonized other.

Notes:

1 The colonized other is one whose subjectivity is "continually located in the gaze of the imperial Other [or colonizer]," (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 170).