

Decomposing the Authoritative Author: Truth and Confession in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *Summertime*

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Abstract

The works of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee have always been regarded as highly experimental writings in form and content. From his first work *Dusklands* (1974) to his most recent *Summertime* (2009), Coetzee engages with the theme of truth-telling regarding the practice of authority by the authorial characters in his literary texts. In order to pose questions to these “selves,” Coetzee always endeavors to usher in interventions on the part of the other. The current paper intends to explore how Coetzee decomposes authoritative authors so as to reveal previously unheeded voices. In *Foe*, Coetzee exposes the blind spot of Susan Barton’s and Mr. Foe’s concepts of life narrative by disclosing the muteness of the third party, Friday. The absent presence of Friday and his differentiated ways of communication display Coetzee’s anxiety as a white writer. In *Summertime* Coetzee picks up again the problematics of white writing. He goes so far as to make himself a dead writer judged by others, mainly via the form of interviews. Such an arrangement, in turn, leads to a transformed confession, with which Coetzee aims to evade any solipsistic and deictic confession. Coetzee’s *Foe* comes after and totally disfigures the terrain of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* by complicating the relationship between those who are entitled to speak and write and those who are not. In *Summertime*, Coetzee tries to re-conceptualize the idea of the classic with his deliberate arrangement of the biographer and the interviewees as the survivors of his stand-in author. The paper concludes with

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(Received: 1 December 2012; Accepted: 27 March 2013)

positing Coetzee as an ethical writer, discussing how he never feels responsible enough for the other without voices by demonstrating Friday in *Foe* and John Coetzee's father in *Summertime*.

Keywords: truth, author, confession, silence, ethical writing

I. Introduction: Polemic of the Classic and Canonicity

In a lecture titled “What Is Classic?,” given in Graz, Austria, in 1991, Coetzee discusses T. S. Eliot’s ambivalent choice in his English identity and literary progenitors, as well as J. S. Bach’s artistic influence on his contemporaries and subsequent cultures. Coetzee does not directly address the title of this lecture until the last few paragraphs, in which he borrows the solution from the Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert: the capacity of “surviving” is what makes the classic classic. To be specific, it is not a certain “essential quality” of the classic that assists in its persistence; rather, the classic survives because “generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs” (*Stranger Shores* 19). Yet it seems untenable to suggest that generations of people’s involvement in the survival of the classic can be separated from the arts’ interior quality. Does the quality within have nothing to do with the circumstances without, when we consider that Coetzee here reminds us of Herbert’s remarks upon the surviving of the classic in the context of Poland surrounded by vicious intruders? In fact, Coetzee intends to foreground the idea that the establishment of the classic lies in the stream of history, or in contextualized conditions, in which it has to be re-conceptualized by time. Rather than an abstract ideal, classic serves as an embodied and materialized reminder of human history. To understand the dialectic of past and present, we go back to his earlier points concerning history:

Historical understanding is understanding of the past as a shaping force upon the present. Insofar as that shaping force is *tangibly* felt upon our lives, historical understanding is part of the present. Our historical being is part of our present. It is that part of our present—namely the part that belongs to history—that we cannot fully understand, since it requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of historical forces but as subjects of our own historical self-understanding. (15, emphasis added)

It follows that T. S. Eliot is to be interpreted in the context of his reading of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which is taken, in Coetzee’s words, as “a book that will bear the weight of having read into it a meaning for Eliot’s own age” (5). This statement also implies that to read someone with poetical lenses is to read his or her with socio-cultural aspects, even though the latter is, according to Coetzee, at the oppositional side of the former, as far as the methodology of reading is concerned. For the cause of tracing his genealogical path, Coetzee himself relates his fifteen-year-old self’s encounter with Johann Sebastian Bach’s¹ *Well-Tempered Clavier* in

¹ The theme of music continues to be a crucial focus from *Foe* to *Summertime*, as discussed in this current essay.

1955 and relocates this classical collection of solo keyboard music in the present. The classic, capable of being pinned down only contextually at a certain moment of time, should remain open for present (re)interpretations. The paradoxical tangibility of the classic's pastness in the present is exhibited in today's classic re-writing and remodeling enterprise. Under such terms and conditions, despite its being honored as a human asset, the classic inevitably concerns the problem of authority on the part of "original" writers and on those who re-write or interpret. *Foe* is a direct confrontation of Daniel Defoe's classic work and in *Summertime* Coetzee considers how the canonicity of an established writer is challenged. Following the perspective Coetzee has in "What Is Classic?," these two texts indicate stories respectively pertaining to two writers, one being the fictional Crusoe and the other the real-life J. M. Coetzee, who are recast as Cruso and John Coetzee to reveal two differentiated modes of literary survival from what comes prior to them as the canonical. Conceiving of the classic and its canonicity as never standing as it was in any specific past history, Coetzee postulates the necessity of remodeling it by intertwining fact and fictitiousness, one of the signature strategies in his writing. By mingling manuscripts with letters, or interviews with diaries, Coetzee exhausts the possibility of exploring the extent to which the canonicity of an author and his works can be abolished.

From St. Augustine to Rousseau, the act of confession serves as the expression of one's true innermost feeling. For Coetzee, confessing, far from presenting authenticity, always involves no less perjury than uncertainty. Instead of supporting a speaker, confession becomes the most destabilizing force which wobbles his or her statement of truth. Theologically, confession signifies excess because if God knows all, the act would be of total redundancy. Yet, if understood in terms of secular performativity, it is never enough, especially when the confessional performer is a writer. Truth, the goal confession intends to reach, is "made" or produced, and waits to be verified.² Jane Poyner, commenting upon Coetzee's later works, states that he is "less interested in the truth value of narrative than in the mechanisms by which 'truth'—always a category to be questioned in Coetzee—is brought to light" (168). Under such circumstances, the meaning of what has been confessed remains in a process of transformation. Attempting to confess his dilemma as a white writer while not identifying his own confession with his protagonists', Coetzee exerts different forms of confession.

² Regarding the importance of how confession is verified, one may refer to Peter Brooks's *Troubling Confessions*, which combines cases of law and literary works in the discussion of confessional speech that has become "more crucial in defining concepts—sincerity, authenticity—that we are supposed to live by . . . Unless the content of the confession can be verified by other means, thus substantiating its trustworthiness, it may be false—false to fact, if true to some other sense of guilt" (6).

Nevertheless, Coetzee, at the same time, also debunks the sincerity of confession by revealing that confession, under diverse guises carried out by a writer, is not a channel towards pure truth, since self-censorship is always already implicated as one *intends* to confess. Whenever a character or an author employs confession as a narrative, his or her authority incurs doubts. In *Foe*, the problematic of the authority of an author is marked in Mr. Foe's allegory and the debate between Susan Barton and Foe concerning Friday's right to a voice. In this section, the paper aims to explore the paradox Barton encounters when she finally recognizes that the narrative of her genuine life is tied up to the impossibility of narrative and dialogue in Friday, after all her attempt to get her story written out, to assume the role of a (male) writer, and to contend with Mr. Foe about what is worth writing with regard to the perspectives from both the writer and the character. Additionally, Michel Foucault's study of confession will be briefly brought in for further understanding of how the entire book of *Foe* implicates the mechanism of institutionalized hegemony of the confessional system Barton tries hard but ultimately fails to defeat. Being an accomplice in the system seems to be the destiny of anyone who confesses, or is confessed.

If Coetzee employs certain characters to speak for him in his earlier novels, such as Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the medical officer in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and Susan Barton in *Foe* (1986), then his later works like *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* (2002), *Slow Man* (2005), *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Summertime* (2009) demonstrate his various attempts to present characters highly identical to him, who paradoxically confess too much and not enough at the same time, owing to the essence of confession this paper aims to analyze. In his latest novel, *Summertime*, which is regarded as the completion of his trilogy of fictionalized memoirs (following *Boyhood* and *Youth*), Coetzee again deals with what is examined in *Foe*: who possesses the power of discourse and how a writer/speaker functions in the book. In *Summertime*, confession is carried out in John's³ third-person point of view in his notebooks. Additionally, the interviews with the biographer Mr. Vincent and John's five former acquaintances serve as Coetzee's transformative confession carried out by the other, and crucially, *for* the other. Both *Foe* and *Summertime* express Coetzee's anxiety and reluctance to assimilate the other in his authorial voice. His oeuvre is a collection of works which differently but persistently

³ For the clarity of discussion, in my discussion "Coetzee" indicates the real-life writer J. M. Coetzee, whereas "John" stands for the character who is also a deceased writer, to whom Vincent intends to dedicate his biography.

stage ethical problems and seek to give voice to the other. With these two texts, one from the late eighties and the other from the end of the first decade in the twenty-first century, we are able to realize that Coetzee, by minimizing the authority of the author to the utmost, seeks not to topple the role of the author or claim its death,⁴ but more fundamentally, to assert that the essence of writing is the revelation of the other. His is the ethics of writing.

II. *Foe*: A Vain Attempt to Retrieve the Life Story of the Self in the Lost Voice of the Other

In every story there is a silence. . . . Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story.

—*Foe*

Coetzee was charmed by *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Written by Himself*⁵ in his childhood. He used to believe in the existence of a real-life person named Robinson Crusoe and in his experiences on an island, partly because Defoe⁶ claims in *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* that the book *Robinson Crusoe* is truly written by a namesake person. After learning that it is fictional, Coetzee bears in mind that the blurring of what is real and what is made up in writing seems to be inevitable. With this experience, Coetzee determines to seek what is hidden underneath the interlacing relations between characters, authors and readers in his writing career. *Foe* turns out to be Coetzee's direct literal demonstration of such a blurring. In this novel, Coetzee does not simply endeavor to bring forth the presence of a woman and a black (Friday here is an African⁷); moreover, he foregrounds the question of authorship undergoing the discursive debate between Susan Barton and Foe over such problems

⁴ Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year*, speaking with the mouth of a writer called J. C., remarks that "Announcement of the death of the author and of authorship made by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault a quarter of a century ago came down to the claim that the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks" (149). Here in the chapter titled "On authority in fiction," J. C. argues against some of the Russian formalists' literary theory which renders the works of authors like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky rhetorically and formalistically determined.

⁵ Hereafter shortened as *Robinson Crusoe*.

⁶ This is seen not only from hindsight, but also from the historical account that Defoe as the writer of the famous Robinson Crusoe trilogy is already identified. Coetzee also refers to the fact in his essay "Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*," collected in *Stranger Shores* (2001).

⁷ While the skin color of Defoe's Friday is tawny, Coetzee's is "black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool" (*Foe* 5).

as who should decide what is to be contained in the adventurous book based on Barton's experience on the island and, of equal importance, over the debate Friday's voicelessness triggers. Supposed to be associated with the telling of truth, confession is often linked to autobiographical account. Yet, autobiography is for Coetzee "*autrebiography*" (*Doubling the Point* 394) since it is not simply involved with the other, but it is also told *with* and *by* the story of the other.

In *Foe*, confession, far from a private act, is rendered political. In the scene Barton argues with Mr. Foe for the source of her story on the island, Foe responds intriguingly with a story of a female Irish prisoner's confession. The woman, accused of theft, is about to be escorted to Tyburn (the place of execution then in London). Before this, she implores for a minister for her "true" confession, even while admitting the falsehood of her previous one. Yet the minister is astonished to learn that, in addition to the current crime she has committed, there are a great number of inappropriate deeds he finds difficult to attribute to this woman. What is crucial here is that in the process of her persuading the chaplain into believing her confession, she becomes less self-confident of it: "if my repentance is not truly felt (and is it truly felt?—I look into my heart and cannot say, so dark is it there) . . . is that not sin doubled?" (124). For the rest of the time, the prisoner keeps "confessing and throwing her confession in doubt" (124), until the minister cannot stand it and thereby dismissively shrives her. Barton realizes the story insinuates that she is this woman, and that the chaplain stands for Foe, who, to Barton's dismay, has "the last word" (124). There are two dimensions Coetzee intends to bring forth, the first being the trickiness of confession, and the second the disciplinary function of confessing. The search for the truth supposed to be produced by confessional acts, according to Coetzee's study of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed*, ends either in the self's failing to know better of oneself than the other does of him or her ("inadequate self-analysis" [*Doubling the Point* 258]), or in the inevitable eventuality that "behind each true, final position lurks another position truer and more final" and thereby it is "deferring the truth endlessly, coming to no end" (*Doubling the Point* 292). Commenting upon Coetzee's reading of Dostoevsky's "double thought," Gilbert Yeoh points out that "[Coetzee] highlights how self-examination, as opposed to enabling truth-telling, drives the self into an infinite regression of moral self-doubt about its motives" (334). The abovementioned prisoner-confessant allegory belongs more to the latter than to the former in Coetzee's analysis, so does the argument between Barton and Mr. Foe. The Irish prisoner and Barton both devote themselves to the teleological pursuit of truth, while remain constantly skeptical of their quarry. In other words, the prisoner insists on telling her

crimes all over from the beginning to the very end so that her absolution can be achieved, yet she is conscious of the nature of implosion inherent in confession. In “Confession and Double Thoughts,” one of his most important essays collected in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee indicates that

We are now beyond all questions of sincerity. The possibility we face is of a confession made via a process of relentless self-unmasking which might yet be not the truth but a self-serving fiction, because the unexamined, unexamined principle behind it may be not a desire for the truth but a desire to *be a particular way*. (280, emphasis in original)

Never steady and innocent as it is believed to be, confession is understood as the “made” confession. The gesture of “self-unmasking” could involve the “desire to be a particular way,” but it can also be a failure of searching for a true confession, especially when it is institutionalized. Michel Foucault in his lectures, given in 1975, studies the system of confession from the seventeenth century onwards, but contingently dates it back to as early as the eighth century. In the thirteenth century, people, following the religious ritual, “must confess after committing a serious offense” (174). Additionally, they are commanded to confess in “obligation of continuity,” which leads to “requirement of totalization” and “exhaustion” (174) when it comes to confessional performance. It is far from enough for people to merely admit their serious offences; minor sins must also be included. The confessing ritual the Irish woman follows can actually be traced back to the earlier days Foucault discusses. What is even more significant concerning confession is the presence of confessors, usually priests, who hold the “power of the keys”: “There is only penance if there is confession, but there is only confession if one confesses to a priest” (Foucault 176). Barton is observant in that she detects the power structure and political aspect of the confessional system. The priest who has “the last word” is also complicit with the secular force of law administration, with which she associates the execution the prisoner, her double, is about to face. Barton sees the irony that it is the Irish woman who persists in obeying the ritual of confession, whereas, the minister, one of the representatives of the performance of confession, is negligent even though he carries the obligation of absolving the sinner. The act of confessing is consequently directed from what is religious towards institutionalized secular performance.

Unsatisfied with Foe’s concept of writing, Barton is also discontented with her own. Impatient of waiting for the debt-dodging Foe, she assumes the task of writing her story. Like the Irish criminal, Barton gradually senses the treacherousness of writing-confession and realizes that the corollary of the impossibility of rendering authentic her narrative has been the inescapable association of her story with Friday, the tongueless ex-servant of Crusoe.

Remarking on the intense relation to power that canon is, Attridge specifies that “All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others” (181). Coetzee is highly aware of the domination an author can impose upon his or her characters:

My novel, *Foe*, if it is about any single subject, is about authorship: about what it means to be an author in the professional sense (the profession of author was just beginning to mean something in Daniel Defoe’s day) but also in a sense that verges, if not on the divine, then at least on the demiurgic: sole author, sole creator. . . . The notion that one can be an author as one can be a baker is fairly fundamental to my conception of *Foe*. (“Roads to Translation” 145)

With words and swords, to wit Bible and guns, Crusoe⁸ subdues the island and Friday, who is taught foremost to know that “Crusoe” signifies “master,” and who, without being inquired first, is named by the day he is rescued. After returning to the island he regards as his domain many years later, Crusoe presents himself as a colonist, celebrating expansionism. *Foe* is a dramatic re-visitation of Daniel Defoe’s original in that not only the plot and characterization are greatly changed, with Susan Barton being introduced, but the author of the classic, put under close investigation, becomes one of the characters. Coetzee makes us realize that Barton and the story she entreats Mr. Foe to write for her are removed from what we today read in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which, in this case, is paradoxically preceded by *Foe*, a 267-year-later production. Bearing Defoe’s/*Crusoe*’s simultaneously fictional and autobiographical classic in mind, Coetzee examines the “craftsmanship”⁹ of a writer in his or her story-telling. Yet how much truth, if there is any, can be included when an author decides what s/he selects to present? Finding the truth in the end turns out to be “telling” the truth, which always already involves the application of the authority of an author to his writing. Therefore, Coetzee, by means of marginalizing Crusoe in *Foe*, intends to debunk the authoritativeness and creation of an author. He arranges a feminine figure, Susan Barton, in the center, with the seldom-heard voice of the Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* absolutely cancelled, as if the presence of Barton becomes another more oppressive power over Friday in *Foe*. Except for the few pages of the last chapter, the whole narrative in *Foe* is occupied by Barton, including the manuscript of Barton’s account of Crusoe’s island, the letters failed to be delivered to Mr. Foe in the second chapter, and the clear record of Barton and Foe’s serious debate on authorship. Here are two levels of restoring the

⁸ The name of the “island king” in *Foe* ends without the letter “e.”

⁹ “Demiurgic,” the word Coetzee employs to describe a writer in the quote above comes from “demiurge,” deriving from Greek *dēmiourgos* via ecclesiastical Latin: craftsman.

voice for the other: one is Coetzee's intention to reinstate the presence of a female character in a colonial text in which only the white male colonizer, Crusoe/ Cruso and his counterpart, the colonized Friday, are allowed to exist; the other is Barton's (and Foe's) preoccupation with understanding Friday, whose story is a necessary complement to hers. Yet "The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. . . . The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means to Friday" (*Foe* 118). As for Coetzee's recovery of Barton's voice, we could consider the whole novel as his reconstruction of Barton's narrative, after he "discovers" the manuscript left by Barton in a dispatch box. Of course the box could include Foe's texts of Barton's story, but Coetzee seems to accept only Barton's self-account. The evidence lies at the end of the first chapter, where we find the whole chapter to be Barton addressing Mr. Foe. Moreover, the novel begins with Barton's words: "At last I could row no further" (5), while in the fourth chapter, in which the narrative is taken by an unidentified person believed to be Coetzee, the first page of the manuscript reads "Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further" (155). The addressing of Foe is omitted and postponed to the end of the first chapter. It turns out that Coetzee, despite the fact that the readers recognize Coetzee instead of Barton as the author of the novel, endeavors to identify himself as an editor of *Foe*, by attempting to "authenticate" the fictional, just as Daniel Defoe did approximately three hundred years ago. By so doing, while Coetzee technically cancels his identity as the writer of a novel, Barton can still show her self-conscious discomfort of writing of the other and with the other, which is felt by Coetzee himself.

Coetzee's confession of his guilt of possessing the right to speak is inferred in the scene of Barton and Foe's lovemaking. During their intercourse, the former straddles the latter, claiming "This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets" (*Foe* 139). Barton intends to be dominant as far as the production of the text is concerned: "She must do whatever lies in her power to father her offspring" (140). Barton contends for discourse but, at the same time, she ensnares herself in the logic of the patriarchal production of discourse: "I still endeavor to be father to my story" (123). Right after it, Barton and Foe are complicit in trying to extract words from Friday so that their separate wishes can be fulfilled, one to have his book published, the other to accomplish a real and substantial story so that her life becomes complete as well. Barton announces that "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," while Foe insists that "We must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday" (142). Both Barton and Foe resolve at this stage to do what is impossible, that is, the cracking of Friday's muteness. Yet to their disturbance, Friday remains silent.

Friday, like Coetzee's other characters of radical alterity (the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, for instance), refuses to be assimilated into the institutional system of language, here specifically referring to the language of English. Mr. Foe reminds Barton that Friday's silence indicates his availability to being appropriated as they wish. Nonetheless, his silence also provides the chance to explore the possibility of thinking otherwise than voicing and writing. Owing to Friday's inability to speak,¹⁰ Foe suggests that Barton teach him to write. Instead of writing the taught words "Africa," "mother" and "ship" (146), Friday finally draws human feet with eyes on them, which reminds Defoe's readers of the scene in which Friday bows down to Crusoe's feet after the latter rescues him from the hands of the cannibals. The parallel leveling of Friday's eyes and Crusoe's feet symbolizes mastery and subservience. Nevertheless, we will never know what the drawing means, just as Friday's act of casting buds and petals in the river remains unknown.

The Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* speaks English quite well and he seems to be endowed with the gift for reasoning over critical issues such as theology, while the Friday in *Foe* acquires only a few words Crusoe teaches him for the sake of convenience. There is one scene with Friday seating himself at Foe's table scribbling a series of "O"s before Barton stops him. For what the "O" means, Richard Begam gives two possible explanations. First, we can regard "Friday's writing as a textual gap or lacuna." Accordingly, "Friday has written himself into Coetzee's novel, but as a 'shadowy presence' that white writing cannot apprehend" (123). Another interpretation harks back to *Robinson Crusoe*. Begam indicates that before Friday's conversion to Christianity, he worships the great Benamuckee, the god his peoples believe in and say "O" to as reverence (Begam 123; Defoe 218). Although the two interpretations are oppositional to each other (one connotes Friday's "shadowy absence" in Foe's draft or in Coetzee's book; the other asserts his existent unity with the god and his/her creation), what is intriguing here is that both of them concern a form of language other than English. It could be Friday's own language or sound of communication that the white writing fails to comprehend. Friday's dressing in Foe's authorial robe and his use of the writer's pen and paper seems to be, if not an accusation, a mockery against the white writing of English language. Barton queries after looking into Friday's eyes: "would it not be an African spark, dark to my English eye?" (*Foe* 146). Her desire "to hear the truth of how [Friday] was captured by the slave-traders

¹⁰ In fact we never know if Friday really cannot talk. Susan Barton can't even ensure whether Friday's tongue is cut or not. Whether Friday is unable to speak or he resolutely defies language remains a mystery.

and lost his tongue” (57) is as strong as her desire to keep what she believes in Foe’s and her separate narratives. In a heated debate, Mr. Foe indicates that Barton’s attempt, via words, sounds or tunes, to return a voice to Friday will turn out to be in vain. Responding to Barton’s belief in understanding Friday’s needs through every means of communication possible, Foe argues that such attempts as to seek the ideas of “Freedom, Honour, Bliss” (149) only gives in to the “imprisoning nature of language games” (Head 32): “as it was a slaver’s stratagem to rob Friday of his tongue, may it not be a slaver’s stratagem to hold him in subjection while we cavil over words in dispute we know to be endless?” (*Foe* 150). Obsessive about Friday’s “lost tongue,” Barton is also worried about the lost words in Foe’s story of her life. To return to the above-mentioned postulation, equally crucial interpretation is that if regarding the whole narrative as composed by Barton and edited by Coetzee, then it is Foe who is deprived of the source of the authorial power of a writer, and it seems to be especially ironic when Foe ends the debate with “I would not rob you of your tongue for anything, Susan” (150). In either case, in the end, we witness the mutual appropriation of what should belong to the category of discourse for their right to voice between Barton and Foe, but Friday is, like the hole in his mouth, a forever lacuna. Coetzee, the real existent person who wrote *Foe*, undergoes the experience of becoming-woman/Barton, in spite of the feminist endeavor to retrieve her authorial right subject to her (un)conscious wish to assume the role of the male author, and so to be “father to [her] story” (123). Yet, becoming-Friday is a task of impossibility for Coetzee, at least at the time the novel is published in 1986. Friday in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* has become the prototype of Coetzee’s colonized and dominated characters in diverse aspects, who are either outside the reign of the English-speaking world, or simply mute. Friday in *Foe* taking both is the remotest other Coetzee can imagine to date. Like Barton, Coetzee strives to speak for him and, at the same time, feels guilty accordingly when doing so.¹¹

¹¹ One of the most discussed essays on Coetzee’s writing of silence comes from Benita Parry’s “Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee.” As a contrast to my discussion of Coetzee’s writing of the mute as an “active” returning the voice to those who are suppressed and unheard, Parry argues that his narrative strategies fail to do so. She claims that “despite [Coetzee’s] fictions’ disruptions of colonialist modes, the social authority on which the rhetoric relies and which it exerts is grounded in the cognitive systems of the West” (150). In other words, to Parry, it is difficult for Coetzee to create a real marginal character and speak for him or her, because it is destined that he is unable to escape the fact that the genre of novel is coterminous with European mindset and discourse. Parry’s view seems unfair for she refuses to affirm that these strategies, to a certain extent, do render problematic and flimsy the European discourse Coetzee is blamed for being immersed in.

III. Transformed Confession in *Summertime*

To pick up from the previous section, we are able to discern Coetzee's plan to channel his readers' attention to the problematic of language and writing in *Summertime*, which is about one John Coetzee, whose life is known by the reader through the perspectives of his five acquaintances. This time, John Coetzee, an author-character representative of J. M. Coetzee, becomes the locus of deconstruction. In the book, two of the five interviews are translated from Afrikaans (on Julia's part) and Portuguese¹² (on Adriana's part) into English. There are also some French words dotting the text. Coetzee's conscious insertion of these languages serves to problematize his own authorial posture as an English writer. John tells Adriana: "there is nothing special about English. It is just one language among many" (*Summertime* 161). Besides the language itself, Coetzee considers other means of communication. Music and dancing are tropes in both novels. On the island, Barton regards Friday's tune of six notes coming from his reed flute as only noise (*Foe* 28). Nonetheless, when endeavoring to communicate with Friday, thinking "that if there were any language accessible to Friday, it would be the language of music" (96), Barton attempts to play to his tune and to his dancing, only to reveal that they are not attuned to each other (98). For Barton, as well as for Coetzee, to know the story of the other is necessary but impossible. If *Foe* is a one-way failure of understanding, with the doubly oppressed Friday (by Cruso and Foe/Barton) refusing to respond to Barton (in turn oppressed by the male characters, Cruso and Foe), then *Summertime* suggests a two-way decommunication of a writer and characters. Adriana disparages John's theory of love and music. As a dancing teacher, she describes John as a "disembodied" man (198), whose body is divorced from the mind. She even queries "how can you be a great writer when you know nothing about love?" (199). Likewise, believing that the music of Franz Schubert reveals the secret of love, John brings it to bed with Julia, who thence decides that he knows nothing of loving a woman since he is so detached from reality. John, the author of *In the Heart of the Country* doubling the image of Coetzee, and already an established writer by the time Vincent's biography is on the way, fails in understanding his lovers, and vice versa. Dancing bodies and love-making bodies are associated with music in Coetzee's texts; nevertheless, they never match with each other. Through the reading of the critiques of John by Julia, Adriana and Sophie, the readers wonder

¹² In *Foe*, Barton tells us that Cruso curses in Portuguese when he falls ill: "For twelve days and nights I nursed him down when fits of raving overtook him, when he sobbed or beat with his fists and shouted in Portuguese at figures he saw in the shadows" (27).

whether or not John really conforms to these delineations of him. With these mutual break-downs of communication, Coetzee aims to disclose the unfeasibility of constructing a set relation between the writer and his characters. That is, by employing John, simultaneously as a character and a *doppelgänger* to himself in order to explicate his concept of slippage between authors and author-protagonists, Coetzee disempowers the supposed authorization of an author over his or her scripted characters. Truth in confession is thereby forever in suspension, as Barton claims her life to be. Michael Bell remarks “it would seem that Coetzee’s own frankness is exercised in the mode of the open secret, constantly made available through, and yet significantly bracketed as, literature” (218), which generally indicates that Coetzee’s employment of diaries, interviews, notebooks, and manuscripts all together lead to the de-revelation (“open” and at the same “bracketed”) of the truth of one’s narrative.

Summertime’s manifest and plain inclusion of the real-life author, J. M. Coetzee, is a peculiar methodology Coetzee employs to challenge and problematize the border between autobiography and fiction. The purpose is to render complicated the relationship among characters, author-characters, real-life authors and readers. This is one way of making the decomposition of the authoritative author more possible. In other words, it is exactly because Coetzee in fact speaks through all of his characters, readers are given the privilege to choose sides. This fact leaves the space of discourse wide open. *Summertime* is metafictional in that Coetzee appropriates the authority of the writer by rendering it doubly: as a writer (the real-life Coetzee) writing his own autobiography (though fictionalized), and as a writer (the dead John Coetzee) with his autobiography written by a man who is not even acquainted with him. Coetzee, in his trilogy of “autobiographical fiction,” chooses to employ not only the third-person point of view, but also the present tense (*Boyhood*, *Youth* and the two “Notebooks” sections in *Summertime*) so as to, as Carrol Clarkson claims, “pre-empt the possibility of seeing the events recounted from the past as unambiguously severed from the present, and the ‘he’ as unconnected to the ‘I’ who writes” (39). The autobiographical novel is taken by Coetzee as a self-critical confession with the criticisms coming from the other. To be specific, the autobiographical novel as a literary device serves as a conscious and conscientious literary expression of self-inquiry, whose goal doesn’t end up in revealing any identity of the self. Instead, its end is to goad the autobiographical-fictional writing on to seek for the ultimate ethics emerging from the manifestation of the other.

Coetzee assumes the task Defoe took three hundred years ago by pretending to believe in a historical John Coetzee. Yet this book is more complicated in that John is not the one who writes the book but the object of Mr. Vincent’s

biography. In fact, he is the center around which the five interviews revolve. Succeeding yet different from the two previous novels in the sequence, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, which are both narrated from the third person point of view throughout, *Summertime* is constituted by five transcribed interviews parenthesized by two fragments written by John. The background is set between 1972 and 1977, when the real-life Coetzee has married and has two children, one son and one daughter. Yet, in the novel, John is a bachelor living with his father. In addition, Coetzee's constant and repetitive self-deprecating narrative via the chosen interviewees is incompatible with the appreciations for the Nobel Laureate, about which Justin Neuman asserts that "such self-mortifications are dubious forms of doing penance" (130). With these in mind, readers are constantly reminded of the demarcation between what is real and what is fictional in *Summertime*. Or to what extent is the real fictionalized? During Mr. Vincent's interview with Sophie, the most meta-fictional part appears in the biographer's response to the latter's inquiry about why he chooses to conduct his book with a series of interviews instead of the writer's letters and notebooks:

I have been through the letters and diaries. What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record—not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity. As documents they are valuable, of course; but if you want the truth you have to go behind the fictions they elaborate and hear from people who knew him directly, in the flesh. (225-26)

Nowhere is Vincent's distrust of a writer writing his own life better illustrated than in this scene in which a biographer blatantly questions the authenticity of the written materials left behind by his biographical subject. Vincent understands Sophie's skeptical view that those who are "in the flesh" can also be fictioneers, yet he would rather believe in the "fact" provided by the heteroglossiac interviewees than a bunch of information obtained from one person, especially when the identity of this person is a writer. Particularly noticeable is that earlier on when required by Vincent to talk more about the liaison between John and herself, Sophie responds by asking "Do you have authorization?", to which he answers "Does one need authorization to write a book?" (225). The dividing line between a novel and a biography seems to be entirely removed. Although Vincent promises this biography will be "a serious book," this book is nonetheless as untrustworthy as the claim that the combination of each of the interviewees' comments on John is capable of providing a much truer portraiture.

To go further with the function of the interviews, any reader is to regard the contents of them as Coetzee's confession done by the fictional interviewees.

Coetzee, taking a “vulnerable narrative position from which the limits of authority are fully exposed” (Lopez 36), employs these characters’ commentaries on him as his own confession, a confession directed by other people back to himself. In other words, his self-critique is rendered possible through the criticisms from the other. In so doing, Coetzee consciously escapes the dilemma of solipsistic and deictic confession. Nevertheless, these characters are not merely means Coetzee takes for his own ends. They are so highly individualized that they demand to become the center of each narrative. Julia, quite like Susan Barton embodied, disputes her place in Vincent’s book:

[T]he only story involving John that I can tell, or the only one I am prepared to tell, is this one, namely the story of my life and his part in it, which is quite different, quite another matter, from the story of his life and my part in it. . . . You commit a grave error if you think to yourself that the difference between the two stories, the story you wanted to hear and the story you are getting, will be nothing more than a matter of perspective [And] by some clever editing, you can transform it into a story about John and one of the women who passed through his life. Not so. Not so. . . . I *really* was the main character. John *really* was a minor character” (43-44, emphases in original)

This reminds us of Barton’s contention about who should decide what facts need to be chosen as parts of a book, which concerns all those who are related to the story told by a writer. Is Friday a much more significant character than Barton? Or is Julia correct to assert that since John plays only one part in her life, he is thus comparatively unimportant? How is it possible that John becomes a marginal character in the biography dedicated to himself? An equally pivotal question also arises: whose confession is presented here? This last raised question is deliberately suspended. John is at the mercy of the five interviewees’ subjective impressions of him, whose narratives in turn are under the control of the biographer Mr. Vincent, who takes his liberties to adjust, deploy and rearrange the interviews. While questioned by Margot concerning the way in which her interview is demonstrated in the third-person point of view, he defends himself: “I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as a narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content” (*Summertime* 91). Vincent, like Barton and Foe, is conscious of what might be excluded from what is chosen, but it is obvious that he still cannot escape the *aporia* Coetzee endeavors to evade with authorial withdrawal. Like Coetzee’s, pretension to be the editor and compiler of *Foe*, Vincent’s idea of taking the task of an interviewer to present a much more objective judgment, which is a paradoxical phrasing *per se* since judgment always implicates subjectiveness, is destined to arouse doubtfulness unless readers are willing to suspend their disbelief.

The nineteen seventies that Mr. Vincent determines to focus on are known as the harsh time of South Africa apartheid, but in his biography, political events and John's perspective of them are not the main focus. In fact, only a piece of news about a political killing and a colleague's talk of John's political incorrectness are revealed respectively in the opening titled "Notebooks 1972-75" and the penultimate section titled "Sophie." In its stead, *Summertime* emphasizes John's affectionate relations with his four female acquaintances, their ideas (including the only male interviewee Martin, John's colleague at the University of Cape Town) of the writer, and his relationship with his father. Paradoxically, though John is supposed to be the center of this biography, the interviewees with whom the biographer chooses to excavate his past consider John, more or less, a minor character in their lives. Uneventfulness, furthermore, dominates the bulk of the book, whose staging of ordinariness is reminiscent of Barton's reflection upon whether she should accept embellishment to her story: though conscious of the boredom her story might bring to the reader, Barton, rejecting Foe's suggestion of adding flavor to it with the plot of daughter-searching, insists on presenting what she conceives of as the authentic part. In both *Foe* and *Summertime*, Coetzee intends to take his readers to the reconsideration of what lies in the essence of *history* or *her-story*. Should the attractiveness of stories be one of the crucial reasons measuring the extent to which a novel is closer to being a novel? Will a biography be considered not truthful enough if it goes with appealing stories? These considerations do not imply the setting of a borderline between plain narratives belonging to a "truer" biography and mesmerizing stories which accompany fictions. Rather, ordinariness is the cause and effect Coetzee tries to experiment the impossibility of breaking up the two, while truth remains indistinguishable at any rate in Coetzee's works. Anton Leist and Peter Singer describe Coetzee's work as "paradoxical truth seeking" because the quest for truth or "truth-fullness" is "the engagement in a never-ending spiral movement that at no point leads to 'full' truth." They continue to point out that "paradoxical literature ends in confessions and expressive subjectivization, in living through the attitude of criticism and self-criticism" (7). Indeed, in *Foe* as well as in *Summertime*, one *fictional* and the other "factional," Coetzee presents self-critique confession by respectively bringing forth the questionable assumptions of the role of authority by different characters (Friday in Foe's robe, Barton with Foe's pen, Foe and Coetzee taking up Defoe's task) in the former, and pitting the self revealed by the other against the self as the established writer in the latter. While shedding light on the decomposition of the authoritative author, Coetzee aims to direct his readers towards what is *other* than the self. The understanding of this *other-wise* thinking in Coetzee's writing leads to his belief that ethics always emerges when it

comes to the intervention on the part of the other.

IV. Conclusion: Towards the Ethic of Writing

Confessing one's failure to care for the other occupies the mind of Coetzee's characters. Barton is obsessed with Friday's inability to (or refusal to?) speak (English), and even claims that her life is suspended until his story is vented. The lives of the two are bonded together when their stories are revitalized in the words written by a writer. In *Summertime*, on the other hand, John's father, besides the individually interviewed protagonists, is the most frequently presented figure because he stands as the focus John is able to "directly" confess in his notebooks, instead of being confessed by means of the interviews: John's thoughts always revert to one episode of life when he willfully breaks his father's favorite disk in childhood, and on this account he is preoccupied with the idea of compensation after he grows up; he realizes the similarity he shares with his father when it comes to an insipid and solitary life: "sad old men like his father; dull, dutiful sons like himself" (247); he admits his irresponsible idea that forms in his mind during the nursing of his father: "I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you" (266). Despite these personal confessions, John, in his own notebooks, refers to himself in the third-person point of view. "He" is substituted for "I" in these undated fragments. And in a step away from the book, the "he" is doubly removed from Coetzee in that it is first of all used by John to refer to a person who is not-I, and secondly taken by Coetzee to address his character's use of viewpoint in the fiction. Already in the interview appearing in the last part of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee addresses himself in the past days as "he" or "him" (391-95). "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (391), and Coetzee's autobiographical account is *autrebiographical*, intending to give more attention to the life writing of the other, which includes not only the other than the self, but also the self as the other. "How to tell the truth in autobiography" (392) becomes how to tell the truth with the other's biography, that is, with the other's life writing (Barton) and storytelling (the interviewees). And what is pivotal is not to seek for the ultimate truth which does not exist, but to realize that the whatever-whenever-truth can only be possibly illuminated in the process of narrating one's life for, with and by the other. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee indicates that for him "everything that you write . . . writes you as you write it. The real question is: this massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction . . . does it yield only fictions?" (*Doubling the*

Point 17). Does it also yield truth? These are not questions which can be easily answered with the presentation of an ordinary story to be more real one. Through either the textualization of the context or the contextualization of the text, Coetzee repeals the demarcation between the life and the literary. For Coetzee, an author is unable to preempt the meaning he produces. Both *Foe* and *Summertime* regard authorial authority as the dominating obstacle to understanding the other, and such a conscience of the writer is crucial when it comes to the understanding of “enterprise of self-construction” in the light of the other. Coetzee consequently turns his authors (Crusoe of *Robinson Crusoe* and John of *In the Heart of the Country*) and even himself into the characters, or the selves into the others, and cancels their power to claim the writer’s authority by putting them to death in the very beginning of both novels. Succeeding to Crusoe’s¹³ and Foe’s identity as a writer, Barton is a figure who, if not a mouthpiece for, stands in for Coetzee and his sense of dilemma as a white writer hoping to summon the voice of the other. Kossew comments on Coetzee: “Part of his insistence on the particularity of the procedure of novelistic discourse is related to Coetzee’s own awareness of the way authorship and author/ity can operate as potentially colonizing” (6). Author/ity, though not necessarily aligned with colonization, is itself an act of the suppression of voices. Friday is an archetype of a mute object in *Foe*, whereas John’s father, first a non-speechifying figure and later a patient under the surgery of laryngectomy, symbolizes another *autre silencieux* in *Summertime*. In the end, the “true story” (*Foe* 118) depends either on a voice never retrieved, or a secret never told: John wonders whether his father gravitates towards the glamorous colleague, Mrs. Noerdien. Yet, later at the end of the fragment he notes down: “Why say that his father is in love with Mrs. Noerdien when he has so obviously fallen for her himself?” (*Summertime* 260), divulging the self’s inner thought with the telling of the other’s life.

In the introduction for *Confessions of the Critics* he edits, H. Aram Veerer writes “[the contributors of the book] step beyond center and margin, beyond self-effacement and self-absorption, beyond liberal authenticity and identity politics” (xxiii). Comprising collected essays of confessional criticism and confessional autobiography from literary and theoretical critics, this book, Veerer adumbrates, marks a change in the field of criticism today. It is not only that, from the perspective of readers, the “very act of reading refreshes” (xxiii), but that the reflectivity of one’s personal anecdote linked to his or her academic training shows in these “autocritographies.” The same commentary could also

¹³ Crusoe in *Foe* doesn’t even keep notes of his daily life.

be applied to Coetzee, whose works¹⁴ always smack of philosophy and theoretical insight. David Attwell is right to point out, as Coetzee himself also admits when interviewed, that Coetzee's literary writing has something to do with critical theory, and here Attwell means Derridean deconstruction. Coetzee, realizing the philosophical tradition and discourse of criticism he is constantly working with, responds to the comment by clarifying that he is not a "trained philosopher" before he confesses that "contemporary criticism has become very much a variety of philosophizing" (*Doubling the Point* 246). Despite his disapproval of being aligned with philosophers such as Foucault,¹⁵ Coetzee's claim that "The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (246, emphasis in original) carries a tune of Derridean and Levinasian non-arrival ethics. It also suggests that Coetzee's texts have the enchanting power and potentiality to invite critiques from all fields in humanities, even inclusive of law and animal rights. His novel is a "resistance to closure," as Kossew cogently remarks (9). If there is any single focus in Coetzee's oeuvre, it has always been the theme of decomposing the authoritative power of an author-character, and within the theme is the revelation that Coetzee sees confession not only as the locus upon which authorial authority is debunked, but as the site from which the impetus to reflection upon the past (the classic Robinson Crusoe story and canonical position of the dead John Coetzee) in the present is given. Always too much and not enough, confession is for Coetzee a gesture of decoding the secretive truth. Perhaps it would be valid to end with James Wood's appraisal of Coetzee's work with the amalgamation of the postmodern and the traditional. It echoes both the above-discussed fact and fictitiousness concerning the methodology of reading in the two works at issue in this paper, but it also indicates the paradox Coetzee's writing so possesses: a hidden voice burst forth in its boldest as well as its most private way (always too much and not enough), or, to put it in other words, de-revelation of the truth of one's narrative.

We are warned that it is naïve to confuse author and character, even when—especially when—that character is also a novelist. But if Coetzee's novels deflect such inquiries, they also invite them. His books make all the right postmodern noises, but

¹⁴ In addition to fiction, Coetzee is also known as a writer of several books of criticism: *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992), *Giving Offence: Essay on Censorship* (1996), *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (2002), *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005* (2007), as well as numerous published critical papers and the forthcoming *Here and Now: Letters, 2008-2011* (2013).

¹⁵ See note 4.

their energy lies in their besotted relationship to an older, Dostoyevskian tradition, in which we feel the desperate impress of the confessing author, however recessed and veiled. ("Squall Lines" 140)

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解離權威作者： 論柯慈作品《仇敵》和《夏日》裡的 真實與自白

摘要

南非著名作家柯慈一向對於自己作品的形式或內容擁有不懈的實驗精神。從第一部作品《幽暗之地》(1974)到近期的《夏日》(2009)，柯慈的一貫主題均涉及對於真實的敘述，而此敘述與文本中作者式的要角對於權威的施行與運用密切相關。為了將這些「自我」角色置於問題意識之中，柯慈的作法是引入他者的干預。此篇論文試著探討柯慈如何透過揭示未受關注的聲音對於權威作者進行解離。在小說《仇敵》中，柯慈藉由「星期五」這個角色曝現了蘇珊·芭頓與作家福之於生命敘事概念的盲點。「星期五」缺席般的在場以及他殊異的溝通方式突顯了柯慈身為一位白人作家所產生的焦慮之感。而在虛構自傳《夏日》裡，柯慈重拾白人書寫的主題，不過這次他將「自己」設定為一位已故作家，任由身邊女性與同事在與一位傳記作者的訪談中進行評論與批判。文中將指出柯慈此般安排是為導向一種轉化告白，藉此得以逃逸唯我論與直証的自我坦白。論文最後將說明《仇敵》中的「星期五」與《夏日》裡約翰·柯慈的老父所代表的無聲他者使柯慈不得不察覺自身所承擔之責任的不足。也因此，柯慈所進行的倫理書寫將無止盡。

關鍵字：真實，作者，自白，靜默，倫理書寫