realized, and this realization constitutes a bridge to the real that stems from the self-cancelling element of K's story. This is an enactment of that seminal deconstructive procedure in which a binary opposition is reversed and then undermined. The end result of such a procedure is to expose the hegemonic assumptions in a framework of interpretation. The gardening/farming, subsistence/accumulation parallel proceeds so that the oppositions are reversed, and then undermined. The mythic story of Michael K, and the allegory in *Michael K* the novel are both self-cancelling: the novel eludes final interpretation just as much as its central protagonist does. The final effect, however, is not to obscure meaning, but to lay it bare: the reader's interpretive assumptions are questioned as the function of allegory is critically examined, in a highly self-conscious novel that encourages comparable self-consciousness in its readers.

The novel ends with K's imagined return to the farm – not an event in the world of the novel – and the improvised use of a teaspoon to draw water from the damaged well (*MK*, pp. 183–4). This image of minimal existence surpasses all others in the novel, and installs a narrative loop, since the infant K, with his harelip, was fed with a teaspoon (*MK*, p. 3). If K endures, the narrative loop implies, he does so by virtue of his persistent, minimalist philosophy.

This philosophy places stress on K as a figure of Being, an idea that also unsettles the book's series of allusions to deconstruction. Insofar as deconstruction invalidates origins and privileges textuality, it challenges the idea of Being as a state of existence prior to knowledge. K now emerges as the embodiment of the principle of Being, in an apparent deconstruction of the novel's use of deconstruction. With this contradiction comes the temptation of a simpler idea of reference, with the presence of K symbolizing an oppressed people. It was the simple presence of the majority non-white population in South Africa that eventually made the geopolitical control engineered by the architects of apartheid impossible to sustain. There is this political anchor to the book as allegory; but it coexists, in an elusive novel, with the delineation of a form of unfettered textuality.

Foe

The subtle ambivalence of *Michael K* resists a mechanistic reading of the book as a product of a particular historical context even while that context is clearly evoked. This kind of duality has become a hallmark of Coetzee's fiction, particularly evident in the next novel *Foe* (1986) where a similar

gestural bridge to the South African context is built. Once again Coetzee's preoccupation with textuality and the role of the novel is apparent; but there is also a poignant evocation of oppression, which is made to speak simultaneously to the business of literary history and to the problem of how the colonized other is silenced.

Foe is a highly 'literary' work, a postcolonial reworking of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, containing important allusions to other works by Defoe. Its metafictional aspect, together with its literary self-consciousness, made it particularly amenable to contemporaneous academic ideas. Yet this is not a 'difficult' novel requiring specialized knowledge: the narrative remains appealing to a general readership. However, readers are invited to ponder the place of this novel in literary history, and it is Coetzee's choice of *Robinson Crusoe* as his basis that is important here. Not that this is an unusual choice – there have been many re-workings of *Robinson Crusoe* ('Robinsinades', as they are sometimes called) – but Coetzee gives a characteristically self-conscious and ambivalent twist to this dependency. In conventional accounts, Defoe is the father of the English novel, and *Robinson Crusoe* is a canonical English text. It has also been characterized as embodying the great myth of Western imperialism in the way it enthusiastically embraces the idea of 'civilizing' unknown territories and indigenous inhabitants, as a form of heroic endurance. It is this taint of colonialism that serves Coetzee's purpose particularly well, because he is able to observe a pointed historical correspondence: *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719, which is also the era of early Dutch settlement in South Africa, the Dutch East India Company having established a settlement at Cape Town in 1652.

This suggests an association between the origins of the English novel and the origins of colonialism in South Africa, both emanations of European imperialism – one cultural, the other political – with a common ideology of superiority. However, Coetzee is never as simplistic as this. Indeed, as a writer, he is admiring of Defoe's technical accomplishments and innovations, and has suggested that *Foe* is a tribute to eighteenth-century prose style (*DP*, p. 146). The literary allusiveness of the novel, in fact, heralds a complex treatment of the issue of canonicity, within which there is a writing back to Ian Watt, who established Defoe's formative role in the history of the novel in his classic work of criticism, *The Rise of the Novel*. The allusions to Defoe's work raise involved questions about power and textuality through (especially) a series of three prominent intertextual references, embedded within each other, in effect: these are *Robinson Crusoe*, *Roxana* (1724) and the short story or anecdote 'A True Revelation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal' (1706).

It is the reworking of Crusoe that dominates the novel, of course. It is given a startlingly different emphasis by the introduction of Susan Barton as an intermediary to Cruso's story (Coetzee omits the 'e'). She seeks out Foe (as Defoe was originally called) in order to have the island story recorded. The pointed differences between her story and the published *Crusoe* reveal the imaginative premise: Coetzee invites us to speculate on the inspiration for *Crusoe*, and on the omissions and reconstructions evident in the finished novel – and, also, in the notional moment of the inception or 'fathering' of the novel genre.

Defoe's method, as every student of the novel knows, was to conceal artifice and appeal to verisimilitude. In its first edition, the title page of *Crusoe* makes no mention of the author and projects itself as an autobiographical account written by Crusoe himself. Coetzee, by contrast, is much concerned with literary artifice, and by reversing particular details from *Crusoe* he draws our attention to the implausibility of the original. Coetzee's Cruso feels no need for tools, for example, where the original Crusoe makes a number of trips to his wrecked ship to build a vast store of tools, guns, ammunition, canvas, food, razors, knives, and so on. (In Coetzee's novel it is Foe who is preoccupied with guns and tools.)

The differences also reveal Coetzee's Cruso to be a postcolonial figure. If Defoe's Crusoe is the archetypal colonialist, enamoured of the project of taming a new world, Cruso is emblematic of exhausted imperialism. Unlike his literary model, he makes no table or chair, no lamp or candle; he does not keep a journal, or build a boat. Neither does he have any seed to sow; but he does occupy himself with building barren terraces ready for planting.

There is a feminist dimension to *Foe*, as well as a postcolonial one, and these elements come together in the treatment of the two marginalized figures, Susan Barton and Friday, and the question of who controls the story that is told. Susan Barton is a version of the eponymous heroine of *Roxana*, whose first name is also Susan, and this second transtextual borrowing from Defoe complicates things considerably. We are invited to assume that Susan Barton's island story is the inspiration for *Crusoe*, but that the woman is written out and put in another of Defoe's novels instead (even though Foe suggests that the island story must be set within a longer narrative of Susan's experiences (*F*, p. 117)). Such a conceit invites us to think about the differences between the two novels, and to speculate on the patriarchal bent of their author: with the woman edited out, *Crusoe* is clearly a myth of masculine colonial endeavour and endurance, while Susan's challenge to the status quo is focused, in *Roxana*, on the economic and sexual basis of marriage – a challenge that is ultimately contained and condemned.

who inspires, controls, author the story

These invited speculations are one aspect merely of a rich and complex investigation of authorship and authority in *Foe*. In this connection Susan Barton emerges as an ambivalent figure. On the one hand, she is apparently at the mercy of Foe's invention – especially when she is dogged by the appearance of a daughter she does not believe is hers, in an echo of the daughter episode at the end of *Roxana*; on the other hand, however, she reveals affinities with Foe in their tussle for control of the island story. When she reflects that Cruso will be a disappointment to the world, that his tale will not satisfy the requirements of an adventure narrative, she anticipates Foe's determination to embellish the story (*F*, p. 34). The sense of Susan Barton's complicity is heavily qualified; but it is there, nevertheless, in the way in which her longings and desires are bound up with the need to assert control over her story.

When Barton expresses doubts about her identity at the end of the third section, in the form of the kind of ontological uncertainty that is common in postmodernist writing, she elicits from Foe some reflections on substantiality/insubstantiality, as well as his resonant account of how, 'in a life of writing books', he has often 'been lost in the maze of doubting' (*F*, p. 135). Foe's reflection on his 'blindness and incapacity' (*F*, p. 136) is also, of course, an articulation of the doubts and insecurities of the postcolonial writer, here projected back on the entire historical project of the novel in English.

As in most of Coetzee's novels, the problem of allegory, as a mode that is simultaneously evoked and interrogated, is central to *Foe*. The allegorical correspondences are clearest in connection with Friday, whose silence seems to suggest the repression of the black majority in South Africa. Susan Barton's wish to facilitate the telling of Friday's story, by teaching him to write, connotes the dilemma of the South African liberal. If we take the island to be an allegorical representation of modern South Africa, then Barton's summary of life there seems pointedly apolitical. Recognizing that 'all tyrannies and cruelties' were possible on the island, she celebrates the fact that 'we lived in peace with each other' as proof of an underlying human decency: 'our hearts had not betrayed us' (*F*, p. 37). In South Africa in the 1980s, the tyrannies and cruelties that might flow from civil war and social breakdown are averted by repressive state control as much as by a shared ethic of cooperation.

We are made to speculate about whether or not Friday has been castrated as well as having had his tongue cut out. As such details and speculations mount, he acquires a kind of mythic status that overloads any simple set of allegorical correspondences. The mutilated Friday is a figure of colonial oppression; but his scars begin to lend him an invulnerable authority, as the

signs of historical oppression that constitute a story that is his own. And this speculation about Friday's story, which is at the heart of the novel, makes discourse the focus. Friday's silence is a form of resistance to the discourse that defines him; yet it is also a product of the world established in that dominant discourse. In a literary-historical sense, this lends the book an irreducible paradox. *Foe* depends upon *Robinson Crusoe* (and the tradition of novel writing that flows from it, in standard accounts); yet this defining Western literary myth is also exposed as bankrupt or exhausted by virtue of the gender and ethnic silences it reinforces. Yet 'speaking for' is no solution, and this is the apparent double bind that *Foe* insists upon: Friday must remain silent, his story untold, unless it is to be appropriated by the novelist tarnished with the brush of cultural imperialism. Coetzee here shows a greater sensitivity to the problem of appropriating the story of another than he had done in his previous novels.

Yet in the creation of Friday, Coetzee seeks to gesture beyond the double bind. In the scene where he draws upon the slate 'row upon row of eyes upon feet', these 'walking eyes' evoke images of slaves being forced to journey to places of enslavement; but they also suggest a sense of bearing witness, of a history of oppression that is not forgotten (*F*, p. 147). This sense of an alternative history waiting to be unleashed is the central idea of the novel's final section, where a new narrating persona – perhaps representing Coetzee – supplants Susan Barton. The crucial moment is when this new narrator 'dives' into the wreck to try and find a way of releasing Friday's story. Earlier, the problem of 'mak[ing] Friday speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday' is configured as the answer to the question 'who will dive into the wreck?' Barton says: 'On the island I told Cruso it should be Friday . . . But if Friday cannot tell us what he sees, is Friday in my story any more than a figuring (or prefiguring) of another diver?' (*F*, p. 142). This condenses the problem of who is qualified to make known the revised history of the postcolonial world, and alerts us to the fact that the author/narrator of the novel's final section is not the ideal candidate: Friday would be the genuine submarine archaeologist for this process of revisionism.

the alternative history waiting to be written by the post-colonial writer

The narrator of the final section has two attempts to make Friday speak, and it is the second such episode that carries the weightiest implications. In a bold metafictional gesture, the narrator comes upon the manuscript of Susan Barton's island experiences in Foe's chamber, and then slips 'overboard' into her text, and into the water above the shipwreck. He dives down to a wrecked ship, and finds the only signs of life coming from Friday. In the way that Coetzee attaches a paradoxically positive association to the scarred body in earlier works, especially *Waiting for the Barbarians*, we read here that 'this

is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday'. The ship in which Friday is found seems to be a composite, having elements of the various ships in the novel, and it thus becomes a symbolic distillation of the separate vehicles of imperial adventure, and so appropriately Friday's 'home', the site where the mutilated and chained body reveals the scars of colonial history as the text of its own story. The 'voicing' of Friday's silence in the extraordinary gesture at the end of the novel implies this historical necessity. The release of this 'unending' history, which 'runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth', gestures towards a postcolonial future, but without actually articulating that history (*F*, p. 157).

Age of Iron

The extraordinary ending of *Foe* indicates a desire to cede authority to the oppressed other, and this gesture is one of a sequence of situations in Coetzee's works in which power and authority are relinquished. This is the central organizing idea of the next novel, *Age of Iron* (1990) in which the elderly Mrs Curren, a retired Classics lecturer, suffering from terminal bone cancer, undergoes a kind of personal dissolution which is also a form of qualified political enlightenment. Coetzee thus inverts the usual form of the novel of personal development to make Mrs Curren's 'progress' dependent upon her acceptance of her own unimportance as she approaches death.

On the day Mrs Curren's illness is diagnosed, she is 'adopted' by Vercueil, the alcoholic vagabond who becomes a kind of angel of death to her, though this allegorical idea, predictably, is held up for our critical scrutiny. The novel takes the form of a letter, written by Mrs Curren to her émigré daughter now based in North America. The unreliable Vercueil takes responsibility for posting the letter, which seems unlikely to the reader, making Mrs Curren's confessional narrative appear to be for herself only. To the extent that Vercueil is her confessor, as her companion, he fulfils this role only because he can give her no gift of redemption; and, in another inversion of convention, Coetzee implies that this is what makes Mrs Curren's con-