

Coetzee's *Foe* and Borges: An Intertextual Reading

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Foe is indisputably one of J.M. Coetzee's more complex and controversial novels, to the extent that Derek Attridge has straightforwardly admitted that, when it was published in 1986, it "came as something of a disappointment to many readers and reviewers" (72). Jarad Zimble has also remarked that there were many voices against it both in South Africa and abroad. He mentions Nicholas Shakespeare's adverse review in *The Times* (his "most disappointing fiction to date"), Neill Darke's description for a Cape newspaper as "pointless, incomprehensible and tiresome", and D.J. Enright's comparison, in the *New York Review of Books*, to Defoe's novels, "alongside which, he suggested, 'Coetzee's revision' could only 'seem a static and anemic affair'" (Zimble, 1). Even though this author adds that these severe criticisms were somewhat softened by the praise these same reviewers bestowed on Coetzee's style as sparse, elegant and polished, it is also true that *Foe* has been found, as he puts it, "bewildering, plodding and too encumbered by its literary debts" (Zimble, 1).

The most obvious of these literary debts is to be found in Daniel Defoe's novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, discussed by critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judie Newman, or Tisha Turk; but they are not the only ones. Other intertexts that have been mentioned include further works by Defoe, Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck", and allusions to the works of Dante, Shakespeare (e.g. *The Tempest*), Dostoevsky, Pirandello, Conrad, Olive Schreiner, William Golding, or Beckett, as Chris Prentice has noticed (110, n. 21). For Derek Attridge, this richness of allusion and intertextuality responds to Coetzee's intention to canonise his own work, remarking that "it was in *Foe* that Coetzee made canonic intertextuality a fundamental principle [...] 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" (Attridge, 69).

The purpose of this essay is to contribute yet another canonical name to that list, to shed further light on the novel, by highlighting parallelisms so far ignored by criticism, between *Foe* and Jorge Luis Borges's oeuvre. It seems obvious that "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (included in the collection *Fictions*, 1944) is in the background of Coetzee's re-writing of *Robinson Crusoe*. Ever since John Barth drew the attention of readers and critics on this Borgesian story in his postmodernist manifesto "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), it has become an inevitable reference for many contemporary metafictional writers. Similarly, the playful masking of the writer, so obvious in *Foe*, is also in debt to Borges's oft-cited story "Borges and I" (in *The Maker*, 1960).¹ In this case, Coetzee himself has recognised that debt in his Nobel Prize lecture "He and His Man" (Woessner, 109; 125, n. 2). But there are other Borgesian echoes in *Foe* that need to be discussed in detail.

1. The plurality of meanings and readings in *Foe*

The density of meaning, so characteristic of Coetzee's style (and Borges's), has led to innumerable analyses of this short novel. Some early readings of the novel regarded *Foe* as an allegory of South African history and, by and large, the European colonisation of Africa. For instance, Robert M. Post, Helen Tiffin or Dick Penner read *Foe* along the abovementioned allegorical lines. Penner, even conceding that "*Foe* does not lend itself as readily as Coetzee's earlier novels to a reading of South African and colonial analogues", remarked however that "[t]he most viable link to contemporary South Africa in this novel is obviously the relationship between Susan Barton and sullen, enduring Friday" (Penner, 124). David Attwell has asserted that the discursive field of the novel is postcoloniality, emphasising that Coetzee positions *Foe* "in peculiarly South African terms" (103), and focuses his discussion on the relation between this novel and Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883) (Attwell, 103-12). Also Susan VanZanten Gallagher states that even if the location and temporal framework of *Foe* seemed very far away from contemporary South Africa, its focus "on the nature of narrative and imagination and on the question of who will write and who will remain silent are thoughtful responses to the questions of silencing and speech confronting Coetzee in his new role as a prominent South African novelist" (168-9). Further, she quotes Coetzee from a 1987 interview with Tony Morphet in which he admitted that the novel was not "a retreat from the subject of colonialism or from questions of power" (Gallagher, 169). Power and the issue of "who writes?", are examined by Sue Kossew in some detail in her comparative post-colonial reading of Coetzee and André Brink, evoking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Kossew, 161-77).

Both Gallagher and Kossew, when dealing with the writing of "the other", allude not only to the African, colonised by the European (the relation between Friday and Cruso, or Susan), but they also discuss "the other" in terms of gender, the "silent other" represented by Susan Barton. Gallagher mentions Nina Auerbach's review of *Foe* in *The New Republic* in 1987, in which this author echoed Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck", pointing to some parallels in wording in the last pages of the novel, as well as with the French feminist approach of *écriture féminine* (Gallagher, 189-92).² Kossew, in turn, discussed both the female and the colonised subject as being "marginalized by patriarchal author/ity" (168), drawing on the feminist interpretations put forward by authors such as Teresa Dovey and Kirsten Holst Petersen (Kossew, 168-70); but also on the analyses of other critics such as Hena Maes-Jelinek, Benita Parry, Helen Tiffin or Sheila Roberts, who emphasise the problematical condition of Susan Barton, as she is not only a victim of patriarchy but also a coloniser herself.

Moreover, the presence in the writing and development of *Foe* of poststructuralist theory has been explored in relative depth, starting with the early essay by Spivak (originally in 1990), who defended Coetzee's text as "neither a failure nor an abdication of the responsibility of the historical or national elite" (19). She argued against the often heard claim among critics that Coetzee should not have "put into practice" his readings of theory, but should have avoided the "invasion" of theory into fiction. Spivak strongly opposed this position: "What should the practice have been in this case? A book that did not show the reading of theory, resembling more 'what a novel should be'?" (19).³ The final section of the novel, on which we will concentrate later, is highly relevant in this regard, as some authors have noticed, addressing it from a remarkable diversity of theoretical and philosophical perspectives. Despite that diversity, and the great interest

and perspicuity of some discussions, there is still much confusion and darkness about the closure of *Foe*. In Attwell's view, "Friday possesses the key to the closure of the narrative" (112), and we know that Friday cannot speak, because he had his tongue severed.⁴ This final section (identified in the novel as "IV" is extremely short (barely five pages), but still – in Patrick Hayes's words – "remains one of the biggest interpretative conundrums of all of Coetzee's writing" (109).

2. Interpreting the first part of section IV of *Foe*

There are several possible explanations to the impenetrability of section IV, which we will try to address through a close reading of those last five pages and some of their most interesting and productive interpretations. One of them is certainly Hayes's, who, in his study of the connections between this novel and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, identifies the debt to the Russian novelist at the beginning of section III of the novel. At this point, Susan addresses Foe and remarks, in a clearly metafictional and anachronistic mode, "I recall an author reflecting that after death we may find ourselves not among choirs of angels but in some quite ordinary place, as for instance a bath-house on a hot afternoon, with spiders dozing in the corners" (*Foe*, 113-4; discussed by Hayes, 107-9). The same reference to a "country bath-house", is found verbatim in *Crime and Punishment* and is repeated on the penultimate page of *Foe*: "It is not a country bath-house" (*Foe*, 156). Although we will return to that key sentence later, let us only add for now that the whole scene (or rather, scenes) of section IV cannot be satisfactorily read exclusively through Dostoevsky's debt.

Mike Marais, in his Levinasian analysis of the novel, makes a good point when he interprets the ending of *Foe* as an allegory of reading, thus putting the reader at the same level as the narrator of the last five pages: "Coetzee's endeavour to invest the text with a silence that renders the reader responsible for the other is self-reflexively depicted in the ending of the novel where an anonymous first-person narrator interacts with Friday and eventually tries to vocalise his silence" (75-6). Through said self-reflexive meditation the writer interweaves his novel with history, in more demanding and ethical terms than the traditional concept of *littérature engagée*, with which Coetzee disagrees. For Marais, the novel "seeks not to *represent* history but to *perform* the ethical. It endeavours to expose the reader to that which will *concern* him/her and thereby to become the means through which his/her relations with others in history will be affected" (80). This interpretation is, on the one hand, very much in line with Coetzee's essay "The Novel Today" (originally a talk given at the 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town), where he firmly rejected the submission of fiction to history and the alleged obligation writers had to write according to the historical demands of their times. The writer denounced then that in South Africa "the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity" ("The Novel Today", 3). Liberal and leftist critics thought that in a period of political convulsion the category of "history" should be privileged over that of the novel, as if "history" were truth, i.e. reality, and the novel just a "construction of reality". Coetzee defended that both are different types of discourse and that "history" has no primacy whatsoever as a sort of master-form of discourse (for further discussion of *Foe* from this perspective, see Alexandra Effe, 27-40).

On the other hand, Marais's interpretation of the final section of *Foe* helps to clarify the identity of its anonymous narrator, which has been a very controversial issue among critics to this day. Tisha Turk also agrees with identifying the narrator with the reader, "someone who is, quite literally, *moved* by Susan's narration, the book that we are now both finishing and beginning to re-read – "At last I could row no further" (5, 155) – and that models for us both the difficulty and the necessity of reading and listening differently in order to recover untold stories" (308). Marco Caracciolo, using the tools of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, has gone a few steps further in interpreting the narrator's voice in section IV as belonging not to the author, but to the reader. His argument seems convincing in terms of dealing with the "impenetrability", in Caracciolo's words, of these final pages. By defining the novel's ending as "an allegory of interpretation in which the reader's meaning constructions are projected onto the narrator's exploration of an environment" (91-2). Further, he notices that this narrator "appears to be heir to the nineteenth century tradition of investigative narrators who accompany the reader into an enigmatic storyworld", but the main difference in this case is the "postmodernist twist" of *Foe*, "since it is the narrator himself who lies at the roots of the reader's puzzlement" (92).

Certainly, as Hayes has also remarked, the enigmatic atmosphere of this last section of the novel responds to "a type of storytelling that operates according to altogether different rules, where Friday mysteriously takes on an expressive power – this is some sort of literary genre in which 'bodies are their own signs'" (Hayes, 109). The questions to be asked would be what those "different rules" are and to what sort of literary genre, or discourse type, this section belongs. Hayes points to its anti-realist atmosphere, equating it to a sort of mystical experience, so that the text would be a "wisdom tale", whose origins – he reminds us – lie "in the pre-enlightenment past, in religious tradition" (112), "a place where there is a mystical unity between the body and its meaning" (114). This is a very insightful remark to which we will return later in sections 4 and 5 of this essay.

Aside from its overwhelmingly mysterious and symbolic environment, there are all sorts of details in the text – at a surface, but also structural level – which point to a dream or a nightmare, such as the obsessive repetition of words, evoking a *déjà vu* experience. The first impression is thus of utter darkness, into which the narrator penetrates, to find only lifeless silence around: "The staircase is dark and mean. On the landing I stumble over a body. It does not stir, it makes no sound" (*Foe*, 153). The reader cannot fail to notice that the first sentence of section III was identical, except for the tense of the verb (present tense in section IV, past tense in section III): "The staircase was dark and mean" (*Foe*, 113). The narrator tries to make sense of the body they have stumbled over, but struggles to do so, recalling a picture of something unreal, as if facing "a cripple" or "a sack of straw". In their attempt to decipher what they have found while unwrapping the body's face, the adjective used by the narrator is "endless". The impression left is indeed one of being inside a nightmare, which would then prove that all their efforts to unveil the mysterious face are futile:

By the light of a match I make out a woman or a girl, her feet drawn up inside a long grey dress, her hands folded under her armpits; or is it that her limbs are unnaturally short, the stunted limbs of a cripple? Her face is wrapped in a grey

woollen scarf. I begin to unwrap it, but the scarf is endless. Her head lolls. She weighs no more than a sack of straw. (*Foe*, 153)

Suddenly, and after hearing a “quick scurrying across the floor, a mouse or a rat”, the narrator comes across two other bodies, those of a man and a woman. Both are in bed, “side by side”, “not touching”. The description is absolutely macabre, leaving no doubt in the reader that the narrator is telling about two corpses which look as if they were smiling: “The skin, dry as paper, is stretched tight over their bones. Their lips have receded, uncovering their teeth, so that they seem to be smiling. Their eyes are closed” (153). That impression of having encountered death is reinforced when the narrator draws the covers back and holds its breath, expecting “disturbance, dust, decay”; but as if it were a dream, whose rules defy ordinary expectations, “they are quietly composed, he in a nightshirt, she in her shift” (153).

The two bodies are left resting on the bed and the narrator turns into a corner of that mysterious space, which is again “in pitch darkness”; the air being so thick that “my matches will not strike” (154). The dream-like impression the reader has is again reinforced by the scene in which the narrator, unable to see anything, kneels on the floor and gropes around until they find “the man Friday stretched at full length on his back” (154). The narrator touches the body, first the feet (“which are hard as wood”), and then starts going up through the body which seems to be wrapped in a sort of shroud: “feel my way up the soft, heavy stuff in which his body is wrapped, to his face” (154). Contrary to the logic of reality (but not to the logic of dreams), the wrapped body is warm, and the narrator confirms that there is “the pulse in his throat”. The macabre details increase because the body which seemed like any other corpse looks as if it were alive, having a heart beating, even if faintly, “in a far-off place”. The narrator keeps on touching the body, checking that his hair is “indeed like lambswool”, such as Friday’s hair had been described early in the novel (5-6).

A key moment in this pitch-dark nightmare happens when the narrator reaches Friday’s mouth and finds that his “teeth are clenched” and tries to open his mouth by pressing “a fingernail between the upper and lower rows”. While doing so the narrator is lying on the floor beside Friday and smells “of old dust”. For a long while nothing happens, and the narrator has the impression of having perhaps fallen asleep (“I might even have been asleep”), until – again following the logic of dreams – the apparently inert body suddenly “stirs and sighs and turns on his side” (154). Then the anonymous narrator raises a hand to Friday’s face and, pressing closer, succeeds in getting the slave’s teeth apart, so they place their ear close to Friday’s mouth and lie waiting. But what can they be waiting for? The reader knows that Friday is unable to speak, because his tongue had been cut by slavers. The description that follows belongs once more to the typical realm of dreams, vaguely recalling Poe’s tale “The Tell-Tale Heart”: “At first there is nothing. Then, if I can ignore the beating of my own heart, I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a seashell; and over that, as if once or twice a violin-string were touched, the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird” (154). Again, some of these words had appeared before, like words being repeated in dreams: in section III Susan (the “she” mentioned in the previous lines) had told Foe: “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). So the picture is indeed ghastly, with the narrator lying on

the floor next to this body which, in spite of being wrapped as a mummy, seems to be still alive and from whose mouth come the sounds of the sea, the wind and the birds.

The unreality of the scene is increased by the final two short paragraphs in this first part of section IV. The narrator is not content with hearing the sounds of the sea, which seem to be coming out of Friday's mouth, but presses closer to his mouth and listens to other sounds, which clearly evoke more than the sea. Those later sounds conjure the landscape and events that took place on the island where Friday, Susan and Cruso lived together. According to the description made by Susan Barton in the previous sections of the novel: "Closer I press, listening for other sounds: the chirp of sparrows, the thud of a mattock, the call of a voice. From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island" (154). The impossibility – the unreality – of that scene, and particularly of those sounds coming out of Friday's mouth, is emphasised by the presence of the phrase "without a breath".

3. Evoking Borges's "Brodie's Report"

This oneiric and unrealistic atmosphere puts an end to the first part of section IV. As it is obviously governed by the rules of dreams, it is now useful to recall Borges, one of the great masters of dream (and mirror) narration, from whose books Coetzee has taken more leaves than critics have acknowledged. Years before Coetzee wrote *Foe* by re-writing *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, Borges had made a similar attempt. In addition to his well-known "Pierre Menard", the Argentine writer had addressed another canonical eighteenth-century English text, the Fourth Book of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, rewritten in his short story "Brodie's Report" (in the homonymous book, 1970).⁵ It is worth examining it briefly here, in view of so many postcolonial interpretations of *Foe* and its metafictional devices, since Borges had tackled similar questions in "Brodie's Report", by describing a society of primitive people – the *Mlch* –, which he renamed as "Yahoos".

As Robin Fiddian has mentioned, citing William Luis's essay "Borges, the Encounter, and the Other: Blacks and the Monstrous Races", the Argentine writer deals in that tale with "the problematics of Post-Colonial and Post-Modern thought within the context of Blacks in Africa and, by inference, the Caribbean during the first third of the nineteenth century" (qtd. by Fiddian, 131). It seems relevant to notice the African condition of "the others", the colonised, much in the way Coetzee writes Friday as African, unlike the original character in *Robinson Crusoe*.⁶ Some of the unique traits of the Yahoos, as described by Brodie, include cannibalism as well as the custom of mutilating the child destined to become their king: once a male child is born, they examine him and if they find "certain stigmata" appropriate for him to be their future king, the boy is then "gelded, blinded with a fiery stick, and his hands and feet are cut off, so that the world will not distract him from wisdom" (*Collected Fictions*, 404). It is remarkable that *Foe*'s Friday, unlike his parallel figure in *Robinson Crusoe*, was also mutilated: his tongue had been cut off (perhaps also to prevent any distraction from wisdom?), and he had apparently been gelded too, as pointed out by Susan in the novel: "I confess I wondered [...] whether the lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation; whether by a dumb slave I was to understand a slave unmanned" (*Foe*, 118-

9). Actually, when she looks at Friday dancing, “with his robes flying about him”, she confesses that she felt “so confounded that I gaped without shame at what had hitherto been veiled from me”, fearing – she says – “that evidence of a yet more hideous mutilation might be thrust upon my sight” (*Foe*, 119). In fact, in a mysterious and ambiguous language, she adds that

In the dance nothing was still and yet everything was still. The whirling robe was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday’s shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them. (*Foe*, 119)

In Borges’s tale it was not only the king who was gelded; also the god worshipped by the Yahoos had suffered mutilation: “this god they may possibly have conceived in the image of their king, for the god is mutilated, blind, frail, and possesses unlimited power” (*Collected Fictions*, 406). Fiddian notices in this respect that “Borges is clearly calling up the paradigm of civilization versus barbarism explored obsessively in the work of Domingo F. Sarmiento”, among others (Fiddian, 141), which seems congruous with Borges’s interest in Argentine history, something that Coetzee has recently echoed in another of his novels.⁷ The figure of the god is relevant as well in *Foe*, and particularly in connection with Friday and writing, as remarked by Kossew (164-5). It is precisely Foe the writer who appropriately mentions God as the one who “continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it”, but who also wonders whether “it is possible that some of us are not written, but merely are; or else (I think principally of Friday) are written by another and darker author” (*Foe*, 143). This passage is especially pertinent if we bear in mind that for Foe, “God’s writing stands as an instance of a writing without speech” (143), which is exactly what happens in the case of Friday.

Beatriz Sarlo, when discussing “Brodie’s Report” in her book *Jorge Luis Borges. A Writer on the Edge* (87-92), makes reference to some of the ethical issues posed by Borges in his rewriting of the Yahoos’ civilisation, even conceding that part of Borges’s message might be (read as) ironic. She notices the relativism of the report Brodie addresses to Queen Victoria, insisting on the warning his description of the Yahoos provides about the dangers of Christian civilisation: “Brodie has offered the hypothesis that the ‘Yahoos’ were once a more civilized nation whose present decadence should be explained not as primitivism but as degeneration”, so that this tribe “can be thought of as *the future of the European nations*, and not only as their past” (Sarlo, 91). This reflection that Sarlo believes Borges is posing before his readers is confirmed by the words used in the final paragraph of the story, in which Brodie emphasises not only the “barbarism” but also the “civilised” traits of the Yahoos. Despite its potentially ironic reading, “Brodie’s Report” also contains a severe critique of the European or Christian civilisation. The fact that both the European and the Yahoos’ civilisations share fundamental features makes them equally worthy of consideration and criticism:

The Yahoos, I know, are a barbarous people, perhaps the most barbarous of the earth, but it would be an injustice to overlook certain redeeming traits which they possess. They have institutions, and a king; they speak a language based on abstract concepts; they believe, like the Jews and the Greeks, in the divine origin of poetry; and they sense that the soul survives the death of the body. They affirm

the efficacy of punishment and reward. They represent, in a word, culture, just as we do, in spite of our many sins. (*Collected Fictions*, 407-8)

This indirect and possibly ironic way of pointing to the values of the Yahoos, so similar in many respects to those of “civilised” societies, allegedly more advanced and morally commendable, might have been the basis of Coetzee’s questioning of the moral authority represented by Susan, Crusoe and Foe in their treatment of Friday. The ambiguous and mysterious personality of Friday, reinforced by his incapacity to communicate with the Christian civilisation, places him somehow in a position akin to that of the Yahoos. Friday’s barbarous condition, as Susan insists in her narrative, cannot be an obstacle to “save” him, in the same way as Brodie states at the end of “Brodie’s Report” alluding to the Yahoos: “[w]e have the obligation to save them” (408).

“Brodie’s Report” proves then also useful to read *Foe* in another light, since it is evident that Coetzee’s novel is a text that *creates* its own precursors (*Robinson Crusoe* is one of them, but not necessarily the only one). In this context it is thus pertinent to evoke Borges’s remarks (taken from T.S. Eliot) that “each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (“Kafka and His Precursors”, 365). But there are other Borgesian tales which can shed further light on the final section of Coetzee’s *Foe*, so let us return now to the closing of the novel.

4. Interpreting the second part of section IV of *Foe*

After the first two pages of section IV, which are separated by two asterisks from the other three pages of this section, the narration continues with the description of the blue plaque on the wall of the house visited by the narrator. This is a blue English Heritage plaque in commemoration of “*Daniel Defoe, Author*”. So the narrator has come to a house connected with the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. We do not know which house it is, because the information given in the plaque is not provided; the narrator simply adds that “more writing” was “too small to read” (*Foe*, 155). What happens next is however different from what the reader might have expected of a historic site.

In the paragraph following the description of the blue plaque, the dream-like or nightmarish atmosphere of the first part of the section prevails. When the narrator enters the house, and even if the day is depicted as “a bright autumn day”, the inside is dark (“light does not penetrate these walls”). The second sentence from the beginning of section IV is repeated here *verbatim*, although expanded with other details from the first paragraph: “On the landing I stumble over the body, light as straw, of a woman or a girl” (*Foe*, 155). The reader has the impression that this is a repetition of what has happened two pages before, and the narrator confirms this impression by adding “The room is darker *than before*” [our emphasis]; in short, the narrator has definitely been here before, this is a second visit to the same place. The description continues with the narrator “groping along the mantel”, finding the stub of a candle and lighting it. As a result, there is then “a dull blue flame” which allows the contemplation of a scene of a couple lying in bed “face to face, her head in the crook of his arm”. This is again different from the first part of the section, because in that first visit the narrator saw the couple, but they were not touching each other. Also Friday is seen again, but now in a different position,

“turned to the wall”, and the narratorial voice adds something not perceived before. In his neck there is “a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain”.⁸ Next to them lies a table and, on the floor, a dispatch box that the narrator picks up and puts on the table, opening it. The candle is brought nearer thus permitting the reading of the first words of the topmost leaf that the anonymous narrator has taken from the box: “Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further” (*Foe*, 155). Those words, with the exception of the address (“Dear Mr Foe”), coincide *verbatim* with the beginning of the novel (“At last, I could row no further”: *Foe*, 5). So we might infer that the narrator has found the text submitted by Susan Barton to Daniel Foe in which she described her arrival at Cruso’s island (section I of the novel).

This second nightmare-visit to a house, now identified as Daniel Defoe’s house, puts this anonymous narrator in contact, through this self-referential device, with the text of the novel *Foe*. It also allows the encounter with the corpses of its protagonists: certainly Friday’s and Susan’s, and probably also the girl’s who pretended to be Susan’s daughter; as well as with those of Cruso, Foe, and even the captain of the ship that brought Susan, Cruso and Friday to England (“Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs in their nightclothes...”, 157). The atmosphere is undoubtedly mysterious and dark, since the only light found there comes from the blue flame of the candle, which permits the narrator to read that first sentence in Susan’s text. The reader – who is the same as this anonymous narrator, as Marais, Turk or Caracciolo have argued – might be wondering what to make of all this, when suddenly, in the following paragraph, the scene shifts again, and now into a completely different location:

With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard. Gripped by the current, the boat bobs away, drawn south toward the realm of the whales and eternal ice. Around me on the waters are the petals cast by Friday. (*Foe*, 155)

Thus, following the logic of dreams, the narrator is no longer inside Defoe’s house, but in the sea, on a boat from which they slip overboard. At first, the reader cannot help wondering who is really slipping, because the words opening that paragraph repeat, again *verbatim*, those used by Susan Barton in her narration, in the first paragraph of the novel: “With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard” (*Foe*, 5), evoked as well, with variations, elsewhere in the novel (131, 133). The only difference between both sentences is the tense of the verb *slip*: present tense in the narrator’s voice, and past tense in Susan’s voice.

Being within a dream, the narrator seems to be subject to, and dominated by, the words and narration that the reader has become familiarised with throughout the novel. The change of scene causes confusion– between what happened to Susan in her narration and what is happening now to the dreamer/narrator. Flashes from other incidents in the novel recur in the passage quoted above and also in the following paragraphs: “the petals cast by Friday”, “the dark cliffs of the island”, “the great bed of seaweed”... (*Foe*, 155), thus allowing the reader to remember, in a rapid succession of images, relevant episodes in the novel. This might give the impression that Susan and the narrator are one, as if the authority or authorship of the narration were in the same hands. But that impression (which is logical, as the narrator until section IV has actually been Susan) is immediately dispelled. After the narrator slips overboard and starts swimming (as Susan did) “toward

the dark cliffs of the island”, something different happens: the narrator feels that “something dull and heavy” touches and eventually leads them under the water towards a sunken ship. The picture before their eyes is overwhelming, as the following account shows:

The dark mass of the wreck is flecked here and there with white. It is huge, greater than the leviathan: a hulk shorn of masts, split across the middle, banked on all sides with sand. The timbers are black, the hole even blacker that gives entry. If the kraken lurks anywhere, it lurks here, watching out of its stony hooded undersea eyes. (*Foe*, 156)

The words used to describe the shipwreck are very powerful, evoking images of huge and fantastic monsters, like *leviathan* and *kraken*, again recurring to previous allusions (“those great beds of seaweed are the home of a beast called by mariners the *kraken* – have you heard of it?” – *Foe* had asked Susan a few pages before, 140). All this makes the nightmarish quality of the description more vivid, and cannot fail to impress the narrator (and the reader) who must feel threatened and afraid at the massiveness they are facing: that of the leviathan and also the kraken, “watching out of its stony hooded undersea eyes”.

The narrator finally enters the ship through that hole, and finds himself below deck. The logical incongruity characteristic of dreams is reinforced by another detail provided by the narrator, who says that they have “[t]he stub of candle [hanging] on a string around [their] neck” (*Foe*, 156) and that they are holding it up as if it were a talisman, even if it doesn’t shed any light. How could this candle have provided light under the sea? It is interesting to note the presence of the candle (and its consequent evocation of the “dull blue flame” mentioned before), and particularly the fact that this stub of candle is around the narrator’s neck, reminding the reader of the scar on Friday’s neck, “left by a rope or chain”. The narrator and Friday are certainly blurred here (as the narrator is also impersonating Friday), like Susan and the narrator had been blurred before. This contributes to create the dream-like atmosphere where distinctiveness of identity is absent.

The narrator encounters a series of obstacles which prevent them from advancing through the sunken ship: “[s]omething soft obstructs me, perhaps a shark, a dead shark overgrown with pulpy flowers of the sea, or the body of a guardian wrapped in rotting fabric” (*Foe*, 156), to the extent that they have to creep “on hands and knees”. That impression of dirtiness, decay, and difficulty of movement (produced by the “dead shark overgrown with pulpy flowers” and the “guardian wrapped in rotting fabric”) is increased by the sand, which is described as “soft, dank, slimy”, being compared to “the mud of Flanders”, probably alluding to the severe physical hardships suffered by soldiers in many wars on European soil. The potential evocation of armed conflicts like the Thirty Years War, the Spanish Succession War, or the First and Second World Wars – the macabre pictures of dead bodies buried in the slimy and dank lands of Belgium – come up in the minds of narrator and reader. They feel surrounded, in a terrifying nightmare, by all those corpses sunk in the mud of Flanders, “in which generations of grenadiers now lie dead, trampled in the postures of sleep. If I am still for more than a moment I begin to sink, inch by inch” (*Foe*, 156).

This anonymous narrator is thus imbued with some of the feelings of Coetzee's characters, as that voice often repeats the words of Friday and Susan. Precisely at this moment, when the narrator is visiting another part of the ship the words addressed by Susan to Foe – discussed earlier by Patrick Hayes as taken from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* – recur: "It is not a country bath-house" (*Foe*, 156). We know what the narrator means, as Hayes has remarked by quoting the whole passage from *Foe* (113-4) and the original text by Dostoevsky. The initially enigmatic allusion to the "country bath-house" is a symbol of eternity: "at the time it will seem like any Sunday in the country; only later will it come home to us that we are in eternity", says Susan (*Foe*, 114); "try supposing that all there will be is one little room, something akin to a country bath-house, with soot on the walls and spiders in every corner, and there's your eternity for you" (Dostoevsky, qtd. by Hayes, 107-8).

This metaphorical allusion to eternity is emphasised by the details of the cabin the narrator contemplates once they go through the door, as well as by its reference to the past ("three hundred years ago", Daniel Defoe's time). It is certainly nothing like that peaceful little room "with soot on the walls and spiders in every corner", but something much more macabre, following the pattern of ghastliness that dominates the last section of the novel: "In the black space of this cabin the water is still and dead, the same water as yesterday, as last year, as three hundred years ago" (*Foe*, 156-7).⁹ On the novel's last page, the devices employed by Coetzee, such as enumeration and a somewhat chaotic concatenation of features, are repeated and further expanded:

Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands, puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, float like stars against the low roof [...] In the last corner, under the transoms, half buried in sand, his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs, I come to Friday. (*Foe*, 157)

When the narrator approaches Friday, "half buried in sand", and kneels over him, wondering "what is this ship?", they answer themselves (and the reader) through a declaration that critics have found enigmatic, characterised by enumeration and chaotic concatenation, and obliquely allusive to the universe and eternity:

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. (*Foe*, 157)

5. The light cast by Borges's "The Writing of the God"

This stylistic device (enumeration and chaotic concatenation) has been examined in detail by Jaime Alazraki in his analyses of the style of Borges's dream-like tales (*La prosa*, 370-82; and *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 44-51), in particular in connection with three stories that bear some resemblance with *Foe*: "The Aleph", "The Zahir" and "The Writing of the God" (all of them included in the volume *The Aleph*, 1949).¹⁰ These three tales – in the tradition of the wisdom tale mentioned by Hayes (112-3) – deal with the concepts of the universe, eternity and divinity. Those concepts also lie in the background of *Foe*, and especially in this final section, so a careful reading of these Borges stories, and especially "The Writing of the God", is pertinent.

We see that the narrator tries again to open Friday's mouth in order to obtain an explanation, some words that might clarify the mystery of the scene and probably also of Friday's own nature. But if early on only the "sounds of the island" had come out of that mouth, now the narrator recognises that the answer cannot come in words ("this is not a place of words"), because those words would be "filled with water and diffused", and – this is certainly important – because the place where they are "is a place where bodies are their own signs". I think the meaning of this last phrase – variedly interpreted by critics – can be associated to the mystic belief about the body being a dark prison that needs to be transcended, as Alazraki has written in his comments on a passage from "The Writing of the God" (*Borges and the Kabbalah*, 45). In it the reader can find many parallels (even in details of vocabulary) to the descriptions of section IV of *Foe* quoted above. It is Tzinacán, the priest of the Pyramid of Qaholom, that speaks about the prison in which he finds himself:

I felt lost. The sand crushed my mouth, but I cried out: *I cannot be killed by sand that I dream – nor is there any such thing as a dream within a dream.* A bright light woke me. In the darkness above me, there hovered a circle of light. I saw the face and hands of the jailer, the pulley, the rope, the meat, and the water jugs.

Little by little, a man comes to resemble the shape of his destiny; a man is, in the long run, his circumstances. More than a decipherer or an avenger, more than a priest of the god, I was a prisoner. Emerging from that indefatigable labyrinth of dreams, I returned to my hard prison as though I were a man returning home. I blessed its dampness, I blessed its tiger, I blessed its high opening and the light, I blessed my old and aching body, I blessed the darkness and the stone.

And at that, something occurred which I cannot forget and yet cannot communicate – there occurred union with the deity, union with the universe (I do not know whether there is a difference between those two words). (*Collected Fictions*, 252-3)

By reading only these three paragraphs from "The Writing of the God" we can make sense of the meaning of Coetzee's chaotic and nightmarish description of the shipwreck scene: the water, the sand in which the narrator sinks, the rope around their neck (evoking Friday's scar), the darkness and dampness (that impedes the candle to give light), Friday's mouth, the bodies being "their own signs", "the home of Friday", and the

metaphorical stream that comes out of Friday's mouth, flowing up "through his body and out upon me", and advancing "to the ends of the earth [...] soft and cold, dark and unending" (*Foe*, 157).

Borges links the narrator of his tale to the deity, which he suggests is the same as the universe ("I do not know whether there is a difference between those two words", 253). This is also what Coetzee has done in the last section of his novel, by blurring the distinction between the narrator and the characters of the novel; that is why the narratorial voice seems to impersonate Susan and uses her words (possibly also Foe's and Cruso's). All of these voices have the authority of authorship, and thus can be equated to the deity in Borges's tale: all of them are the "god" of their writings. As Friday cannot speak, identifying him with the narrator is more difficult; but not impossible. Coetzee suggests that there is also a correspondence between the mutilated slave and the narrator/reader. It is not only that both bear a rope around their necks, as already mentioned; perhaps even more significantly both are writers, god-like authors who create/write their worlds.¹¹

Critics have often quoted from the dialogue between Susan and Foe in section III of the novel, in which Foe insists Susan should teach Friday to write. When Susan argues that he wouldn't be able to write because he cannot speak, Foe answers that "[w]riting is not doomed to be the shadow of speech" (*Foe*, 142), and suggests that "God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it" (143). Even conceding – as Susan argues – that we cannot read God's writing ("he employs a secret writing, which it is not given to us, who are part of that writing, to read", 143), Foe affirms that "God's writing stands as an instance of a writing without speech" so that, even if Friday has no speech, "he has fingers, and those fingers shall be his means" (143). Eventually Friday comes to writing, although what he writes is unintelligible to Susan or Foe, like God's writing: "He is writing, after a fashion [...] He is writing the letter *o*", as Susan admits (*Foe*, 152).

Significantly, Borges's tale also dealt with the writing of a God in similar terms as those contained in the dialogue between Susan and Foe, emphasising the difficulty or impossibility of understanding what this God writes:

On the first day of creation, foreseeing that at the end of time many disasters and calamities would befall, the god had written a magical phrase, capable of warding off those evils. He wrote it in such a way that it would pass down to the farthest generations, and remain untouched by fate. No one knows where he wrote it, or with what letters, but we do know that it endures, a secret text, and that one of the elect shall read it. I reflected that we were, as always, at the end of time, and that it would be my fate, as the last priest of the god, to be afforded the privilege of intuiting those words. (*Collected Fictions*, 251)

Is Friday perhaps "one of the elect"? Might Friday be representing God, repeating the writing of the god in his esoteric scribbling of an endless series of *o* letters? We cannot forget the symbolism of the letter *o* as standing for the perfection of the circle, where alpha and omega meet. In this way Friday stands for the creator of perfection, the creator of the world. In other terms, as Tzinacán very accurately puts it, God only needs to utter a single word, because in that word is "*absolute plenitude*. No word uttered by a god could be less than the universe, or briefer than the sum of time. The ambitions and poverty

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of human words – *all, world, universe* – are but shadows or simulacra of that Word which is the equivalent of a language and all that can be comprehended within a language” (*Collected Fictions*, 252). The letter *o* written by Friday might be seen as the Word, the world, everything, the universe. This explanation seems more feasible in this context than other readings, such as Dick Penner’s, who regards Friday’s *o* as an echo of the expletive *O*’s by Daniel Defoe’s original Friday, or even that this circular sign might be a number (0) rather than a letter (Penner, 123-4).

Relevantly, Friday is presented in *Foe* as a parallel to the priest Tzinacán, who lived in the darkness of his cell (in Friday’s case, also in the metaphorical darkness of his silence). Tzinacán, like Friday (and like the king and the god of “Brodie’s Report”), was a victim of mutilation by “the men who got down from their high horses [and] scourged me with burning irons [...] They tore my flesh, they crushed me, they mutilated me, and then I awoke in this prison, which I will never leave alive” (*Collected Fictions*, 250). As explained above, that prison is the body, “not a place of words” but “a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (*Foe*, 157). That home is synonymous of death, but its mystical meaning is that of transcendence, as Alazraki commented in relation to “The Writing of the God”. This interpretation of “bodies” and “the home of Friday” provides a congruous account of the contents of the last paragraph of the novel, which rises Friday to a position of power and relevance that makes him the god of the story.

The end of the novel is a return to Friday’s mouth, but what comes out of his mouth are not only “the sounds of the island”, as it happened at the end of the first part of section IV (*Foe*, 154), but a powerful description of the world; a world that transcends the physical reality of the island and the limits of individuals. It is that mysterious stream which, “without breath, without interruption”, flows up and out, “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” (*Foe*, 157).

Borges was inspired, among other sources, by the Hindu symbol of the *Bhavacakra* (Wheel of Life, or Wheel of Being), and his story contains references to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which are not directly present in *Foe*. Alazraki writes about those debts with lucidity, and extends the mystical experience of Tzinacán to other tales, such as “The Aleph” and “The Zahir”, since both are symbols of the universe, which is paradoxically to be found in very small and apparently insignificant objects (*Borges and the Kabbalah*, 45-51). Reading them as possible intertexts of *Foe* is, however, not so productive in terms of contents and language as it happens with “The Writing of the God”. Nevertheless, the basic symbolism about transcendence and the supreme value of that which is apparently worthless and irrelevant – as in many wisdom tales – is common in all these texts, and shared by Borges and Coetzee. Coetzee’s interests and echoes can be heard in the abovementioned Borgesian tales. It is not surprising that Coetzee has declared his proximity to Borges’s gnosticism in very categorical terms, acknowledging his interest in the ethical and aesthetic motivations behind his mysterious stories which explore the self without falling into the “Gothic hysteria of a Poe”. In Coetzee’s own words, taken from his review of Borges’s *Collected Fictions*:

Borges's gnosticism – his sense that the ultimate God is beyond good and evil, and infinitely remote from creation – is deeply felt. But the sense of dread that informs his work is metaphysical rather than religious in nature: at its base are vertiginous glimpses of the collapse of all structures of meaning, including language itself, flashing intimations that the very self that speaks has no real existence.

In the fiction that responds to this dread, the ethical and the aesthetic are tightly wound together: the light but remorseless tread of the logic of his parables, the lapidary concision of his language, the gradual tightening of paradox, are stylistic traces of a stoical self-control that stares back into the abysses of thought without the Gothic hysteria of a Poe. (*Stranger Shores*, 147)

These words provide safe ground for supporting a reading of *Foe* on the basis of the Borgesian intertexts examined in this essay, because “the collapse of all structures of meaning” that Coetzee attributes to Borges, and the reference to the “flashing intimations that the very self that speaks has no real existence”, can equally be used to describe Coetzee's fiction. In this regard, *Foe* is very much a case in point, as previous criticism has amply demonstrated in connection with authority, authorship, gender and subaltern speech. The stylistic qualities Coetzee so much appreciates in Borges – which are evidence of his mastery of paradox, concision and self-control – are also remarkable traits of *Foe*, unquestionably one of the most memorable novels written by J.M. Coetzee.

NOTES

¹ For the sake of stylistic consistency, works by Borges will be cited in English, particularly from Andrew Hurley's translation in the 1998 Penguin edition of *Collected Fictions*. In the case of the title of *The Maker*, which is an accurate translation of the original Spanish (*El hacedor*), it is necessary to point out that the first translation of the book (1964) was entitled *Dreamtigers*.

² Chris Prentice mentions other critics who have echoed Rich's allusion to “diving into the wreck”, such as Barbara Eckstein, Manuel Almagro Jiménez, Judie Newman, and Laura Wright, but concludes that “the question of who has made this descent, who narrates Section IV, is not clearly resolved” (Prentice, 109, n. 18).

³ Other interesting poststructuralist contributions are the Derridean and Lacanian reading of the novel by Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran, especially pp. 439-42; Christopher Peterson's analysis of the meaning of silence and speech; and Jay Rajiva's Derridean exploration of the role played by Christianity and colonialism. Worth noticing are also Holly Flint's paper, which draws on Spivak's discussion and examines *Foe* in the context of white writing and the pastoral and anti-pastoral genres; and María José Chivite de León's book, in which she examines the specular structure of the novel (47-72), as well as the issues concerned with authorship, representation, writing, and alterity (72-115).

⁴ Nevertheless, Chris Bongie interprets – in a somewhat convoluted manner – that the anonymous narrator is Friday himself, “one who has been initiated into the realm of writing, and who is now in a position to reflect back upon himself, to plumb the depths of a self to which he no longer has true access” (279). In a similar line of thought, Lewis MacLeod, has questioned the alleged tonguelessness attributed to Friday, making an absolutely different (and interesting) reading of his silences. For further comments on Friday's silence and his writing, see Dominic Head (120-6).

⁵ The first English translation (by Norman Thomas di Giovanni), entitled *Dr. Brodie's Report*, was published in New York in 1972 (and in London in 1974), so it is very likely that Coetzee knew Borges's

Brodie's Report long before he started writing *Foe*. Coetzee's deep familiarity with Borges's oeuvre and his translations into English is demonstrated in the review of Borges's *Collected Fictions* (translated by Andrew Hurley) he published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1998 (now included in his collection *Stranger Shores. Literary Essays*, pp. 139-50).

⁶ Fiddian discusses in his book the interest of reading Borges's story in relation not only to *Gulliver's Travels*, but also to other intertexts, such as Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, a tale by Rudyard Kipling ("Lispeth", from his collection *Plain Tales*), and Claude Lévi-Strauss's influential *Tristes tropiques*, which widen the reading of Borges within the current postcolonial debates (Fiddian, 141-54).

⁷ The same reference to President Sarmiento's stance between civilisation and barbarism has been recalled by Lynda Ng and Paul Sheehan in their discussion of Coetzee's novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). These two critics, in their essay on *The Childhood of Jesus*, which is set in an unknown South American country, allude to Sarmiento's project, among other aspects of the presence of Borges's oeuvre in Coetzee's work (Ng & Sheehan, 93).

⁸ This scar is interpreted by Chris Bongie as the trace left on Friday's neck by Barton's deed of freedom, thus associating that scar with writing: "Friday's scattering of petals is a form of writing (and as such intimately related to his captivity, his Lacanian 'captation': it is not only Barton's deed of freedom that will leave the scar around his neck that the anonymous narrator discovers at the very end of the novel; in arming himself with the tools of writing, Friday has also contributed to his own scarification)" (271).

⁹ The presence of ghosts in *Foe* has been noticed before, notably by Dominic Head, with his reference to Daniel Defoe's intertext "A True Revelation of the Apparition of One Mrs Veal" (117-9). Hena Maes-Jelinek, in a different vein, has alluded to the centrality in the novel of "the haunting question of the true nature of reality, of the distinction between ghost and substance", adding that Susan "keeps claiming substantiality, though she also says that she is a ghost haunted by ghosts" (239). In view of the way Susan faces her own ghosts (*Foe*, 132, 134) it is also worth considering the indirect presence of another tale by Borges, "The Other" (in *The Book of Sand*, 1975), *Collected Fictions*, pp. 411-7.

¹⁰ "The Aleph" was translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (in collaboration with Borges) and included in the volume *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969* (1971), pp. 15-29; "The Zahir" and "The Writing of the God" were published in the first miscellaneous collection published in English, *Labyrinths* (1962). However, in this early collection of writings, the story later translated as "The Writing of God" appeared under the title "The God's Script" (pp. 189-97 and 203-7 respectively in the Penguin edition). But, for the sake of consistency, all quotations will be made from Andrew Hurley's edition of *Collected Fictions*.

¹¹ That the reader is a writer is a well-known fundamental concept of poststructuralism, but also a basic tenet of Borges's oeuvre, as he defended vigorously in many of his writings, notably in "Pierre Menard". As Michael Wood has written in relation to Barthes and Borges, "what really connects Borges and Barthes, makes them 'precursors' of each other, so to speak, is the sense not that the author is hidden or ghostly or inaccessible or not needed but that the reader *creates* the author. This proposition is familiar to us now in various nuanced forms, but in Borges and Barthes it rings with a strong sense of discovery" (37).

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