

significance, ranging from allegories of actual history (where a novel is read as if it were about real people, places, and events) to universal allegories (where the novel is read as if it were about abstractions). But I am for reading as an event, for restraining the urge to leave the text, or rather the experience of the text, behind (an urge that becomes especially powerful when we have to produce words about it), for opening oneself to the text's forays beyond the doxa. If Coetzee's novels and memoirs exemplify anything, it is the value (but also the risk) of openness to the moment and to the future, of the perhaps and the wherever. Allegory, one might say, deals with the *already known*, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response.

Notice, however, that I am not saying that in order to understand a work as allegory, we have first to experience it as literary, as if allegorical reading were a secondary mode entirely dependent on the primary, literal, mode. This claim is often made about literary allegory in an attempt to save it for literature, but cultural history shows that it's perfectly possible to apprehend allegorical meanings without paying any attention to the aesthetic subtlety or emotional force of a work of art. Reading allegory as such is a quite different activity from reading literature, even though both can be appropriate for a single work.

In presenting this argument, I take my lead from Coetzee's writing: not only from the rewards to be gained from reading his work in this way, but from the experiences of allegorizing that it invites us to participate in but also to judge—whether it be the mythography of Eugene Dawn, the interpretations sought by the Magistrate and the medical officer, the grand allegory of apartheid whose effects are depicted so bleakly in *Age of Iron*, or the accountability demanded by the university authorities in *Disgrace*. Coetzee ended his inaugural lecture as a professor at the University of Cape Town by asking by what privilege criticism claims to tell the truth of literature, the truth which literature cannot tell itself. Perhaps literary criticism, he suggested, cannot afford to say "why it wants the literary text to stand there in all its ignorance, side by side with the radiant truth of the text supplied by criticism, without the latter supplanting the former."<sup>44</sup> His novels demand, and deserve, responses that do not claim to tell their truths, but ones that participate in their inventive openings.

44. "Truth in Autobiography," 6.

## The Silence of the Canon

Foe

: I :

In the last corner, under the transoms, half buried in sand, his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs, I come to Friday.

I tug his woolly hair, finger the chain about his throat. "Friday," I say, I try to say, kneeling over him, sinking hands and knees into the ooze, "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 fingernail 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. (157)

The final paragraphs of *Foe* achieve their power in large measure as a result of their relation to what has gone before, though even out of context



they convey something of the resonating quality of Coetzee's distinctive style in this novel. Precise, vividly physical, but seldom contained within the conventions of realistic description as developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this style achieves its distinctive effects partly by means of the half-heard echoing of the literary tradition it thereby claims association with. Here, for example, the first two scenes of *The Tempest*, with their memorable blending of loss and salvation, though never quite quoted, shimmer through the writing. The passage contains a number of words that occur, some of them several times, in these two Shakespearean scenes, all of them in speeches having to do with shipwreck: "sink," "ooze," "ship," "water," "cabin," "wreck," "washing," "shore," "island," "earth." But the allusiveness remains uncertain because these *are* single words. How can a single word be a quotation? One or two longer verbal fragments from these scenes may drift into the back of the reader's mind as well: "What, must our mouths be cold?" "Would thou mightst lie drowning / The washing of ten tides!" "Tis beating in my mind," "Full fathom five thy father lies, / Of his bones are coral made."<sup>1</sup> Echoes other than Shakespearean ones play about the passage too, such as the Book of Common Prayer's version of Psalm 45, which also concerns fears of shipwreck and the hope of safety: "Thou that art the hope of all the ends of the earth, and of them that remain in the broad sea." That note of hope will also be evoked for any reader who recalls the "gentle breeze" which, in the opening of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, "beats against my cheek / And seems half-conscious of the joy it gives."

There is also in this closing passage a continuation of the delicate play between a contemporary and an earlier literary style that characterizes all of *Foe*. An older rhetorical mode can be heard in the rhythmic and syntactic repetitions, many of them involving a successive phrasal lengthening—"I say, I try to say"; "without breath, without interruption"; "through the cabin, through the wreck"; "it flows . . . ; it passes . . . ; . . . it runs"; "against my eyelids, against the skin of my face"—and in the slight archaisms, like the prepositions "about" and "upon." The five qualifying phrases

with which the passage begins—before the main clause of the sentence is reached—are also part of this highly deliberate and carefully paced rhetoric. But it is only when the passage is read as the conclusion of the novel that the force of this image and of these stylistic nuances can be fully felt; the narrator of the closing section (what name do we use?—Susan Barton, Daniel Foe, Daniel Defoe, J. M. Coetzee, our own?) has made the last of many attempts to get Friday to speak, and the hauntingly allusive description of the soundless stream issuing from his body is a culmination of the book's concern with the powerful silence which is the price of our cultural achievements.

I begin at the end because what I wish to do is to read back, back from this representation of a speechless speech endlessly covering the world to the ways in which Coetzee's words—and silences—are and are not heard by the institutions of our literary culture. The question I wish to address is that of access to the canon: what does it mean for novels like Coetzee's to claim canonic status, or for critics to make such a claim on their behalf? (That the phrase "novels like Coetzee's" is problematic is indicative of one dimension of the question itself.) What does it mean, culturally and politically, for this claim to succeed or fail?

If we characterize canonization in a fairly straightforward way, as widespread recognition within the institutions of publication and education that a body of texts by a single author constitutes an "important," "serious," "lasting" contribution to "literature" (a characterization I shall considerably complicate in due course), there can be no doubt that Coetzee has been canonized. His eight novels and two memoirs are widely available in prestigious paperback editions, and among them they have won numerous literary awards. He was the first writer to win the Booker Prize twice (for *Michael K* and for *Disgrace*), and he was more and more frequently mentioned as a possible Nobel Prize winner until 2003, when he finally received the award. The present study is the eighth book to appear on his work (a number of others are in the offing), and there have been several special issues of journals on his novels.<sup>2</sup> Critical articles and

1. One could extend the verbal similarities to other parts of these two scenes, such as Miranda's reference to the "words" which Caliban has learned, Ariel's promise to obey Prospero "to th' syllable," or even—by implication—Prospero's phrase "the fringed curtains of thine eye"; but this would probably be more a product of conscious critical labor than an intertextual effect to which readers may respond without even being aware of it. As will emerge in the course of this chapter, *The Tempest's* status as one of the founding literary texts of English colonialist attitudes is also highly relevant to Coetzee's novel.

2. Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee* (1988); Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind* (1989); Marijane de Jong, ed., "J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*," special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies* (1989); Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa* (1991); David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee* (1993); Michael Moses, ed., "The Writings of J. M. Coetzee," special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1994); Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, eds., *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee* (1996); Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (1997); Sue Kossew, ed., *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee* (1998); André Viola, *J. M. Coetzee* (1999); Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald, eds., "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," special issue of *Interventions*



parts of books on his fiction abound, and his novels appear regularly on high school, college, and university syllabi. There is no sign that the critical flood will abate any time soon.

In South Africa itself, where Coetzee lived until 2002, the standing of the novels during the apartheid era was affected by the degree to which they were perceived as hostile to the policies and practices of apartheid—and by the significance of this perception to different groups within the country. On the one hand they were subject to official scrutiny and delays, and ignored by the state-controlled media, but were not, like some more obviously antigovernment works, banned;<sup>3</sup> on the other hand they were championed by some of those opposed to government policies, but attacked by others for failing to engage directly in the political struggle. Since the advent of democratic rule in South Africa, negative reactions to Coetzee's work have been less in evidence (although *Disgrace* did provoke a flurry of disquiet).<sup>4</sup> I shall return later to this complex array of responses.

What is it about these novels that has propelled them so rapidly into the English literary canon? The answers to this question are no doubt many and diverse; since canonization depends on the convergence of a multitude of separate decisions and actions, it is bound to be overdetermined. But one answer we have already glimpsed would be that through their allusiveness the novels offer themselves not as challenges to the canon, but as canonic—as already canonized, one might say. They appear to locate themselves within an established literary culture, rather than presenting themselves as an assault on that culture. Moreover, that literary culture is predominantly European, and clearly “high.” Sometimes the allusions are more overt than those in the last paragraph of *Foe*, and run the risk

(2002); Symposium on *Disgrace* in *scrutiny2* (2002). Viola mentions two French special issues on Coetzee of the journals *Commonwealth* (Dijon, 1992) and *Les Cahiers FORELL* (Poitiers, 1994). Forthcoming volumes include studies by Kai Easton and Kim Worthington and a collection of essays edited by Jane Poyner.

3. In a 1985 interview with Claude Waughier in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Coetzee comments on the fact that *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Michael K* were not subject to the banning which the works of black writers in particular suffered, but were held up by customs delays. He goes on to observe that there are more subtle modes of pressure, such as the total overlooking by South African radio and television of writers hostile to apartheid. In two revealing articles, Peter D. McDonald has examined the newly available censors' reports on Coetzee's novels; see “Not Undesirable” and “The Writer, the Critic, and the Censor.”

4. See David Attwell, “Race in *Disgrace*” and McDonald, “*Disgrace* Effects” for discussions of the repercussions of the novel in South Africa.

of appearing as intrusive attempts to claim membership of the existing tradition.

I have mentioned Jacobus Coetzee's citation of Blake, and discussed the way the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country* weaves into her text the words of canonic writers, and hears, or believes she hears, fragments of the Western cultural encyclopedia descending to her from passing aircraft. *Waiting for the Barbarians* takes its title, and one aspect of its sociopolitical dynamic, from a poem by Cavafy,<sup>5</sup> and alludes as well to Beckett's best-known play; while the name of the central character in *Life & Times of Michael K*, often referred to just as “K,” cannot, as we noted in chapter 2, fail to recall Kafka. However, it was in *Foe* that Coetzee made canonic intertextuality a fundamental principle: its manner of proceeding is to rewrite, and fuse together, the biography of Daniel Defoe and those of several of Defoe's fictional characters. The perpetuation of any canon is dependent in part on the references made to its earlier members by its later members (or would-be members); and in this respect Coetzee's novels could be said to presuppose and to reproduce the canonic status of their predecessors while claiming to join them.<sup>6</sup>

It might be argued that a further claim to belong to an existing canonic tradition is exerted by the *style* of Coetzee's novels; as the closing passage of *Foe* also demonstrates, the deliberate, chiseled prose has little to do with the exorbitance or casualness (however studied) by which texts we might characterize as “postmodern” frequently affront the traditional valorization of literary form. If Joyce is one of Coetzee's stylistic forbears, it is the Joyce who created the “scrupulous meanness” of *Dubliners*; more obvious are the stylistic affinities with Beckett, especially the meticulous prose, the present tense, the isolated figures, of the Trilogy. Here, for instance, is a sentence from *In the Heart of the Country* that, apart from its South African references, could easily have come from one of Beckett's first-person prose narratives: “I would have no qualm, I am sure, if it came to the pinch, though how it could come to this pinch I do not know, about living in a mud hut, or indeed under a lean-to of branches, out in the veld, eating chickenfeed, talking to the insects” (6).

5. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, 30–33.

6. In the later novels, some motivation for the allusive style is provided by the occupations of the central characters whose thoughts are being reflected—teachers of literature (Mrs. Curran in *Age of Iron*, David Lurie in *Disgrace*) and a writer of canonical literary works (Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*). This shift is in keeping with the greater reliance on realist techniques in these novels.



Coetzee's is writing which invites the reader to savor it, sentence by sentence, word by word, for its economy and efficiency; and although the style of each novel has its own unmistakable character, the reader receives the consistent impression in all of them that words have been chosen with extraordinary care. In fact, as with the use of allusions and citations, the very deliberateness of this highly literary language may for some tastes smack too obviously of canonic pretensions.

Also interpretable as consistent with the traditional humanist concerns of the canon is the novels' *thematic* focus: for instance, they return again and again to the solitary individual in a hostile human and physical environment to raise crucial questions about the foundations of civilization and humanity. The American military propagandist pushed into madness and the hunter-explorer clinging to life in the inhospitable interior; the self-tormenting farmer's daughter alone with her father's corpse on the isolated farm; the well-meaning state official enduring himself the barbarism on which his "civilization" depends; the nomadic victim of a violent society surviving on the margins of death; the elderly, dying woman driven out of her house by the thugs of the apartheid state; the debt-ridden writer driven to the limits of sanity by personal and political demands; the disgraced academic devoting his life to the putting down and burning of dogs: these figures may appear as so many versions of Lear's experience on the heath, one poor, bare, forked animal after another. Or one might emphasize, as I did in chapter 1, the repeated motif of masters (or mistresses) and servants—also important in *King Lear*, of course, and, in its yoking of a moral discourse of human bonds and rights with an actual relationship that combines economic exploitation and personal intimacy, a recurrent source of tension in the bourgeois conscience and the novels which represent it. Once again, it is *Foe* which foregrounds this relation to the tradition: not only is *The Tempest*, with its questioning of the place and obligations of the human in the nonhuman or partly human world, present in the background (Caliban is clearly one of the ancestors of Friday), but the novel of which *Foe* is a rewriting, *Robinson Crusoe*, is probably Western culture's most potent crystallization of its concern with the survival of the individual, the fundamentals of civilized life, and the dialectic of master and servant.

This account of the canonic claim made by the novels themselves, and by *Foe* in particular, needs to be complemented by factors external to the writing which also bear on the question of canonization. As a white male (like Daniel Defoe), Coetzee has a degree of privileged access to most canons, and as a South African, especially one who chose during the apartheid years to remain in South Africa, he possesses a certain

mystique: that country, for all its geographical marginality to the canonization processes of Western culture, has a notorious centrality in the contemporary political and ethical imagination that gives its writers a special claim on the world's attention. There is, of course, another side to this advantage. It brings with it the danger that writing emanating from South Africa will be read *only* as a reflection of or a resistance to a particular political situation,<sup>7</sup> whereas the high literary canon, in its most traditional form, is premised upon an assumption of universal moral and aesthetic values. But Coetzee's works seem expressly designed to escape that danger: of his eight novels, only four-and-a-half are set in South Africa, and in all but two of these cases it is a South Africa distanced, by temporal or geographical displacement, from the one we read about in the newspapers. An apologist for the traditional canon might argue that Coetzee's novels are not about the South African situation *per se*, which would render them contingent and propagandist, but about the permanent human truths exemplified in that situation.<sup>8</sup>

Within South Africa, however, this deparicularization has often rendered Coetzee subject to the argument that he has abused his privileges as a member of the white elite in addressing not the immediate needs of his time but a mystified human totality. If the account I have given of his work's amenability to canonization is accurate and complete, this critique must stand as valid. The unproblematic notion of a canon is complicit with a mode of literature—and of criticism—which dehistoricizes and dematerializes the acts of writing and reading while promoting a myth of transcendent human truths and values. By the same token, however, a mode of fiction which exposed the ideological basis of canonization, which drew attention to its own relation to the existing canon, which thematized the role of race, class, and gender in the processes of cultural acceptance and exclusion, and which, while speaking from a marginal

7. Asked during an interview by Tony Morphet, apropos of *Michael K*, "Did you conceive of the novel as in any way a task presented to you by history—the history of South Africa specifically?" Coetzee replied: "Perhaps that is my fate. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a 'South African novelist'." ("Two Interviews," 460). An interesting light is shone on this question in *Elizabeth Costello*, when the Australian novelist is asked her opinion about the extermination of the Tasmanian aborigines, and she answers that she writes only in response to the voices who summon her—whether these be of the murdered and violated or their murderers and violators (202–4).

8. As I noted in chapter 2, the appeal to allegory has frequently been used to universalize the themes of the novels.



location, addressed the question of marginality—such a mode of fiction would have to be seen as participating in the struggle to achieve a voice for those who have been silenced, even if it did so by literary means that have traditionally been celebrated as characterizing canonic art. A more careful reading of Coetzee's novels, I would argue, shows just these qualities.

## : II :

*Foe* came as something of a disappointment to many readers and reviewers.<sup>9</sup> Coetzee's previous novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, allowed itself to be read as, to quote the Penguin paperback's blurb, a "life-affirming novel" that "goes to the center of human experience," seeming to confirm those elements in *Waiting for the Barbarians* which could be taken as expressions of a spiritual and moral truth beyond politics or culturally determined structures of signification. Moreover, *Michael K* satisfied those who wanted Coetzee to deal more directly with the struggle against racist oppression in South Africa, while avoiding the adoption of a narrowly based political position.<sup>10</sup> But *Foe* is not only temporally and geographically further removed from the South Africa of its time of writing than its predecessor; it has no character whose interior life is depicted in such a way as to evoke the reader's moral sympathy (as the Magistrate's and K's do in the previous novels), and it seems to lack evidence of what one reviewer called, in discussing *Michael K*, Coetzee's "tender and unwavering faith in the individual."<sup>11</sup>

Instead of taking *Foe* as a swerve away from a clear and established mode of fiction and set of values, however, it is worth asking whether it

9. Thus George Parker asserted in *The Nation* that *Foe* was a "wrong, if interesting step" in a novel-writing career concerned with "the fate of conscience in the face of its own oppressive power," while Nina Auerbach, writing in *The New Republic*, complained that the new novel "never quite comes to life." In South Africa, the hostility was, if anything, more marked: Neil Darke of the *Argus* (Cape Town) found the novel "often pointless, incomprehensible and tiresome," and one G. H., in the *Natal Mercury*, called it "a literary indulgence likely to prove too oblique for any but the converted to contend with, and to estrange even some of these."

10. The role of South African politics in the novel is far from simple: as we have seen, the opposing forces in the war are never identified, and there are no overt mentions of racial conflict.

11. Alan Ryan, in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, cited on the jacket of the 1987 Viking Edition of *Foe*.

can provide a perspective from which to reexamine Coetzee's novels and their pertinence to the canon and to contemporary political and cultural life. We may do this by returning to the three qualities of Coetzee's writing that I mentioned earlier, and by scrutinizing more carefully the argument that they constitute a straightforward, if dangerously self-conscious, claim to canonic status.

Although the overt intertextuality in Coetzee's novels can, as I have suggested, be read as an implicit claim to a place in the established canon, it is also possible to regard it as drawing attention to the way the text, like any text, is *manufactured* from the resources of a particular culture in order to gain acceptance within that culture, an operation that canonic works, and those who uphold the canon as an unproblematic reflection of inherent values, cannot fully acknowledge. (The most powerful upholders of the canon are, of course, those who do not acknowledge such a concept at all.) In *Foe* this process becomes inescapably evident, as the larger part of the novel consists of a memoir and several letters written by the newly returned castaway Susan Barton to the well-known author Daniel Foe, quotation marks before each of her paragraphs reminding us constantly that this is not the mysterious immaterial language most fiction uses as its medium, nor even a representation of speech, but a representation *in* writing of writing. And it is presented not as a simple day-to-day record of experience, as in a novel of letters or diary-entries, but for the explicit purpose of proffering a narrative—the story of Barton's year on an island with another, earlier, castaway named Robinson Crusoe—for insertion into the canon of published English texts.

When, toward the end of the novel, the quotation marks disappear, the reader is forced to ask questions which fiction seldom invites: on what occasion and by what means are *these* words now being produced, and to what audience are they being directed? Moreover, the intertextuality of *Foe* works to unsettle any simple relation between historical report and fictional invention. The Cruso we encounter in this novel appears as the historical original of the fictional Crusoe we already know from our access to the canon,<sup>12</sup> yet even within the novel he is part of Susan Barton's narrative, which is clearly to some extent—but how much, and

12. The spelling "Cruso" is that used by the Norwich family in the hosiery business which was Defoe's most likely source for his hero's name (see Bastian, *Defoe's Early Life*, 90). Alexander Selkirk—the acknowledged model for *Robinson Crusoe*—has no place in Coetzee's narrative, though Barton does speculate on Foe's possession of "a multitude of castaway narratives, most of them, I would guess, riddled with lies" (50).



how deliberately?—a work of fiction on her part. At the same time, Barton herself is troubled by the repeated appearance of a girl claiming to be her daughter, whose reality, within the fictional world, is thrown into question by the reader's awareness that her story, and that of her maid Amy who often accompanies her, is told in another of Defoe's novels, *Roxana*.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, the quotations in *In the Heart of the Country* and the name "Michael K" seem less like somewhat intrusive claims to belong to a tradition of great writing than determined reminders—working against the skillfully contrived immediacy of the narrators' thoughts—that all cultural work is a reworking, that all representations achieve vividness by exploiting culturally specific conventions and contexts.

Turning to the second claim to canonicity proposed above, Coetzee's chiseled style can be seen not as a bid for admission to the pantheon of great writers but as drawing attention to itself in a way that undermines the illusion of pure expression; the slight self-consciousness of its shaped sentences—what one critic has aptly described as "that style forever on its guard against itself"<sup>14</sup>—goes hand-in-hand with the intertextual aliveness to reinforce the awareness that all representation is mediated through the discourses that culture provides. Certainly by the time we reach *Foe* in a traversal of Coetzee's oeuvre it is no longer possible to regard this quality of the writing as an inadvertent one, an inability to achieve total unselfconscious limpidity. Whereas in the earlier novels a reader might decide that the echoes of Beckett's style are an excusable failure to evade a powerful precursor rather than a calculated effect, the tinges of eighteenth-century diction that characterize the language of *Foe* cannot be anything other than a distancing device rendering us conscious of the artifact we have before us—a device which, remarkably, does not diminish the writing's capacity to produce for the reader a powerful experience of reality. Reading is usually a more complex process than we allow for in our theories of it, and one of the pleasures of reading Coetzee is realizing this—and realizing that this realization need not spoil our more traditional literary pleasures. (The alternative versions of Klaver's death in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" and of Magda's rape in *In the Heart of the Country* discussed in chapter 1 may seem guaranteed

13. The hero of Defoe's *Colonel Jack* also makes an appearance in Coetzee's novel as the young pickpocket employed by Foe. Clearly, "the reader" alluded to here is one well versed in Defoe's fiction: Coetzee exploits the canon's lack of definite boundaries by using allusions that range from the familiar to the scholarly. The novel does not depend upon the recognition of all its allusions by a single reader, however.

14. Peter Strauss, "Coetzee's Idylls," 128.

to shatter any sense of immediacy in the first-person accounts that they claim to be; yet many readers have testified that there is no loss of the traditional power of storytelling in these works.)

Lastly, with regard to the thematic concerns of Coetzee's fictions, one finds that whatever accommodation was possible between the earlier novels and the humanist tradition, the isolated individuals in *Foe* function—as I hope to demonstrate—not as representatives of the motif of naked humanity granted universal insight on the stormy heath, but as compelling subversions of this motif. They demonstrate that what we call "insights" are produced and conveyed by the narrativizing agencies of culture; experience in itself is insufficient to gain credit as knowledge or truth. Even if the transmutation of experience into knowledge occurs in the privacy of the individual consciousness, it does so by virtue of internalized cultural norms, of which each of us is a repository; but without external validation, such "knowledge" must remain uncertain and insubstantial.

### : III :

Every writer who desires to be read (and that is perhaps part of what it means to write) has to seek admittance to the canon—or, more precisely, a canon, since any group approval of a text is an instance of canonization. Like languages, canons are not monolithic entities but complex, interrelated, and constantly changing systems which can be subdivided all the way down to individual preferences (idocanons, we might call them). 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. What *Foe* suggests is that the same imperative drives our self-presentations and representations; unless we are read, we are nothing. And taking together the features of this and Coetzee's other novels that I have discussed, it would seem that it is not possible to separate the processes of canonization that operate within the domain of high, or for that matter popular, culture from the very similar processes that operate in our everyday experience; constructing and sustaining an identity, making sense of one's own past, establishing an intelligible relationship with one's fellows, are all in part a matter of telling one's story (the story of who one is, was, and aspires to be) in such a way as to have it accepted and valorized within the body of recognized narratives—with their conventions of plot, character, symbolization, moralization, etc.—that are part of the cultural fabric, and therefore part of our individual systems of judgment and interpretation.



Acceptance into the canon is not merely a matter of success in the marketplace: it confers *value*, although the value it confers is necessarily understood as not conferred and contingent but inherent and permanent. What is unusual about *Foe* is the way that it simultaneously seeks admittance to the literary canon on these terms *and* draws attention to the canon's cultural and historical contingency, just as Barton, in seeking cultural acceptance for her story and through it an assertion of her unique subjectivity, shows an increasing awareness of the double bind which this implies.

If we extend the meaning of "canonization" to include these wider processes of legitimization, it might be said that the novel dramatizes the procedures and problems of canonization four times over. Cruso, who shows none of the practical ingenuity or the spiritual intensity we expect from the figure of bourgeois resourcefulness we are familiar with, has, by his isolation from culture, lost touch with its founding narratives and need for narrative: not only has he rescued very little from the wreck and made only minimal attempts to improve the quality of his life, he has kept no journal (he doesn't even mark the days on a notched stick as they pass) and has no desire to leave the island. He spends most of his time leveling the island's hill into terraces—a parodic version of the canonic castaway's taming of nature, since he has nothing with which to plant them. Most interesting for my present argument is that he appears to have lost any firm sense of the distinction between truth and fiction. Barton writes to Foe (I keep the quotation marks, since they play an important part in our experience of the text):

"I would gladly now recount to you the history of this singular Cruso, as I heard it from his own lips. But the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy." (11-12)

To her exhortation to Cruso to write a narrative of his experiences he makes two replies: "Nothing is forgotten" and "Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering" (17).

Barton herself, by contrast, feels that she lacks substance as an individual until the story of her year on the island with Cruso (who dies on the return journey) is written as a legitimated narrative, yet is barred from the domain of authorship by her gender, her social status, her economic dependence, and her unfamiliarity with the requirements of the canon of published narratives. It is not merely that publication of her story will

bring fame and money; she has an obscure sense that her experience will remain lacking in reality until it is told as a publicly validated narrative:

"Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth (I see that clearly, we need not pretend it is otherwise). To tell the truth in all its substance you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through; and then the knack of seeing waves when there are fields before your eyes, and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades. I have none of these, while you have all." (51-52)

When Foe goes into hiding from his creditors, she waits for his return, reminding him that her life is "drearily suspended till your writing is done" (63), and later takes up residence in his empty house. 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: "In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me" (133). (One curious, but relevant, effect of Coetzee's strategy is that, for all the vivid first-person writing, Susan Barton does have an aura of insubstantiality, precisely because of the canonic success and consequent power of Defoe's novel.)

Our third dramatization of the processes of canonization occurs with Foe, the professional author, who makes little progress with Barton's story of her experiences on the island; he thinks of including it as one episode in the longer story of a woman in search of her daughter, or spicing it with additional material about cannibals and battles. She insists that he should concentrate exclusively on the story of the island, although she becomes increasingly aware of its unsuitability for the established canon:

"I am growing to understand why you wanted Cruso to have a musket and be besieged by cannibals. I thought it was a sign you had no regard for the truth. I forgot you are a writer who knows above all how many words can be sucked from a cannibal feast, how few from a woman cowering from the wind. It is all a matter of words and the number of words, is it not?" (94)

To assess how much rewriting Barton's story of the island requires in order to render it fit for the developing bourgeois canon of the early eighteenth century we need only turn from Coetzee's novel to the novel



published in 1719 as *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, the more aristocratic name adopted by plain Daniel Foe in 1695 as part of his campaign to be admitted to the British canon.<sup>15</sup> One of the striking absences from Defoe's highly successful novel, of course, is that of any female voice: the gender requirements of acceptable narrative forms allow for women heroines in certain roles (the entrepreneur in larceny and marriage exemplified by *Moll Flanders*, for instance), but these appear not to include stories of the mastering of natural forces and the colonizing of primitive cultures.<sup>16</sup> Within Coetzee's novel, Foe's decision to exclude Susan Barton from his published narrative altogether is not represented; but we do witness how the professional author is much more attracted to Barton's own story before and after the period on the island, involving her lost daughter, and, we are encouraged to suspect from several hints thrown out, the colorful life of a courtesan. In other words, Susan Barton's story—the one she does not want told—becomes Defoe's novel *Roxana*.<sup>17</sup>

15. The events of *Foe* are not securely located at an identifiable moment in Defoe's life. It is likely that he went into hiding from his creditors for a period in 1692, but Susan Barton has read *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal* (written, she says, "long ago" [134]), Defoe's vivid report of the appearance of a ghost to a Canterbury woman in September 1705, which he published soon after the event. He was still trying to satisfy his creditors in 1706, and when he left for Scotland on a secret mission for Harley's ministry in that year he allowed a story to circulate that he was fleeing because of debts (see John Robert Moore, *Daniel Defoe*, 97). However, *Robinson Crusoe* (his first substantial work of fiction, received by many as a factual report) was not published until 1719. Moreover, in imagining the papers which lie in Foe's chest, Barton describes materials on which a number of Defoe's works after *Robinson Crusoe* were based (50), and she mentions on more than one occasion the tales of thieves, courtesans, and grenadiers he has worked on, characters in his flourishing career as a writer of fiction. Another inconsistency is that Defoe's wife outlived him, whereas Foe is said to be widowed (62). One effect of this chronological uncertainty, germane to the novel's concerns, is that it remains unclear whether Foe's reputation is as a reporter of fact or, as was the case only later in Defoe's career, a creator of fiction.

16. I do not mean to suggest that the properties of texts accepted by the canon are wholly determined in advance. Defoe is a good example of a writer whose work, while it clearly answered to a growing need arising from changing economic and social conditions, played its own part, once it was admitted, in transforming the literary canon. Some degree of resistance to canonic demands can itself be a canonic requirement: I have already suggested that a possible disability of Coetzee's novels is that they may appear to conform too obviously to the requirements of the canon.

17. Roxana's real name is mentioned once in that novel: it is Susan, as is that of the daughter who haunts her and who is murdered by her maid Amy (205). (No surname is given for either of the Susans.) The daughter in *Foe* says that her name is also Susan Barton, and her account of her mother's desertion by a husband who was a brewer (76) tallies with the events of *Roxana*.

It would be misleading to suggest that the novel uses a range of characters to lay out nearly a number of different attitudes to canonic narrative; it is itself a narrative that offers strong resistance to the masterful reader or critic, frequently becoming opaque just when a systematic or allegorical meaning seems to be emerging. But it may be possible to think of Cruso and Foe as opposites, one who no longer has any use for narrative, and the other who lives for, and through, narrative. Susan Barton, who, for all we are allowed to know, might be the author of the narratives of both Cruso and Foe, is aware of the constituting capacities of narrative and the emptiness of existence outside her culture's canonic stories, yet irresistibly (and understandably) attached to the notion of a subjectivity and substantiality which does not have to be grounded in the conventions of narrative. She explains to Foe why she pursues him, instead of finding employment:

"I could return in every respect to the life of a substantial body, the life you recommend. But such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body. The waves picked me up and cast me ashore on an island, and a year later the same waves brought a ship to rescue me, and of the true story of that year, the story as it should be seen in God's great scheme of things, I remain as ignorant as a newborn babe. That is why I cannot rest, that is why I follow you to your hiding-place like a bad penny." (125-26)

Yet she attempts to resist, as she must, what is implied by this self-perception: that her story is determined not by herself but by the culture within which she seeks an identity. Thus in refusing to tell Foe of her life before the shipwreck, she insists:

"I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, 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." (131)

At the end of her long debate with Foe, however, she appears to move toward his position: that there are no distinctions to be made between characters invented by an author and individuals with an independent reality. In answer to Foe's question about the substantiality of the girl claiming to be her daughter, the girl from the pages of *Roxana*, she concludes: "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" (152). (For us, of course, that world is the world created by Coetzee's novel.)



Foe might be read, then, as an exploration of a fact that is central to the processes of canonization, in the narrower as much as in the wider sense that I am giving it: human experience seems lacking in substance and significance if it is not represented (to oneself and to others) in culturally validated narrative forms, but those narrative forms constantly threaten, by their exteriority and conventionality, the specificity of that experience. A similar concern could be traced in the other novels—in the different written versions of Jacobus Coetzee's journey beyond the Great River, in the alternative stories Magda tells herself in *In The Heart of the Country*, in the difficulty Michael K has in telling his story, or in Mrs Curran's struggle to articulate the truth of her life. One could thus base these novels' claim to canonic literary status in part on their critique of the traditional unproblematic notion of the canon, showing it to be the reflection of a transcendental humanism oblivious to the role of cultural production and historical materiality. This would suggest one of the ways in which these novels challenge the structures of apartheid, a political and social system whose founding narratives claim to reflect a prior and "natural" truth of racial superiority.

#### : IV :

But Barton's reluctant conclusion that "we are all substantial, we are all in the same world" may be too hasty; and it is perhaps significant that it is Foe, the author, who raises the possibility of an exception to this generalization: "You have omitted Friday." The presence of this fourth major figure in the novel adds to, and considerably complicates, the portrayal of Coetzee's fiction I have just given; it also constitutes the greatest risk which Coetzee takes in the artistic and ethical project in which he is engaged. It is in the representation of Friday that the novel engages most powerfully with otherness, and resists—or more accurately, invites only to resist—the kind of allegorical reading I discussed in the previous chapter.

One could say that the inner significance of Susan Barton's experience on the island, that she senses but cannot write down and that she hopes (fruitlessly) will emerge when Foe's retelling achieves canonization, is embodied not in her story nor in Cruso's, but in Friday's. Throughout the novel, Friday is presented not in his own terms—we have no sense of what they might be—but as he exists in relation to Susan Barton. Her memoir opens with his appearance to her on the shore of the island, and his carrying her to Cruso's encampment in a "strange backwards embrace" (6),

and the narrative of her letters ends with a comparison of her importance to him with that of an unwanted child to a mother who has nevertheless reared it: "I do not love him, but he is mine. That is why he remains in England. That is why he is here" (111).

Friday is a being wholly unfamiliar to her, in terms of race, class, gender, culture. He may be a cannibal. But Friday's story will never be known: he has had his tongue cut out, and cannot even tell the story of the mutilation.<sup>18</sup> His silence, his absolute otherness to her and to her words, is at the heart of Barton's story, both motivating and circumscribing it:

"On the island I accepted that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue. . . . But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost!" (67)

Later she tells Foe, "If the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue" (117).

To put this experience of absolute otherness into words—at least any of the words Barton has been granted by her cultural experience—would be to reappropriate it within the familiar, and to lose exactly that which makes it other, and therefore of the greatest possible significance, to her. She herself articulates this process of appropriation in her debate with Foe:

"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 he is to the world is what I make him." (121–22)

She has, by this stage in the novel, made strenuous but unsuccessful attempts to teach Friday a language in which he might tell something at

18. To be strictly accurate, our only reason for believing that Friday has been mutilated is Barton's report of Cruso's statement to this effect; she herself has no evidence of the cause of Friday's speechlessness, as she finds herself unable to look into his mouth (85).



least of his story; even music proves to be a medium in which nothing approaching communication between the two can occur. Unlike her own silence about her experiences before the island, Friday's silence, she insists in this discussion with Foe, is not a concealment. (The same could be said of her silence about Friday's silence—which is also Coetzee's silence.) Yet its powerful *effects* are everywhere. Barton tells Foe:

"When I lived in your house I would sometimes lie awake upstairs listening to the pulse of blood in my ears and to the silence from Friday below, a silence that rose up the stairway like smoke, like a swelling of black smoke. Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke."  
(118)

In Foe's view, Friday's silence is simply a riddle that must be solved: "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (141). He allegorizes this depth to be plumbed by means of an imaginative interpretation of Friday's mysterious act of paddling out on a log and dropping petals on the surface of the sea, an allegory which Barton takes up and revises, concluding: "It is for us to descend into the mouth (since we speak in figures). It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear" (142). For her, there can be no assurance that all silences will eventually be made to resound with the words of the dominant language, and to tell their stories in canonized narratives. This is not because there is an inviolable core of silence to which the dominant discourse can never penetrate, but because the most fundamental silence is itself produced by—at the same time as it makes possible—the dominant discourse. The wordless stream that closes the novel runs to the ends of the earth, in a moment of loss that is also salvation.

Foe's most telling challenge to the literary canon, therefore, is not its insistence upon cultural construction and validation (an insistence to which we have become accustomed in postmodern writing); it is its representation, through this most powerful of nonrepresentations, of the silence which is constitutive of canonicity itself. All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion, it is a silencing by *inclusion* as well: any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity. Who is Friday's foe, who has cut out his tongue and made it impossible for his story to be heard? Is it perhaps Foe,

the writer, the one who tells people's stories, whatever their race, gender, class, and who in writing, rewrites, driving into deeper and deeper silence that which his discourse necessarily excludes? Barton speculates near the end of the novel about Foe's efforts as an author:

But might the truth not be instead that he had laboured all these months to move a rock so heavy no man alive could budge it; that the pages I saw issuing from his pen were not idle tales of courtesans and grenadiers, as I supposed, but the same story over and over, in version after version, stillborn every time: the story of the island, as lifeless from his hand as from mine? (151)

Yet it is important to remember that it is only from the point of view of his oppressors (however well meaning) that Friday figures as an absolute absence. Included among those oppressors are Coetzee and the reader, and hence it is only by indirection that the substantiality of Friday's own world (in which he is not, of course, "Friday"—perhaps not even "he") can be suggested. One example is the uninterpretable (though repeatedly interpreted) act of strewing petals on the sea's surface, another is the equally uninterpretable series of marks Friday makes on the slate when Barton tries to teach him—at Foe's bidding—to write. There is also the extraordinary final section, in which an unidentified first-person narrator makes two visits to Foe's hideaway, the second in our own time (since the house bears a blue-and-white plaque inscribed *Daniel Defoe, Author*); in the house are the bodies of Foe, Barton, the girl who claimed to be her daughter, and Friday, but on both occasions it is Friday who commands attention. On the second occasion, the narrative blends into Susan Barton's own story of the island, as we have heard it more than once, but the now multiple "I" achieves what neither she nor Foe had been able to achieve: the descent into the sunken wreck, "the home of Friday" which "is not a place of words" but "a place where bodies are their own signs," and the sight of the dark mouth opening to emit its wordless, endless stream.<sup>19</sup>

19. The narrator(s) of this final section is/are not invested with any greater authority than earlier speakers in the novel; if anything, the uncertainties of interpretation are increased by the sense of historical distance. We have already noted that the final passage functions as a palimpsest of major documents of Western culture, and we might add to this the affinities between the account of the "home of Friday" and Montaigne's treatment of the body and language of the savage in "Des Cannibales." See also the discussion of Montaigne's essay by Michel de Certeau—"which focuses on the place of the other in travel writing—in 'Montaigne's 'Of Cannibals.'"



This moment answers to the moment when Jacobus Coetzee speculates on the unknowability of the South African people he has moved among:

I am an explorer. My essence is to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark. If the Hortentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me, who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear it out of the way. (106)<sup>20</sup>

It answers (without answering) Magda's repeated questions in *In the Heart of the Country* about the others she cannot know, her father and her servants (and the other that is herself), and the questions the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* constantly asks the barbarian girl ("What do I have to do to move you? . . . 'Does no one move you?'" [44]). It provides a reply of a kind to the despairing insistence of the medical officer in *Michael K* as he tries, unsuccessfully, to get K to open his mouth, both to eat, and to tell his story:

You are going to die, and your story is going to die too, for ever and ever, unless you come to your senses and listen to me . . . No one is going to remember you but I, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!* (207–8)

We might note that K, however, comes to think of himself as a mole "that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (248).

: V :

It is a necessary property of any canon that it depends on what it excludes, and since culture as we understand it could not exist without canonic processes at all levels of its functioning—including, as we have seen, the construction of individual subjectivity—there is no question of eradicating this source of exclusion. To be made aware of it, however, is to be reminded of the violence always implied in canonization, in the construction of cultural narratives, in the granting of a voice to one individual or one group,

20. Jacobus Coetzee is not just an explorer, but a writer too, and much of his writing is as destructive of the other as his gun; it evinces the characteristically self-contradictory claim of the colonizer, both to know everything that needs to be known about the other, and to find the other a wholly mysterious and inassimilable entity. (On both counts the other—upon whom the colonizer in fact depends—is regarded as dispensable.) See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 70–71.

necessary and productive as that process is. In enforcing this awareness, Coetzee's fictions have engaged directly with the changing political conditions in South Africa, doing so not primarily as political argument, vivid reportage, or—this was the argument of my previous chapter—point-by-point allegory, but as an exploitation of the traditions and potencies of the novel understood as a central form in Western culture, offered to the reader as an experience to be lived through.

*Foe*, in particular, focuses on what might be considered the most fundamental narrative of bourgeois culture not only to examine the processes of canonization and legitimation implicit in it and in its popular success, but also to bring forcefully to its readers' attention the silences which those processes generate and upon which they depend: in particular, a gender silence and a race silence.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the novel refuses to endorse any simple call for the granting of a voice within the socio-cultural discourses that are already in place; such a gesture would leave the silencing mechanisms, and their repressive human effects, untouched.<sup>22</sup> In 1986, Njabulo Ndebele spoke for black South Africans in these terms:

There have been diverse cultural interests to whom the challenge of the future has involved the need to open up cultural and educational centers to all races. Missing in these admirable acts of goodwill is an accompanying need to alter fundamentally the nature of cultural practice itself. It is almost always assumed that, upon being admitted, the oppressed will certainly like what they find. ("The English Language," 223–24)

21. Since my particular interest here is in Coetzee as a South African novelist, I am focusing on the question of race rather than the question of gender, but I am conscious that this is to do less than justice to the novel's richness and importance. A longer discussion would consider the differences between the treatments of the two exclusions in *Foe*, as well as the connections that link them. (One would want to consider, for instance, the relationship between Friday's mutilation and that of female victims such as Philomela and Lavinia.) And this discussion could lead to other exclusions, such as those of class, religion, nationality. See also Gayatri Spivak's suggestive engagement with *Foe* in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 174–97.

22. See Derrida's demanding scrutiny of the question of the other (of philosophy, of politics, of literature) in "Psyche" (55–56, 59–62). For Derrida, to avoid programming the other into a version of the same, "one does not make the other come, one lets it come by preparing for its coming" (60), and this means preparing for its arrival by opening up and destabilizing the existing structures of foreclosure. The relevance of Derrida's discussion to Coetzee's fictional project would be clear even without the footnote which observes: "Racism is also an invention of the other, but in order to exclude it and tighten the circle of the same" (63).



Coetzee's fiction, as I read it, brings out both the necessity and the difficulty of the process of genuine structural change in a society like South Africa's. Just as canonization inevitably involves, as a condition of the audibility of the canon, a continuous act of silencing, so political, cultural, and material domination of a social group produces, as far as the ears of the dominant class can determine, an impenetrable silence which is at the same time a necessary condition of the latter's power (and therefore a constant threat to it). Friday's tonguelessness is the sign of his oppression; it is also the sign of the silence, the absolute otherness, by which he appears to his oppressors, and by which their dominance is sustained. Foe observes to Barton: "We 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" (148). What Foe is less conscious of is the cost of this inheritance of mastery, a cost which Barton—herself subject to the logic of exclusion and silencing—is acutely aware of.

But for those who find themselves unwillingly in the dominant group—and during the apartheid period Coetzee, like most of his readers, found himself determined in advance as a member—there is no simple remedy to be understood in terms of investing Friday with speech. If he could have his tongue restored to him, he would melt into a class which is already constituted and socially placed by a pervasive discourse (Foe suggests that, even without the faculty of speech, he might join one of London's strolling Negro bands); for insofar as the oppressed *are* heard, it is as a marginalized dialect within the dominant language. Even those who speak against oppression from the position of the oppressed have to conform to the dominant language in order to be heard in the places where power is concentrated, as Susan Barton discovers.

Effective social and political change, then, is not merely the granting or the seizing of a voice (and the power that goes with it) by one or other predetermined group; it also entails work on the part of members of both oppressed and oppressing groups to create breaks in the totalizing discourses that produce and reify that grouping itself. The burden of this work necessarily falls on the oppressed, who will themselves produce the discursive transformation that will allow themselves to be heard (as part of the process of effecting the material shift of power that any lasting discursive shift is tied to). But the members of the oppressing group who seek to secure change have a role, too; not Foe's project of teaching Friday to write the master discourse with which the main part of the novel

ends (though there are indications—which could never, for us, be wholly legible—that Friday is in fact *subverting* the master discourse with his multiply interpretable graphics), but Coetzee's project of representing the processes of authorship, empowerment, validation, and silencing in a narrative that is constantly aware of the problems inherent in its own acts of representation (an issue that we have already considered in relation to Coetzee's earlier novels), and makes this awareness part of the reader's experience.

I observed earlier that the settings of Coetzee's novels render them less likely to be read as concerned exclusively with the South African struggle, and that they may run the opposite risk of being taken as having little specifically to do with that struggle. There is clearly some significance in the fact that Friday is a black African in *Foe*, unlike Defoe's tawny-skinned creation, just as there is in the fact that the people who remain outside Jacobus Coetzee's or Magda's or the medical officer's or Mrs. Curren's or David Lurie's comprehension are, for the most part, South Africans excluded from white privileges. On the other hand, the barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians* cannot be identified so clearly; they function as a less specifically historicized representation of otherness, upon whose necessary exclusion from its narratives, and occasionally from its physical spaces and economic resources, the civilization of the Empire depends. Furthermore, the least comprehensible figure in *Age of Iron*, Vercueil, is not racially identified, while racial difference is not an issue in the Russian setting of *The Master of Petersburg*.

This occasional absence of precise empirical grounding is a necessary feature of Coetzee's fiction, I would argue, since the novels are addressed as much to those outside South Africa as to those within it. (Indeed, to be white and to write oppositional fiction in English during the apartheid years was to restrict your readership inside the country, making access to an international canon of peculiar importance.)<sup>23</sup> There are two relatively easy responses by outsiders to the issue of racial conflict in South Africa that Coetzee's writing inhibits, however: first, that what is at stake is a battle of universal human principles, a version of similar battles in every

23. To write "modernist" fiction is to limit your audience further, of course. Neil Lazarus, writing in 1986, argues interestingly that, since the modernist text resists reductive appropriation by the dominant discourse, "the relative underestimation, within South Africa itself, of the work of Gordimer and Coetzee ought to be taken as an index of the oppositional cogency of this work, and not, as it is usually taken, as an index of its irrelevance" ("Modernism and Modernity," 136).



society and every period, another manifestation of the tragic complexity of the human condition;<sup>24</sup> and second, that the conflict is entirely a local matter of a particular history and a particular set of problems in need of urgent resolution by those on the spot. What these novels work to suggest instead—and again, this is a task that falls peculiarly on the shoulders of the white South African writer in English—is that the South African struggle for justice and equality is *part* of a wider, and entirely concrete, struggle, that it has a particular history which is continuous with the particular histories of all other countries participating in the rise of Western capitalism and the liberal ideology on which it depends, and that one requirement in moving toward a just future (one of many, but one in which works of art might have a special role) is an understanding—as much affective as rational—of the ways in which the cultural formations that we have inherited through those histories are, for all their indisputable value, complicit with many barbarities being committed all around us today.

## : VI :

Turning back to the question of Coetzee's novels and the literary canon, the question that presses itself is this: is the cost of these works' admittance to the canon their being re-read (and thus rewritten) as stories—as the same story—of essential humanity and transcendent values, their textuality disguised, their otherness expunged, their ethical power annulled? The novels themselves might appear to give a pessimistic answer, for the work of art is clearly in the same powerless situation as characters like the barbarian girl, K, or Friday. It is the subject of stories (both before and after it appears), and only through stories—commentaries, criticism, discussion, internal reflection—does it acquire meaning and value

24. This might be a significant difference between Coetzee and his precursors Kafka and Beckett: Coetzee's fiction is so directly concerned with the economic and political fabric of cultural existence that it is more difficult to derive from it general statements about the human predicament. There are moments, however, when the inadequacy of representation being dramatized appears to be not so much the inadequacy of a particular set of available discourses but that of language itself; notably when the body feels or acts in ways that exceed or escape any possible conceptualization—as, for instance, in the magistrate's obscure physical desires in *Waiting for the Barbarians* or K's body's refusal to eat the food of the camps in *Michael K*. But this does not diminish the importance of the more specific questions relating to the cultural validation of certain discourses at the expense of others, and of the price to be paid for cultural acceptance.

for us.<sup>25</sup> But anything like a “full” understanding of it would require an apprehension of what remains uncaptured in the critical and interpretive discourse by means of which we represent the work of art to ourselves and others, that discourse which tends, as I have argued, toward the allegorical substitution of structure for event, meaning as a noun for meaning as a verb. It is important to recognize, however, that this is in no sense a mythical or Romantic notion; Coetzee's novels do not represent a yearning for some realm of richness and plenitude beyond language, a meaningfulness behind the emptiness of our conscious lives. They attempt strenuously to avoid both terms of the colonizer's contradiction I mentioned earlier (see note 20): that the other is wholly knowable, and that the other is wholly mysterious; that the other has no boundaries, and that the boundaries of the other are impenetrable.<sup>26</sup>

As Coetzee's novels enter the canon, then, it becomes increasingly difficult to read them *against* the canon, as their uniqueness is dissolved by the legitimized voice which the canon grants; yet if they were to fail in their bid for canonicity, it would become increasingly difficult to read them at all, since the only voice available to them is the voice granted by one canon or another. This, we have seen, is the double bind dramatized in *Foe* at the level of the individual, and inherent in any attempt to combat political and cultural repression. If I may end with a utopian

25. The most compelling (and therefore most occluding) of these stories are often those told by the authors themselves. It is notable that Coetzee observes a scrupulous reserve in relation to his texts, as is evidenced in many interviews. For instance, here he is in conversation with Morpher: “Q: Friday has no tongue. Why? COETZEE: Nobody seems to have sufficient authority to say for sure how it is that Friday has no tongue” (462). And later Coetzee remarks: “Your questions again and again drive me into a position I do not want to occupy. But what legitimacy has that ‘want’? By accepting your implication, I would produce a master narrative for a set of texts that claim to deny all master narratives” (464). See also *Doubling the Point*, 205–6. In *Foe*, Susan Barton discovers the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of metanarrative commentary: “Alas, my stories seem always to have more applications than I intend, so that I must go back and laboriously extract the right application and apologize for the wrong ones and efface them” (81).

26. Michel Tournier's *Vendredi*, another modern rewriting of Defoe's novel which is in productive triangulation with Coetzee's work, offers a very different view of the other of colonialism: although in both reworkings the black servant represents a consciousness radically alien to the Western mind he serves, this otherness in Tournier's work is more easily assimilated to a Eurocentric primitivist myth. Tournier's novel surfaces elsewhere—and is perhaps gently mocked—in Coetzee's oeuvre: Jacobus Coetzee, alone in the veld, tries to imitate the earth-fecundation of Tournier's Crusoe: “I bored a sheath in the earth and would have performed the ur-act had joy and laughter not reduced me to a four-inch dangle and helpless urination” (95).



thought, however, it would be that the canonization of Coetzee's novels, along with other texts (fictional and otherwise) that question the very processes of canonicity itself, could slowly transform the ideology and the institutions from which the canon derives its power, so that new and presently unimaginable ways of finding a voice, and new ways of hearing such voices, come into being. Instead of canons premised upon a notion of transcendental and inscrutable value, we can hope for cultural practices and formations that encourage an awareness of the historical production of value, of the part played by ideological systems in political domination and exclusion, of the necessarily provisional and historically contestable nature of any arrangement which allows some to speak and in that gesture renders others—and a part of themselves—silent. This project is a small component of a much greater struggle, which took (and is still taking) a violent form in South Africa, to fashion cultural and political structures and procedures that will allow us not just to hear each other's stories, as the liberal humanist dream would have it, but to hear—and this will entail a different kind of hearing—each other's silences.

## Trusting the Other

### *Age of Iron*

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To read *Age of Iron* is to read, or overread, a strange kind of letter, written in 1986 by a dying woman in Cape Town to her married daughter in the United States. This, at least, is the fictional contract we enter into, though we are given little in the way of realistic reinforcement that might enable us to imagine the words issuing from a pen onto a sheet of paper. Even the highly implausible epistolary activity of a Clarissa Harlowe or a Saint-Preux is conducted with occasional nods to the mechanical requirements of letter-writing, but here the novelist places no constraints on the verbal creativity of his character. Yet in one sense Mrs. Curran's words are more fully imbued with what might be regarded as the spirit of epistolary than most fictional letters (or, for that matter, nonfictional ones): that is, in their utter dependence on and directedness toward a single, absent, other, another whose absence is the force which brings the words into being while rendering their task—of communication, above all the communication of love (whatever that might mean)—impossible. Mrs. Curran's daughter is the living being she is closest to, the one she most easily trusts, the one she turns to as soon as she hears the news—which sets in progress the letter and therefore the novel—that the cancer she is suffering from is terminal.