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Literature Across Cultures  
3379 words  
26-1-2010

### **Untranslatable Silence: The Power of Silence in Coetzee's *Foe***

Conscious of his status as a white writer in South-Africa, John Maxwell Coetzee often deals with the political situation of his country in his fiction. However, not all of his works focus on this subject. In his novel *Foe*, an adaptation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist, Susan Barton, arrives at an island where a man named Cruso lives together with a black called Friday. Since Friday is unable to speak, he is liable to interpretations from characters and the reader. However, his silence also prevents a solid grip on his character. Although it is tempting to analyse the slave-master relationship of Cruso and Friday as a metaphor of South-African politics, *Foe* is a more sophisticated analysis of freedom and slavery, not only providing insights into relationships between those in power and those without, but also looking at the function of language and silence in those relationships.

Contrary to Defoe's *Crusoe*, who is telling the story of his adventures himself, Coetzee's Cruso is a mysterious man, and together with Susan Barton, the female castaway and narrator of *Foe*, the reader tries to understand and interpret his behaviour and origins. Similarly, Coetzee provides little information on Friday, the black servant of Cruso, thereby challenging the reader into filling in the blanks. Although silence, the alternative to regular discourse, can be seen as inferior, marginalised or discriminated, it can also be seen as a powerful way of revolting against norms and expectations imposed by external authorities. Cruso becomes an example of existentialist philosophy, revolting against the dogmatic language of civilisation by excluding Friday from its use. In this light, Cruso's behaviour and Friday's silence become much more than exaggerated types representing South Africa, and instead criticise the role of authorities in general, imposing meaning on its subjects.

Although it is tempting to consider *Foe* as a critique of colonialism, providing an alternative version of Defoe's classical story of the shipwrecked Englishman, this is only the beginning of Coetzee's argument. When *Foe* is compared to *Robinson Crusoe*, it is obvious Coetzee altered the original to a large extent, changing the nature of Crusoe, Friday and the island they live on, and adding a female protagonist, Susan Barton. In addition, the role of the author becomes increasingly complicated, since Coetzee introduces a character called Foe, an English writer in the role of Daniel Defoe. In *Foe*, it is not Foe or Defoe that imagines the story, but Susan who asks Foe to write a book using her experiences. These changes are only some of the many differences between the books, indicative of Coetzee's view.

In his essay "The Noise of Freedom: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*," Robert Post argues that *Foe* provides a metaphor of the political situation in South Africa as seen by Coetzee. In his explanation, *Foe* is about the relation between slave and master, represented by the relationships between Cruso and Friday, Susan and Friday, and Cruso and Susan. In this metaphor, Cruso represents the white Afrikaner government, exploiting the black population, signified by Friday, and Susan represents the white liberals in South Africa, including Coetzee (145). Her ambiguous treatment of Friday is similar to the role of white liberals in South Africa, which are part of the apartheid system even though they resent it. According to Post, the main theme of the book is freedom, which is struggled for and investigated by all characters. In addition, Friday "is further imprisoned by his inability to understand English, responding only to the few words Cruso taught him" (146). Post then argues that Friday's inability to speak signifies the silencing of black people in South Africa, both political and linguistically: "Blacks, having learned the language of their tribe, are then taught only the Afrikaans or English words they need to know in order to function as servants or other employees of the Afrikaner and English whites" (146).

Although Friday might represent the black people of South Africa, he should instead be seen as oppressed people in general. The larger problem, however, lies in Post's analysis of Crusoe. When compared to Crusoe, Defoe's protagonist, Crusoe lacks the drive of colonialism, the will to impose civilisation on Friday or cultivate the island. Crusoe's undertakings on the island are minimal, and although he spends much time building the terraces, he acknowledges they are of no use to him: "The planting is not for us. (...) We have nothing to plant – that is our misfortune" (33). Whereas Crusoe has a solid connection with his European past, apparent in his behaviour, desires and through his journal, Crusoe seems to be disconnected from civilisation, refusing to record his history and refraining from changing the island into a westernised colony.

Susan wonders at Crusoe's behaviour, and often asks him why he did not civilise the island and Friday. Crusoe, however, does not explain himself the way Susan would expect, but answers her questions incompletely, contradictory or not at all. For example, when Susan asks him about keeping a journal, Crusoe states that "Nothing is forgotten. (...) Nothing I have forgotten is worth remembering" (17). When Susan argues that the details of the castaways are the power of their accounts, Crusoe answers: "I will leave behind my terraces and walls. (...) They will be enough. They will be more than enough.' And he fell silent again." (18). Crusoe's accounts of his past also confuse Susan:

(...) the stories he told were so various, and so hard to reconcile with one another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew what was truth and what was fancy. (...) So in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling. (11-2)

Since Susan often finds Crusoe's answers unsatisfactory, she tries to explain his behaviour and attitude herself, especially after she has returned to England and Crusoe is dead. As Susan thinks of several possible truths concerning Crusoe's past, Friday's behaviour and

the loss of his tongue, the reader is led along by her theories, and has to choose whether these stories are true or not. The persistent fear that Friday might be a cannibal has no grounds except for Susan's interpretation of a remark by Cruso, yet, since there is no evidence against it either, one can never be sure. Friday's silence allows both Susan and the reader to fill in Friday's nature, in the progress defining him. Susan considers Friday as Cruso's slave, and since Friday does not protest, Susan turns him into her own slave when Cruso dies. Susan's explanations become the reality of *Foe*, as long as Cruso and Friday fail to refute it.

In short, Friday's silence allows Susan to construct an image of him, whether it is true or not. Susan realises this towards the end of *Foe*, when she states that there is a difference between her silences and those of Friday:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is matter, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (...), what he is to the world is what I make of him. (121-2)

This can be linked to the suppression of people, both politically and culturally, in South Africa, but also in general. Discrimination, whether based on race, culture, sex or religion, essentially denies the minority the right to speak, which allows for the imposing of a stereotypical image, often considered inferior.

In her book *The Translation Zone*, Emily Apter investigates the status of comparative literature in the world at this time by means of sixteen essays, and argues that translation has become increasingly important in comparative literature and the world in general. Apter considers translation as a political instrument, by which the established order can both

stimulate and impede minorities. The title of *The Translation Zone* refers both to the abstract field of translation between languages and the tension, or even war, between cultures. In a subsection of the book, called “The Politics of Untranslatability,” Apter addresses the silencing of Algeria by calling it “untranslatable” and the power of language as a dogmatic instrument.

Apter argues that the language of the establishment, in her essay the Western world, can be used to silence minorities, by stressing the impossibility of translation. It may be profitable, politically or economically, to exaggerate the differences between cultures and languages to a point where they seem untranslatable, in order to maintain that some cultures are simply different. By stressing the impossibility of translation, cultures can effectively be silenced, denying the possibility to talk back. Although Apter analysis this movement on a global cultural-political scale, the concept is familiar in the context of colonialism. Western powers have exaggerated differences between the local cultures and their own to be able to deny common grounds, making it easier to exploit them. Apter argues that Anglophone and French publishers “have preserved neocolonial networks of metropole-periphery exchange” and that a “neo-imperialist situation” is “looming on the horizon,” in which publishers and the commercial sector determine which languages can be translated and which cannot, effectively silencing some literatures from the global market (100, all quotes).

Coetzee provides an example of silencing with Friday, who has no mastery of the main language in his surroundings, perhaps of no language at all. Moreover, he might not be able to speak at all, since Crusoe argues that his tongue has been cut out. Who has done this remains, again, a matter of speculation, and it can also be argued that there is no proof that Friday has lost his tongue, since Susan was unable to see it when Crusoe tried to show her (Coetzee 22). Nevertheless, whether Friday’s tongue is really cut or not, he is not able to

communicate his wishes to anyone. As mentioned before, his silence makes it necessary for Susan to make up Friday's past and nature.

Another interesting point raised by Apter is the dogmatic nature of language. Apter notes that languages all have their own systematic dogma, which dictates its rules on the users:

The turn to dogma means exchanging a baggy model of translation – identified with easy transfers of identity and willy-nilly notions of cultural transposition, hybridity, or *métissage* – for militant formalism. Dogma captures the sovereign imperiousness of linguistic worlds that whimsically decree the laws and constraints of literary license, or that produce subject living by numbers. 'Dogma' is another name for linguistic essentialism; it is the superstructural expression of base structure in the mother tongue.

(110, original italics)

Apter's concept of the linguistic dogma attributes power to languages, a power which forces all users to express themselves according to the rules of the language. These rules are concerned with linguistic elements such as grammar, but also dictate what is considered literature and define the way people are bound to think. Although Apter focuses on the impact this dogmatic power has on translation, the concept of dogmatic language can also be applied to colonialism. Colonisers often imposed their language on the locals, hoping to change their culture. In the light of Apter's discussion, a foreign language imposed on people obliges them to use its laws and views, thereby altering their way of thinking.

When this use of language is considered, it becomes clear that Friday's inability to speak English might be considered a sign of oppression, but can also be interpreted as a resistance to oppression. When Susan asks Cruso how many English words Friday knows, Cruso says: "As many as he needs," (21). This might be considered an indication of Cruso's unwillingness to educate Friday, so that he can exploit him easier. However, it might also

mean that Crusoe does not want Friday to become a quasi-English slave, which is exactly what Defoe's Friday is turned into. The acquisition of English has not liberated Defoe's Friday, but instead rendered his mind more useful to Crusoe and has adapted him to Western norms.

These ideas are confirmed in Dana Dragunoiu's essay, which focuses on Crusoe's role in *Foe*, and argues that Crusoe is an example of an existentialist hero. When Dragunoiu compares Crusoe to Crusoe, she notes that: "Defoe's hero is a prodigal son who is saved by his own hard work and God's mercy, an adventurer who can narrate his past and present with detailed certainty. By contrast, Coetzee's anti-hero inhabits a historical and metaphysical void in which he seems curiously contented" (310). This void is indicative of Dragunoiu's idea that while Crusoe represents the eighteenth century colonial ideal, as he is active, self-assured and a devoted Christian, Coetzee's Crusoe shows the struggle of the modern man: "Coetzee's Crusoe harbors no illusions about the overarching structures constituting the faith of his predecessor. Stripped of belief in higher principles, higher powers, and the existence of the Absolute, Crusoe's attitude toward himself and his world becomes profoundly ambiguous" (312).

From an existentialist perspective, Crusoe's behaviour can be explained: his disregard for the world beyond his island can be linked to the existentialist belief that all moral systems are in fact human creations, which means that there is no absolute value system. Susan is amazed that Crusoe does not want to be escape from the island, and she asks him why he never attempted to escape: "'And where should I escape to?' he replied, smiling to himself as though no answer were possible" (13). Although Susan tries to discuss some options with Crusoe, it becomes clear he is not interested in leaving the island. Crusoe believes that the rest of the world is governed by absolutist systems, whereas the island allows him to be free and authentic, even though he does not have the comforts of regular value systems. Dragunoiu states that: "The portrayal of Crusoe and his island suggests to me an invocation, a negotiation, and finally an uneasy reaffirmation of existentialism as an ideal for political action" (309).

Coetzee's familiarity with the existentialist philosophy<sup>1</sup> also provides additional support for the reasons of Friday's silence. As Dragunoiu points out: "The existentialists were sensitive to the fact that language encodes ideology within its structures. Cut off from the reality it is supposed to represent, language becomes authoritative, self-enclosed, and self-reflexive" (317). This affirms the idea that Crusoe's antipathy towards the moralising absolutists structures of the world may have been the reason that he chose not to learn Friday English. Dragunoiu argues that:

The towering figure of Crusoe, meditating in silence on the cliffs of his island, refusing to keep a diary, and choosing to teach Friday only the most basic words of the English tongue, suggests a bid for authenticity and self-determination by means of a similar rejection of language. Silence is tremendously significant in Coetzee's portrayal of Friday. Although silence is usually taken to signify the oppression and objectification of the silent individual, Coetzee's treatment of Friday suggests a different view. (317).

From this point of view, Crusoe is not oppressing Friday by denying him the possibility of speech, but is guarding his autonomy by shielding him from a foreign language. Crusoe becomes even more the "lenient master" he believes himself to be as he strives to maintain Friday's autonomy (Coetzee 23).

In contrast to the idea that silence might make it easier for others to construct a false image, the existentialist philosophy argues that it is actually speech that objectifies people, turning them into objects that fulfil a role. By adapting a role in society, people are more easily categorised and are thereby deprived of their autonomy. Since Susan tries to narrate her story to Foe, she tries to explain and categorise all events and characters in her story. Despite Crusoe's and Friday's silent resistance to categorisation, Susan aims to integrate them into a coherent, logical story, and tries to provide them with a history. In essence, she attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> A significant part Coetzee's academic work focused on Beckett's work, and Dragunoiu states that : "Coetzee's early academic work investigated Beckett's existential concerns from a stylistic perspective" (310).



translate them into the language of society, so that the readers can understand them. Scott Bishop argues in relation to *The Life and Times of Michael K* and *Foe* that:

[B]oth Michael and Friday become not only the subject of the interpretation (and therefore the subject of the authority) of other characters in the books, but also the subject of the reader's interpretation. Coetzee puts us, as readers, in the very position he finds so questionable. We see Michael's and Friday's presence as literary and political issues, and we try to interpret the meaning of them as characters; but Coetzee has made Michael and especially Friday resistant to interpretation. That is their nature as figures in the novels: they suggest that the reader should interpret, but they thwart any interpretation. They remain steadfastly silent. (56)

This resistance to interpretation through silence can also be applied to Cruso, albeit in a lesser extent, since he is still a part of societal discourse, even though he has moved away from it.

Susan struggles with Cruso's attitude and Friday's history throughout the book, and towards the end she comes to realise why they resisted her interpretation and communication. It becomes clear to her that she tried to enforce her language, including its laws and values, on Friday and Cruso. As Dragunoiu puts it: "she become[s] aware of the violence of objectification" (320). Susan comes to realise that she could return to a normal life, "to the life of a substantial body" (125), but that "such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing" (126). Dragunoiu also points out that in the passage where Susan feels Cruso's island rocking (Coetzee 25-6), "the absence of solid foundations serves as a metaphor for the existential freedom embodied by Cruso" (315). Coetzee writes: "I thought: It is a sign, a sign I am becoming an island-dweller. I am forgetting what it is to live on the mainland" (26). Nevertheless, Susan cannot adapt to this situation so easily "[a]nd like Beckett's individuals who cannot reconcile themselves to their existential conditions, Barton longs for the putative stability of society and its governing structures" (315). However, when she has lived in

England for a while, she comes to realise that the lack of stability is present in England as well, and that its solid structures of are an illusion, and she desires to return to the island.

In conclusion it can be said that *Foe* provides a deeper consideration of oppression than is evident at first. Although Coetzee reintroduces Friday as a servant of Cruso, their relationship has changed. The many mysteries and blanks in the stories of Cruso and Friday make it necessary for both the reader and Susan, as a narrator, to analyse their actions and interpret them in order to translate their life into a meaningful story. However, Cruso refuses to explain himself and Friday is unable to speak, which prevents accurate translation. As Bishop puts it, Friday “is an unmediated being, and his story is an unmediated story” (55). Although this initially seems to stress the oppression of Friday, since he cannot speak and is therefore unable to alter the image imposed on him, it can also be interpreted as a resistance against the dogmatic power of language, which imposes its rules and values on speakers.

If language can be seen as defining its speakers, to rebel against language is to rebel against the oppression of its structures, which, according to existentialist philosophy, are created by man and not absolute. The relativity of discourse and the values and laws of society creates a void that is both liberating and terrifying, which allows individuals to resist the roles imposed upon them. Dragunoiu states that: “By having him not participate in linguistic discourse, Coetzee gives Friday a certain autonomy, the means of escaping ‘the lapse into thinghood’” (318). Ultimately, it is silence that allows Cruso and Friday to resist the translation into the discourse of the English world and remain isolated and autonomous on their island.

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