So we arrive at a certain paradox. The classic defines itself by surviving. Therefore the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself classic.

One might even venture further along this road to say that the function of criticism is defined by the classic: criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic. Thus the fear that the classic will not survive the decentering acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being the foe of the classic, criticism, and indeed criticism of the most skeptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival. Criticism may in that sense be one of the instruments of the cunning of history.


I

J. M. COETZEE’S fourth novel, *Foe* (1986), is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, with the notable addition of two central characters: a female narrator, Susan Barton, and a male author, Mr. Foe, who is planning to fashion Susan’s castaway tale into a novel. Their disagreement over how this tale will ultimately take shape is the central conflict of Coetzee’s novel. If *Robinson Crusoe* is a protonovel about individual survival in a remote and uncivilized world, then *Foe* is a novel about the challenge of
presenting such a survival story to a city of metropolitan consumers of literature, those who, though they may themselves be metaphysically stranded, live among multitudes.

Coetzee, a South African writer who now lives in Australia, has throughout his career been attuned to the uses of literary heritage, engaging openly with the authors whose sensibilities inform his own. In addition to Defoe, Kafka and Dostoyevsky resonate explicitly in his early work, particularly in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and the *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). With *Foe*, however, Coetzee attained a lyricism that separates this novel from his other works even as it “made canonic intertextuality a fundamental principle” (Attridge 69). He also laid claim to a powerful motif. Robinson Crusoe and Friday are, after all, totemic figures in literature as models of an encounter between the perceived anthropological extremes of human experience: civilization and savagery, enlightened and unenlightened.

Coetzee has summed up *Foe* in terms of authority and its literary counterpart, authorship: “My novel *Foe*, if it is about any single subject, is about authorship: about what it means to be an author not only 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” (“Speaking in Tongues” par. 26). Thus, writing is the novel’s chief mechanism of plot. Coetzee’s novel alters Defoe’s story, then probes the narrative implications of altering a story, of determining where it begins, where it ends, and what material is worthy of inclusion. In so doing, it exemplifies the singular paradox of the rewriting as a subgenre. In pinning a classic to the board to examine and reimagine it, more often than not the writer engenders a plot in which recognizably canonical books are dreamed up but never realized, or realized only in radically altered forms. They give the impression of being fragile, ephemeral things—the very opposite of what we think of as a classic, one that feeds on criticism and resists the caprices of changing times and tastes. In this setting, the classic is a book that, if it exists, does so only by chance, in the context of many other possible books, and at grave risk of imminent disappearance. In her vision of the castaway tale’s narrative structure, Susan refers to Friday’s muteness and lack of language as “a puzzle or hole in the narrative” (121), the absence at its center. In the same way, the book she desires—the evidence of her own trauma, translated into a book for the masses—is the absence at the center of *Foe*. For in the rewriting mode, classic stories are established by their absences and by their inability to attain authority or completion.

The canonical rewritings like *Foe* that have emerged in the last three decades are informed not only by their literary forebears but in a meta-literary fashion by the canon wars of the 1970s and ’80s and the critical advances during that time in postcolonialism and gender studies. It has become conventional wisdom, thanks in part to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s influential primer *The Empire Writes Back*, to read such rewritings chiefly as resistance texts, arguing (along postcolonial or gender lines) against the prevailing canon. I contend that the opposite
is true, that contemporary rewritings such as *Foe* are actually our most canonical texts, for they take canonicity as both their inventive premise and their textual subject. They do not reify the canon so much as they presuppose it; far from resisting, they plot its inevitability. However, they also show the arbitrary and precarious nature of composition, publication, and literary permanence, making the canon into an entity that is penetrable and subject to infinite mutations from within. In this essay, I argue that *Foe*, with its treatment of literary concerns through the rewriting mode, acts as a parable of canonical reading and rereading, shedding light on Coetzee’s conception of the labor of writing, the realities of achieving canonicity, and the project of rewriting novels, canonical and otherwise.

II

Above all else, *Foe* is a dialogue, conducted mostly in letters. But since for much of the novel the reader sees only one side of the correspondence, it begins with the impression of an extended monologue. The writer of the letters for all but the final section is a former castaway, Susan Barton, but, as the initial quotation marks in the novel signify, she is not telling her tale directly to the reader; the bulk of her story is inset within another medium. Five pages in, we gain our first intimation of Susan’s intended recipient, as well as the clue that she has already communicated to him some of her story: a parenthetical aside describes the stranger she encounters on the island as “of course the Cruso I told you of,” which confirms that this letter is not her first (9). It is not until the second chapter, however, that we learn the object of Susan’s direct address: a man called Mr. Foe, “the author who had heard many confessions” during her effort to convince him to give her island saga the literary treatment she, an amateur, cannot manage herself (48).

Susan’s letters set the stage for the novel’s twists on genre and form, as she recounts for Foe not only her own experience in coming to the West Indian island and surviving its isolation but also the tales she hears there from and about her companions, Friday and Cruso, and the stories she tells them. Rather than offering a simple frame narrative, Coetzee allows the circles to overlap, creating series of repetitions. A striking example occurs at the beginning of the book. The narrative opens with a description of the shipwrecked Susan having reached the end of her strength. “At last I could row no further,” she begins. “My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached” (5). Five pages later, having landed on the island and been led by the wordless Friday to meet Cruso, she explains her background to him before declaring, “Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached” (11). The changes to diction are slight, but the echo of the novel’s opening lines is intentional and what has changed is Susan’s audience. At first it was Foe, the reader of the letter; the next time it is Cruso within
the scene and Foe outside it. The description alters and, in its second incarnation, leads elsewhere. In a novel that is itself a second incarnation that leads elsewhere, this is no small gesture. Susan recasts her tale incessantly, if subtly, and Coetzee absorbs into his narrative structure the generative power of stories, how they reproduce and evolve, shifting slightly for each new audience. The effect is an open-ended model of storytelling, in which the writer is free to explore an infinite number of potential directions. In the context of a Defoe recasting, this mode is surprising: it subverts any conventional wisdom about where this particular novel, albeit attached to the characters and themes of *Robinson Crusoe*, is expected to go.

But to Susan, who is not an experienced writer, the creative process is no poetic affair of freedom, genius, or imagination. It boils down to a “matter of words and the number of words” (94). At the same time, she seems caught between contradictory impulses to satisfy both the writer (Foe) and the hypothetical reader. She believes strongly in the necessity of meeting outside narrative expectations; as she puts it, “the world expects stories from its adventurers” (34). Though self-avowedly not a writer, she is a constant critic. She is attuned to the dangers of vagueness in story and style and is wary of having her story or her character overtaken by a familiar trope. She warns Cruso—who in Coetzee’s version is noticeably not keeping a journal—that “seen from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its particularity. All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaway” (18). Originality is, after all, the guiding ethos of her desire to publish her story. Yet even as she transmits her story to Foe so that he can recast it, she begins to doubt her efforts. “I should have said less about him [Cruso], more about myself,” she says, realizing that if the originality of her tale lies in her sex, she forfeits it by giving narrative space to Cruso (51). Likewise she also comes to question her selection of literary ally, asking herself whether she was “wrong to choose Mr. Foe” (79). In these moments of regret, she rewrites her own story before it has even reached print. By the end of the novel, Susan has rejected any intrusion that is not strictly true, and she confronts Foe with regard to her narrative wishes:

The story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right. It commences with my being cast away there and concludes with the death of Cruso and the return of Friday and myself to England, full of new hope. Within this larger story are inset the stories of how I came to be marooned (told by myself to Cruso) and of Cruso’s shipwreck and early years on the island (told by Cruso to myself), as well as the story of Friday, which is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative … Taken in all, it is a narrative with a beginning and an end, and with pleasing digressions too, lacking only a substantial and varied middle, in the place where Cruso spent too much time tilling the terraces and I too much time tramping the shores. Once you proposed to supply a middle by inventing cannibals and pirates. These I would not accept because they were not the
Rightly for a novel that borrows from its ancestor, originality becomes both a problem and a solution. “The booksellers will hire a man to set your story to rights, and put in a dash of color too, here and there,” the captain had told her (40). But the issue of adding the dash of color creates the conflict on which all relationships in the novel hinge. Susan’s story in print, meanwhile, which is the desired object of *Foe*, becomes an elusive thing, a phantom. She has her title ready: “The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related” (67). But in that book’s conspicuous absence, we are left with concerns of tone, narrative strategy, structure—all the architectural devices that bring a story to fruition. Coetzee is using the rewriting form to show how novels get made, or not made: the plot that takes over is the trajectory of the creative process. And given that the creative process is unsuccessful in this case, the rewriting brings literary anxiety to center stage.

There is of course another phantom novel present in *Foe*, and that is the book we know as *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner*. It is understood in the space of Coetzee’s novel that *Robinson Crusoe* does not yet exist as such. The tale of the castaway called “Cruso” is only just making itself known, through Susan’s rendering of it. But in her efforts to get Foe to write up her story, Susan—though unwittingly—is already resisting the impulses of *Robinson Crusoe*, and the reader sees clearly the shadow it casts, even as Susan voices doubt about the merit of her own contributions. “Are these enough strange circumstances to make a story of?” she asks herself. “How long before I am driven to invent new and stranger circumstances: the salvage of tools and muskets from Cruso’s ship; the building of a boat, or at least a skiff, and a venture to sail to the mainland” (67). These inventions she suggests are details present in Defoe’s text, but, through Susan, Coetzee casts aspersions on them, as if to show that his revision is only one in a line of such interferences. If Susan is right, then it was Defoe who corrupted this tale from the outset. Coetzee’s own invention thus becomes a multilayered project: he is elaborating *Robinson Crusoe*, while within his book the characters themselves struggle against its unarticulated (technically as yet unrealized) dominance.

Susan’s resistance is most clearly expressed in a direct refutation of the seminal image of Defoe’s work: the footprint discovered by Robinson Crusoe in the sand, which haunts him for ten years until he has found and domesticated its owner.¹ In *Foe*, Susan asserts, “I saw no cannibals, and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind” (54). With this contradiction, the sense of authority in *Foe* gradually becomes diluted. Cruso’s version of events (and, by extension, Defoe’s) vies for accuracy with Susan’s, here presented as precisely the kind of empirical evidence that Coetzee, as we shall later see, admires in Defoe—“All I say
is: What I saw, I wrote” —but no more necessarily believable than any other piece of fiction (54).

Likewise, the writer himself struggles, literally, to embody authority. The image of Foe spinning tales at his desk, untroubled by Susan’s prudish concerns about truth and accuracy, suggests a remote, lofty man, out of tune with the events happening around him. He wants to invent details, compress events, impose structure. In the sense that he could theoretically accomplish those goals, he is omnipotent. But if the writer is cast as powerful and godlike on the one hand, he is on the other hand small and susceptible. A third of the way into the book, Susan’s letters to Foe begin to be returned. She fears that he has lost interest in her story; the reality is that Foe is in debt, his house has been taken over by his creditors, and he has gone into hiding. The writer proves vulnerable to real-world economies—a victim of gritty realism. The author at work is portrayed not in some idealized creative environment but is under threat of attack: from bill collectors, most prosaically, but also from those persons we identify as his characters, perversely single-minded in seeking completion of their narratives. “Will you continue to write our story while you are in hiding?” Susan asks on hearing that Foe has taken flight (61). “Will you not bear it in mind […] that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done?” (63). Foe is in one light a potential savior, and in another light a petty criminal. Without the benefit of a retroactive, canonizing perspective, literary talent does not translate into economic or social power.

And fiction per se wields virtually no canonical power in the world of Foe. This is a historically accurate point. To the extent that it exists as a genre, it would still be largely considered a debased form. Pat Rogers points out in his reception history of Robinson Crusoe that “contemporary readers were rebuked” for reading such works in place of Shakespeare or Ben Jonson and quotes a 1725 essay describing the corrupting effects of the “fabulous Adventures and Memoirs of Pirates, Whores, and Pickpockets” that cites Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders by name (Rogers 128). Coetzee’s Foe imagines fiction into being—a story based on a true experience but refined into a pleasing aesthetic object, fabricated specifically to grasp and hold a reader’s attention. This is how, in retrospect, we take Robinson Crusoe. But Defoe’s works initially gained popularity by masquerading as true accounts with realistic consequences and moral imperatives.

Susan desires the fame of a character in a true story, not an embellished one. But whether in fiction or nonfiction, she understands that to live in print is to be immortal—a belief that Coetzee’s novel endorses through its own extended treatment of a literary character. Writing means nothing to the mute, illiterate Friday, yet in anticipation of the publication of their story Susan asks him, “Are you not filled with joy to know that you will live forever, after a manner?” (58). She has grand plans for post-publication: Friday will go back to Africa (the story is meant to reunite him with his past) and she, Susan, will become a person of consequence: “Susan Barton the
castaway” (125). Thus, her prevailing motivations are contradictory: the story will open up for her a new chapter, setting her and Friday free from their period of island life and all its attendant burdens, while at the same time she will tie herself in perpetuity to the identity the story gives her. Immortality has its price.

However, in truth, Susan’s identity is already tied to another story: Defoe’s *Roxana, or The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). Like the echoed beginnings that characterize Susan’s opening pages, the source texts of *Foe* prove overlapping, the protagonist of *Roxana* overlaid on the template of *Robinson Crusoe*. It is a layering device which, as we shall see, Coetzee employs to demonstrate that responding to a classic is neither a simple nor direct proposition.

Susan is introduced in *Foe* as a childless mother. She arrives on the island having experienced parental trauma: the loss of her daughter to kidnappers. When she returns to England, Susan is awkwardly confronted by a young woman who claims to be her daughter and to bear her name but who Susan insists is not hers. Whether bound by blood or not, they become a mismatched pair, accentuating the loss on both sides: orphanhood and childlessness. Susan’s rejection of the girl who claims to be her daughter is noteworthy because it is couched in literary terms. In her denial of the girl, as in her pursuit of Foe as ghostwriter, she falls back on her own expectations as a reader. To her mind, the print tradition is an authority, and though her own imperative to publish is partly to do with the novelty of her own story—the originality and freshness of the female castaway, a character she believes has not yet been undertaken in print—she cannot accept that her own narrative of mother searching for daughter could be so easily reversed. Her verdict is that the girl cannot be hers because “there are no stories of daughters searching for mothers … they do not occur” (77–78).

Here, however, her instincts are amiss: the work of Defoe himself proves her wrong. The young Susan Barton’s quest for her mother does follow a literary plot—though admittedly not as familiar as the plot that brings together Crusoe and Friday. It is from Defoe’s novel *Roxana*. Roxana is the protagonist’s pseudonym; her real name, referenced but once or twice in the novel, and then obliquely (even a careful reader is likely to miss it), is Susan, as is her daughter’s. When the alleged daughter tells her tale, it is the tale of Roxana’s daughter: the father’s abandonment of the family, the mother’s destitution and reliance on her maidservant, Amy, to dispose of her children (*Foe* 76).

If there is no place in *Foe* for a mother-daughter reunion, it is because parentage in the novel—such as it exists—is exclusively patrilineal. Susan’s response to the mysterious girl who claims her affection is that she is “father-born.” She means that her father is Daniel Foe, for Susan suspects that this phantom daughter is merely a character brought to life by Foe in order to provoke her into some kind of narrative reunion and closure. The result is a picture of male authorial begetting, one that implicates Coetzee’s novel as well as Foe’s, since *Foe* is of course also father-born,
engendered by Defoe’s novel. Biological reproduction seems off the cards here; sex happens between Susan and Cruso, but it results in no children. When Susan comes across a stillborn child on the road during her pilgrimage to meet Foe in person, she unwraps it, discovers it’s a girl—another lost daughter, to add to the novel’s tally—and leaves it behind (105). The finding of the infant is just a red herring in the plot, as it toys with igniting Susan’s maternal instinct only to shut that possibility down. But the child by the roadside, itself another orphan, is emblematic of the difficulty exposed in Foe of bringing any creative endeavor to life. No longer, Foe would have us believe, is the novel engaged in idealizing or achieving the continuation of a family, as it had in the Victorian novel, in which the survival and strength of the child meant the survival and strength of the family, and metaphorically, the nation; breathing life into such an institution is not something Foe can presume to do. Susan, as we have seen, assumes that the only way to continue her legacy is in print. Once diverted from her initial quest to find her lost daughter in the new world, she discards her mission to reunite her family as a failure. The final verdict on this subject comes near the end of Foe, when the young Susan Barton and her nurse arrive at the house, and in the midst of this confused and emotionally dry gathering Foe proclaims, “So we are all together” (129). As Coetzee presents it, it is a hollow gesture, the writer trying in vain to assemble a family.

The possibility of conception and reproduction is instead shifted to the realm of the literary—a realm in which mated novels give birth to new ones. On the involvement of Roxana in the plot of Foe, Judie Newman notes that “Foe exposes its readers to the feeling that we have assisted at the creation of a hybrid” (97). In that light, Foe is simply setting various plot possibilities at work to see where they might end up, and Coetzee’s novel is the breeding ground. The idea of a discrete canonical text is undermined completely; as Spivak writes in her analysis of Foe, “It is as if the margins of bound books are themselves dissolved into a general textuality” (163). In considering the thematic impact of this blending, Newman relates it to Mary Douglas’s work on pollution in Purity and Danger, the idea of “dirt as essentially disorder” (86). A self-proclaimed whore, albeit one who passes in genteel society, Roxana is an embodiment of dirt by social standards; Susan Barton is more ambiguously so, as an adventuress. Both are, in a certain sense, cast away. Newman also notes that “after his death, Defoe’s novel [Roxana] was itself rewritten: in 1740 (with a happy ending), in 1745 (ending punitively), in 1775 (sentimentally) and in 1807, as a tragedy by William Godwin” (98), thus showing it to have mothered new texts as Robinson Crusoe fathered them, though on a much smaller scale.

For Spivak, the intersection of Roxana and Foe is the crossroads of race and gender theory and cultural expression. Both Robinson Crusoe and Roxana, she writes, are “English texts in which the early eighteenth century tried to constitute marginality.” In the former, “the white man marginalized in the forest encounters Friday the savage in the margin”; in the latter, “the individualist female infiltrates
nascent bourgeois society.” Thus, Spivak concludes, “in Coetzee’s novel, a double-gesture is performed. In the narrative, Roxana begins her construction of the marginal where she is; but when her project approaches fulfillment, the text steps in and reminds us that Friday is in the margin as such, the wholly other” (157). This pairing illustrates a futility endemic to Foe that is separate from the frustration of Susan’s vain attempt to get her book into print, though it is enhanced by that device of stagnation in the plot: namely, that “the book may be gesturing toward the impossibility of restoring the history of empire and recovering the lost text of mothering in the same register of language” (165, Spivak’s italics).

The fact remains, though, that enfolding Roxana into Foe is a curious move on Coetzee’s part to begin with. Newman’s description of Foe as a hybrid of Defoe’s works is true, but what it does not account for is the relative obscurity of Roxana compared to Robinson Crusoe. The reader can assist in the creation of a hybrid only if he or she recognizes the second source, which, outside the academic sphere, is highly unlikely. If Friday is the character (or, perhaps more appropriately, the body) who remains “wholly other,” in Spivak’s terms, he is on the other hand at least a familiar figure to start with. In fact, the novel’s central figures, Crusoe and Friday, have transcended the page to become part of the cultural heritage of the Western world; one does not need to have read Crusoe to know who they are. Roxana can hardly lay claim to that kind of dissemination. By putting these characters on an equal plane, Coetzee nods to the scholarly reader and notes that to engage with a canonical author is to engage not in a one-on-one dialogue, but in a conversation with multiple works, a model of collective reading that mirrors institutional reading. No canonical work, Foe suggests, is fully isolatable. And for every canonical work there may be at least one potential partner (by the same author, no less) that exists in relative obscurity. The purpose of the rewriting is shifted, not simply to reinvent the familiar but to show how the unfamiliar might logically, easily, be re instituted. The imperative is both to privilege scholarly reading and to complicate interpretation of the original text or texts, rather than to offer clarification or explanation, or a single alternative or competing point of view.

Along these lines, the use of Roxana also introduces a complex narrative of plagiarism and illusion, as a response, in part, to the question of how novelists get their ideas. For the majority of readers, unfamiliar with Roxana, the narrator Susan Barton would appear to be Coetzee’s invention, his modern contribution to a centuries-old story, infusing the classic male encounter between enlightenment and savagery with a plot that caters to feminist theory and semiotics. To discover that she too is skillfully borrowed from a work of Defoe’s is to throw the whole project of invention into question, a parallel to the problem of invention that occupies the novel itself. Maximillian E. Novak mentions Foe on the first page of the introduction to his 2001 biography of the author in this context of plagiarism. Defoe, he writes, had come under attack late in the eighteenth century, some six decades after his death, for
allegedly having fabricated *Robinson Crusoe* from material of the sailor Alexander Selkirk, who published a narrative of his own maritime adventures a few months before *Robinson Crusoe* appeared. With this fact in mind, Novak reads *Foe* as including “a playful modern version of the plagiarism theory [...] in which Defoe has stolen his work from his own creation, Roxana, who appears as Susan in the text” (Novak 1). It is a self-reflexive and self-critical move for a novel that openly acknowledges *Robinson Crusoe*. It suggests as part of the moral of the story that to struggle with invention is the peculiar province of the novel—that this difficulty, whether writing or rewriting, is endemic to the very form.

Of course, a scenario in which Roxana dreams up a castaway called Robinson Crusoe and feeds his story to Daniel Defoe suggests the picture of a novelist living wholly within a world of his imagining, an idea that strengthens the view of a writer as a creative force shaping his own environment rather than casting aspersions on his ability to find and follow through on ideas for fiction. In this reading, there is neither character nor milieu, in *Foe*, that exists outside the mind of Daniel Defoe: the world is made literature-centric—Defoe-centric, no less. But the question of sources and source texts, in the form of Susan’s voluminous letters, is certainly paramount in *Foe*, and the interplay of multiple versions of the castaway narrative indicates that the idea of pinpointing one origin, or one original, for the novel, let alone one interpretation of it, is at best elusive. To rewrite in Coetzee’s terms is to read widely, to assimilate, and to stretch the canon rather than contract or entrench it—while at the same time to inhabit the collected works of a writer, major and minor alike, rather than just one of them.

III

In *Foe*, Coetzee not only envisions re-writing canonical texts as a more complex intertextual enterprise but also discovers that a version of the writer’s biography, an integral part of his plot, is a crucial element of re-imagining the classic. In this regard, Coetzee’s first move is to revert to Defoe’s surname by birth, Foe, for the character in his book, which not only provides him with a set of handy connotations but also represents a privileging of original over what one might call embellishment. (Defoe added the “de” in an effort to retroactively bestow an aristocratic connection to his family name.) In this way, as in others we have already seen, Coetzee casts suspicion on his own project even as he builds it up: if the original is to be privileged, what of such embellishments as *Foe* itself?

Coetzee makes no claims to biography, but for precisely that reason the facets of Defoe’s life that he chooses to highlight reveal the priorities of his version of the story. He shows us not Defoe’s life—the decades of entrepreneurship, political engagement, affectionate family life, and a writing career at the forefront of the
emerging forms of journalism and fiction—but the bleak circumstances of his death: “away from his home, hiding from a creditor who had the power to seize all his goods and throw him into prison for debt” (Novak, Daniel Defoe 6). Coetzee strips this lamentable situation further, for though Defoe had a wife and eight children, the Foe we see is alone, and he radiates solitude beyond any temporary absence on the part of his family. In the setting of his home and workplace there is no evidence that he might have been a family man. Coetzee draws attention to the lack: “What has happened to your sons and daughters?” asks Susan Barton in a parenthetical midway through the novel. “Could they not be trusted to shelter you from the law?” (95).

The effect of this isolation of Defoe is twofold. First, it is part of the deliberate obscuring of the novel’s temporal setting. The events of Foe would seem to take place during one of Defoe’s bankruptcy crises; there were two, in 1692 and in 1703 (Novak 75). On the other hand, the young woman who claims to be Susan Barton’s daughter gives her birth year as 1702, which would put the action about eighteen years later, right around the time of Crusoe’s publication. Other details having to do with where Foe is in his writing career contradict any attempt to pin down the year in question. Either one of the bankruptcy periods would far predate the writing and publication of Robinson Crusoe, suggesting a period of germination in which the author gets the idea for the masterwork during the time frame of the book but years go by before he successfully implements it. The inspiration and evolution of the canonical work would thus be privileged over its ultimate appearance; process would be privileged over result. And Susan’s reasons for choosing Foe as her ghostwriter are thrown into question; Attridge notes that “One effect of this chronological uncertainty, germane to the novel’s concerns, is that it remains unclear whether Foe’s reputation is as a reporter of fact or, as was the case only later in Defoe’s career, a creator of fiction” (78 note). Research for works in both genres seems already to have been completed: at Foe’s home, Susan finds papers that include “a census of the beggars of London, bills of mortality from the time of the great plague, accounts of travels in the border country, … also books of voyages to the New World, memoirs of captivity among the Moors, chronicles of the wars in the Low Countries, confessions of notorious lawbreakers, and a multitude of castaway narratives, most of them, I would guess, riddled with lies” (Foe 50). These tantalizing pages are the building blocks of Defoe’s oeuvre, fiction and fact: Moll Flanders, Journal of the Plague Year, and Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain, as well as the numerous pamphlets, essays and poems for which he became famous and infamous during his lifetime. The point of all this confusion over Defoe’s age and experience—Foe, after all, does not present itself as a biographical document or reflection of Defoe’s actual career—is that the author figure is separated from his historical milieu, a fact that comes into play vividly in the novel’s ending, in which we are all at sea as to what time it is.

In obscuring the time period of his work, Coetzee also works against the text of Robinson Crusoe, in which the passage of time in all its banality is diligently
documented by the protagonist: first in a journal that tracks events and the weather from day to day and later, when ink begins to be in short supply, becoming expansively conscious of the passing of seasons and years, remarking on long-term accomplishments, “in about a Year and a half I had a Flock of about twelve Goats” (148). Coetzee’s Cruso, as aforementioned, keeps no journal; as Spivak observes, he “has no interest in keeping time” (161). In stripping both Cruso and Foe of the power that comes with noting and shaping the passage of time, Coetzee undercuts the form of the original novel and undermines the trope of imperial power achieved through archival intelligence and record-keeping. This, after all, is one of the themes suggested by Crusoe’s naming of Friday, a gesture at once supremely rational, since he arrives in Crusoe’s life on a Friday, and absurd, since we all come into the world on a day of the week but few of us become that day’s namesake. Susan lodges for a while in Clock Lane, and she chides Cruso while still on the island for not keeping a journal and not, by extension, keeping track of time. But the thrust of Coetzee’s novel is against such documentation, as we see from his suspension of the character of Foe in biographical limbo. It is antirealist, from that point of view, and antiempirical; it transcends time, like a ready-made classic.4

The second result of Foe’s isolation has less to do with time than with space. The removal of Foe’s family provides a void into which a different kind of family can enter. In Coetzee’s tableau of the writer’s life, Foe’s only companions are the selection of his own characters who cluster around him, whether by their will or his summons—Susan Barton, Friday, and the maid Amy and young Susan of Roxana. His life consists of the fruits of his imagination, which from our point of view is the truth about a canonical writer—he is lumped forever in association with his characters—but which brings him no worldly solace in his moment. For within the world of his invention, the writer may exert great power, but Coetzee shows us that in the larger bounds of Foe, there is no value—at least, not yet—in the author’s work. Foe’s writing has no purchasing power in the market. When Susan, on the road in pursuit of the writer in hiding, attempts to barter a bound copy of a book by Foe, the cobbler insists on another volume instead. Critics have pointed to Defoe’s preoccupation with accounts as characteristic of his fiction and nonfiction, and certainly, reading Robinson Crusoe and Roxana, one gets the impression of protagonists constantly tallying their assets.5 Their progression through each novel has an acquisitive imperative—one that ultimately pervades the entire genre, from Austen on, by thematizing the gaining or losing of assets through marriage and inheritance. If the inheritance plot began with such accounting, peaking in the nineteenth century and receding in the twentieth, then we might understand rewritings as reviving it in a figurative mode, enacting and capitalizing on the inheritance of the canon’s most valuable asset: its stories.
IV

A reader who comes to Robinson Crusoe with knowledge of this particular canonical asset—the story of the castaway Crusoe and his faithful man—might expect Friday to enter the action far earlier than he does. In fact he comes in about two-thirds of the way through the book, after Crusoe has already spent decades on the island. This is not to say that readers are incorrect to identify the relationship of Friday and Crusoe as the key to the novel’s registers of human emotion and connection, its political and imperial commentary, its theological bent, and most other significant topics, for on Friday’s entrance the text pivots from a study of isolation, fear, and survival to one of companionship, strategy, and mastery. It is simply a question of reminding ourselves that for much of the original text, Friday is most conspicuous by his absence. Earlier in the novel’s own history, it was read accordingly (Rogers 138–39).

Coetzee’s revisions both to the character of Crusoe and to the novel’s plot draw out these differences. Coetzee’s castaway is about sixty years old—which makes him older than his literary forebear Crusoe and “roughly Defoe’s age at the time when his novel was published”—nor is he at all concerned with getting off the island (Thieme 64). He is a more primitive presence, “an illustration of the futility of Empire” rather than an exultation of its strengths (Newman 96). By the time Foe begins, Cruso’s strength is sapped; shortly thereafter he makes his exit, while Friday remains physically present throughout. As Thieme argues, Foe “refuses to see the Friday–Crusoe connection as central” (69). But Susan’s constant reference to the hole in the narrative created by Friday’s muteness is in a certain sense of a piece with the original work, in which, at least in terms of page count, Friday’s role is not central either.

Another point of continuity between the eighteenth- and the twentieth-century Friday is the narrative of liberation that surrounds him. In each case, however, it is used toward different ends. In the seminal scene of Defoe’s work, Friday appears as one of two captives of a group of barbarous savages. As his companion goes before the knife, Friday takes his chance for escape, and because he happens to head toward Crusoe, Crusoe becomes his refuge. Crusoe also takes his chance, deeming this the long-awaited opportunity to “get me a Servant, and perhaps a Companion, or Assistant”—in that order; he shoots Friday’s pursuers and casts himself as his savior, “call’d plainly by Providence to save this poor Creature’s Life” (203). At first it is Crusoe who is mute, making signs, while Friday speaks words in his own language. After this meeting, Friday as we know him is born, his new name marking his rebirth. In the same sentence Crusoe also renames himself; henceforth, he is “Master.” And henceforth, Crusoe does the talking and Friday the learning: “I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me” (206).

Though Friday proves “the aptest Schollar that ever was” and becomes adept enough to engage Crusoe in theological and philosophical discussions (in pidgin
English, but wholly comprehensible), what happens at the point of their encounter to Friday’s native tongue is what happens literally to the tongue of Coetzee’s Friday—it is cut off (211). Friday does, however, find cause to revert to his own language three years after meeting Crusoe, when at the end of a raid against further incursions of savages he comes across the only character who could rival Crusoe in demanding his filial affection: his biological father. A Spaniard is also added to the party, and Friday serves as “interpreter” (Crusoe’s word) among the four men, translating not only his father’s speech but also that of the Spaniard, “for the Spaniard spoke the Language of the Savages pretty well” (242). It is apparently not beyond the capacity of a European to learn the native language, therefore, but the reader infers that Crusoe has chosen not to do so.

Equally important, he chooses not to teach Friday to read. This is a curious point. It emerges after Crusoe has recorded for posterity his dialogues with Friday about good and evil in the world, and Friday—acting the role of the noble savage—has through such inquiries as “why God no kill the Devil?” inspired Crusoe to think further about his mission vis-à-vis this companion: having saved Friday’s life, he must also save his soul (219). They proceed to spend a peaceful three years, as Defoe’s account has it, in thought-provoking conversation. But Crusoe, glad though he is to have a body to talk to, reserves the written word for himself. He remains the medium between Friday and the Bible.

I always apply’d my self in Reading the Scripture, to let him know, as well as I could, the Meaning of what I read; and he again, by his serious Enquiries, and Questionings, made me, as I said before, a much better Scholar in the Scripture Knowledge, than I should ever have been by my own private meer Reading. (221)

As this passage demonstrates, despite Crusoe’s assertion of inclusivity his reading is kept “private.” Why, in all those years, does Crusoe not teach Friday to read English as well as to speak and understand it? Is it because Robinson Crusoe predates an era of widespread literacy, whether along class or race lines? The question of oral language is well addressed in Defoe’s story; the question of literacy remains a puzzle.

In Coetzee’s version, it is Susan—herself struggling for liberation—who would save Friday from his would-be captors and teach him to communicate. She hangs the success of her story on it: “The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday” (118). But here Friday—whose English in the original may sound naive but who is nevertheless savvy enough to register skepticism with some of the basic tenets of Christianity—cannot speak at all, even in his own language. He can fill neither the role of the vocal savage nor the role of interpreter, both of which were legitimate parts for him in Defoe’s work. Susan speculates further that Friday’s “lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious
mutilation,” i.e. castration (119). With these missing organs in mind, her priority is to fill the void they leave behind, making a whole man of Friday, whether by giving him a voice with which to speak his story or by giving him independence, in the emancipation papers she hangs around his neck like a replacement appendage. These strategies are so symbolically overdetermined that they seem destined for failure, and indeed Susan judges them as such (142).

But there is another way to bring Friday into the narrative, and that is to give him literacy—not the power to speak, but the power to read and write. Not surprisingly, the idea comes from the novel’s writer in residence. “Have you shown him writing?” asks Foe, when Susan has lamented the failure of her efforts with Friday. To her objection “How can he write if he cannot speak?” he replies, “Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech” (142). And so the main narrative of the book (excepting the final few pages, in which the setting and narrator shift) ends with Friday’s reading and writing lesson, in which, dressed in Foe’s robes and wig, deploying his pens, and sitting at the famed author’s desk, he begins by writing the letter o. Whether this o is, as some critics have suggested, the Greek letter omega, indicating that in the end Friday must find his beginning (Newman 102), or an echo of what in Robinson Crusoe are Friday’s prayers (which he refers to in his vernacular English as “saying O” [Spivak 171]) or a self-portrait, the representation of his open, soundless mouth, is not made clear. But whatever the case, Friday’s rows of circles on a slate are the last piece of writing we read in the body of a book whose unwavering goal is to bring to fruition a piece of writing.

It may be that Friday will never make himself heard, and that Coetzee’s novel, in assuming that troubled postcolonial position, accords Friday even less agency than he possessed in the colonial age. But this image of Friday filling Defoe’s role—especially in a book in which the story at hand, Susan’s story, markedly fails to get written—may be interpreted as compensation, opening up any number of rich interpretations of the power he might assume as a writer and a reader. Many critics have taken Friday’s silence in the novel as proof that Coetzee will not presume to speak for the black African’s experience—Thieme, for example, notes that the one thing Foe refuses to do is “to speak for black subjectivity” —and this view is well supported by Coetzee’s reluctance either to fill Friday’s silence in interviews or otherwise explain his characters, or even to speak for himself (69). But the image of Foe in Defoe’s robes, imitating his actions, is a more powerful gesture than any words might offer. It may be that in the model of mimicry suggested by Homi Bhabha—in which the mimic man, the colonial man, instructed in the culture of his imperialist oppressor, is necessarily a lesser version of that master, kept all the more segregated by the slippage that accompanies crude imitation—Friday makes a poor Defoe and can never gain his authority. But his donning of Defoe’s clothes and his taking up of Defoe’s pen serves the purpose of equating him with another writer of inarguable cultural standing: Coetzee. Both are sitting at Defoe’s desk, making free use of his
materials. So long as he can read and write, Friday need not speak at all. And if he must be consigned to mimicry, then Coetzee willingly consigns himself as well.

V

Seventeen years after the publication of *Foe*, the figures of Robinson Crusoe and Daniel Defoe still loomed large enough in Coetzee’s imagination to provide the basis for his 2003 Nobel lecture, an elliptical meditation on myths of solitude and enlightenment (and, strangely, duck migration) titled “He and His Man.” The talk centers on the story of a castaway and is prefaced by a quotation from Defoe’s novel that describes how Crusoe taught Friday to speak—that is, to speak English. Defoe’s style is evident as an influence throughout the address, and portions of it are loosely quoted from his nonfiction masterpieces *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* and *Journal of the Plague Year*, but the English setting of Bristol and the obscurity of the narrative device preclude any straightforward interpretation of the piece as dealing with Crusoe and Friday, as the title “He and His Man” would suggest (Attridge 196). In fact, the situation is far more complicated. “His man” is less servant than reporter, noting all that he sees around him. And “he” is the recipient of these notes: “He (not his man now but he) sits in his room by the waterside in Bristol and reads this” (par. 11). Moreover, “he” is also a version of Robinson Crusoe, as we learn from mention of the parrot that “came back with him,” who used to squawk “Poor Robin Crusoe!” (par. 12). It turns out that “his man” is in fact an invention of his own solitude, a figure he has written into being to spur his own composition, thus blurring the lines between reader and writer, author and character. This figure walks among the pages of others of Defoe’s works. And, because “he” is Robinson Crusoe, he must contend with those who have made their own character out of him:

> When the first bands of plagiarists and imitators descended upon his island history and foisted on the public their own feigned stories of the castaway life, they seemed to him no more or less than a horde of cannibals falling upon his own flesh, that is to say, his life; and he did not scruple to say so. *When I defended myself against the cannibals, who sought to strike me down and roast me and devour me*, he wrote, *I thought I defended myself against the thing itself. Little did I guess*, he wrote, *that these cannibals were but figures of a more devilish voracity, that would gnaw at the very substance of truth.*

> But now, reflecting further, there begins to creep into his breast a touch of fellow-feeling for his imitators. For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit for ever in silence. (par. 34–35, Coetzee’s italics)
Thus he comes to terms with the idea that his story will be told and retold by others, and that neither he nor his fictitious man is powerful enough to stop it, nor should they stop it if they could. The lecture concludes with an attempt on the part of Crusoe to cast himself and his man into relation: are they “master and slave,” “comrades in arms,” or “enemies, foes”? (par. 40). The identity he settles on is strangers.

In 1999, Coetzee published an introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of Robinson Crusoe. In this far more concrete commentary on the novel, he argues for an interpretation of Defoe as an “impersonator, a ventriloquist, even a forger […] The kind of ‘novel’ he is writing (he did not of course use the term) is a more or less literal imitation of the kind of recital his hero or heroine would have given had he or she really existed” (vii). And though Coetzee maintains that Robinson Crusoe is not Defoe’s best book (“Moll Flanders is more consistent in its execution; Roxana, though uneven, rises to greater heights”), he credits the empiricism that is Defoe’s brand of realism: “For page after page—for the first time in the history of fiction—we see a minute, ordered description of how things are done. It is a matter of pure writerly attentiveness, pure submission to the exigencies of a world which, through being submitted to in a state so close to spiritual absorption, becomes transfigured, real” (viii–ix). Together, these two pieces demonstrate that Coetzee’s interest in Robinson Crusoe remains firmly rooted—as it was in the writing of Foe—in the problems of originality, imitation, and plagiarism. With the production of something original comes the ever present threat of theft or appropriation, but if Defoe himself can be read as a forger, then it is far more difficult to pinpoint where the original originates.

The ending of Foe, which long precedes these two essays on Robinson Crusoe, remains the most ambiguous textual commentary of them all. This is in large part because in the final section the unities of the novel give way entirely. Time hurtles forward, and the narrator changes shape from Susan Barton to an unidentified and ungendered “I.” That the setting bears relation to what has transpired in the preceding narrative is established by the opening sentence, “The staircase is dark and mean”; it is the present-tense version of the sentence that opens section three of the novel, when Susan tracks down Foe in Bristol, where he has taken refuge from his creditors. This new narrator, walking through a silent house, stumbles over the body of a woman or girl that “weighs no more than a sack of straw,” then discovers two more dead bodies, a woman and a man. The house, we take it, is that of the author Foe; the first body may be that of the alleged daughter; the pair are apparently Susan Barton and Foe himself. Friday’s body, not dead but not quite living, barely registering a pulse, is also there, and “from his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island” (154).

After a section break, the scene repeats, this time with a clue as to location: a plaque on the outside of the house reads “Daniel Defoe, Author.” The shift to “Defoe” puts distance between this historical figure and the man we knew as Foe,
while the plaque’s designation of author retroactively bestows the professional identity that Coetzee shows in its nascent, porous stages in the body of Foe. (If, as Coetzee notes in “Speaking in Tongues,” the profession was “just beginning to mean something in Daniel Defoe’s day”, it now means enough to stand in apposition to his name.) The additional writing on the plaque would doubtless help clarify the setting, but it is unfortunately “too small to read.” A later reference to the “mud of Flanders, in which generations of grenadiers now lie dead, trampled in the postures of sleep” (156) suggests that we are in the twentieth century. Again the narrator stumbles over the body of a woman or a girl; again he comments that it is “light as straw” (155). The repetition calls to mind the doubling back of Susan’s narrative at the beginning of the book; it is an echo of an echo, or another series of false starts. As in that case, there are subtle changes in diction and action the second time around. Now Friday’s face is “turned to the wall,” and there is a scar visible around his neck, “left by a rope or chain” (155)—the chain signifies slavery, the rope evokes those emancipation papers with which Susan simultaneously liberated and burdened her companion.

Now the narrator turns up evidence of the house’s inhabitants and of their relation to the story that preceded his entry: a box containing a manuscript that begins “Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further” (155). It is the opening letter of Foe, still unpublished, but with the missing salutation filled in, altering the start of the novel even as it moves toward its ending. For readers, it is a bona fide literary discovery—the complete, original manuscript of the novel they hold in their hands. By this time, the house has mysteriously transformed into a ship: the narrator slips overboard and is surrounded by “the petals cast by Friday”—a reference to the occasional forays Friday made from the island into the water, scattering petals in what Susan hypothesized might be an offering to the gods. Ensconced at the scene of the castaway drama, the narrator descends into the wreck of a ship, and reaches a cabin at the bulkhead.

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. 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. (156–57)

This is a counterfactual of Foe in which Susan never reaches Crusoe’s island. It is precisely the counterfactual that would clear the way for the story of Robinson Crusoe, with no female castaway joining the archetypal male survivor. In a corner of the submerged ship’s cabin is Friday, who again is not quite living but not quite dead. His presence prompts the narrator’s elemental question—“what is this ship?”—and his wordless response engenders the narrator’s verdict on this strange scene. “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” (157).

It is fair to say that these final few pages have baffled readers across the board, though attempts have been made by scholars to comprehend them. Their readings tend toward descriptions of what the ending is not. Spivak, though she observes that the section is “lovingly written,” is skeptical of its intent, citing its implicit wish of “if only there were no texts” as indicative of the “impossible politics of overdetermination,” for “Coetzee’s entire book warns that Friday’s body is not its own sign” (174). Attridge, who detects in the passage’s diction echoes of the shipwreck scenes in *The Tempest*, argues that “the narrator of the closing section (what name do we use?—Susan Barton, Daniel Foe, Daniel Defoe, J. M. Coetzee, our own?) has made the last of many attempts to get Friday to speak, and the hauntingly allusive description of the soundless stream issuing from his body is a culmination of the book’s concern with the powerful silence which is the price of our cultural achievements” (67). Thieme reads the section as evidence that the text “resists closure” on the note of liberal affirmation that characterizes Friday’s first reading and writing lesson under the tutelage of Susan and Foe.10 Newman cites a reference to Adrienne Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck,” “to salvage what meanings survive from the old myths of patriarchy,” which she notes “chimes with Susan Barton’s desperate quest for her own identity”; the diver, meanwhile, is able to conquer the taboo on mutilation and touch Friday at last (100). Newman also observes that “at the close of the novel the reader is re-reading,” which prompts her opinion that the novel “is not about the need to avoid telling the black story; rather it concerns the necessity for repeated efforts to overcome divisions and categorizations,” specifically, in her reading, apartheid (102).

I will close with a new suggestion for what the ending is. Diving into the wreck may read as a purely figurative activity, the more so for its evocation of the Adrienne Rich poem of that title, which does share in explicating some of the gender issues raised by *Foe* and its female castaway, who struggles in vain to communicate her story. But a more concrete connection exists between the wreck and the subject matter at hand. For Defoe, the possibility of salvaging wealth from below was more than a metaphor. Defoe’s two major brushes with bankruptcy occurred on the heels of two bad investments. The first involved a civet-cat farm for the purposes of making perfume. The second was an investment in a submersible diving engine used to search sunken ships for treasure. It was developed by Joseph Williams, “who experimented with such a machine in May 1691 off the coast of Scotland” (Novak 95). Defoe lost two hundred pounds in shares backing Williams’s diving machine and incurred the wrath of his creditors, but despite that setback he remained optimistic well into the eighteenth century that such a machine would bear fruit. He alludes to them in an appendix to his letter “From London to Land’s End” (published in Volume I of his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 1724–26), which he wrote on the
occasion of a visit to the rocks of Scilly, on the western side of the island, where shipwrecks were a way of life.

Here, also, as a farther testimony of the immense riches which have been lost at several times upon this coast, we found several engineers and projectors—some with one sort of diving engine, and some with another; some claiming such a wreck, and some such-and-such others; where they alleged they were assured there were great quantities of money; and strange unprecedented ways were used by them to come at it: some, I say, with one kind of engine, and some another; and though we thought several of them very strange impracticable methods, yet I was assured by the country people that they had done wonders with them under water, and that some of them had taken up things of great weight and in a great depth of water. (106)

Diving into the wreck, then, in pursuit of “things of great weight and in a great depth of water,” is an avocation in which Defoe took a marked interest over a sustained period of his life.

It is hard to overlook the poetic nature of this particular obsession of Defoe’s. (It is easier, admittedly, to overlook the civet cats.) If the final episode of Foe is not drawn from Coetzee’s acquaintance with this failed investment—though the emphasis he grants to Defoe’s financial crises makes it likely that he knew of the connection—then at the very least the coincidence is symbolically evocative. It is Coetzee’s way of rewriting what was a poor return for Defoe, suggesting that however faint the hope of recompense, the exploration of the wreck and the attempt to get something out of Friday are tasks both readers and writers (either of whom can fill the role of “I” in the final section) must keep performing. What is at stake—the treasures that lie below—are stories and counterfactuals and works that exist in hidden counterpoint to canonical works, like the manuscript of Susan Barton. Yet it would seem, given the close reading of Robinson Crusoe and Roxana in which Foe engages, that in Coetzee’s opinion one way to reach the treasures in the wreck is through canonical study, by rereading those works and writers we think we know best. One of the lessons of Foe (which is indisputably a novel with lessons) is that biographical inquiry is an essential facet of canonical knowledge, that close reading of the text must expand into the life, mind, and circumstance of the author behind it. Spivak refers to Foe as a “didactic aid”; her essay on the novel is an exercise in pedagogy, a discussion of how she uses it to teach (157). My interpretation of the ending has more to do with what it teaches readers as a parable of reading, and of rereading, which is precisely what the false starts that bookend the novel direct us to do. The interplay of the biographical does not negate any of the thematic or allusive readings noted above, but it offers up the historical figure of the author and his preoccupations as a subject equally worthy of allusion and study. Surely that is a comment as weighty as gestures toward Shakespeare and Adrienne Rich on how writers, as well as their works, can enter the
canon, in the days when to be an author is unequivocally to embrace a profession, one utterly worldly yet somehow still divine.
Endnotes

1 Of course, it is highly unlikely that of the number of “savages” Crusoe observes in the intervening decade it is actually Friday who left the footprint he discovers. Rather, the footprint and Friday are synecdochical figures, signifying the presence of a racial and social other on the island, and as such have come to be equated with one another.

2 Newman points to “key elements” in Foe—“mutilation, pollution, taboo, transgression, boundaries”—that “derive their significance from Douglas’s analysis” (97).

3 Even inside the academic sphere it is hit-or-miss. In a volume on approaches to teaching Robinson Crusoe, in which some dozen articles suggest using Coetzee’s text in tandem with the original, not one instructor mentions in passing the interplay of Roxana in Foe. (See Approaches to Teaching Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, eds. Maximillian E. Novak and Carl Fisher.) Nor does Linda Hutcheon in A Poetics of Postmodernism recognize the presence of Roxana as the prototype for Susan Barton: “Foe reveals that storytellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent certain past events—and people—but it also suggests that historians have done the same: where are the women in the traditional histories of the eighteenth century? As we have seen, Coetzee offers the teasing fiction that Defoe did not write Robinson Crusoe from information from the male historical castaway, Alexander Selkirk, or from other travel accounts, but from information given him by a subsequently ‘silenced’ woman, Susan Barton, who had also been a castaway on ‘Cruso’s’ [sic] island” (Hutcheon 107).

4 Derek Attridge points out that the ambiguous and/or displaced settings of many of Coetzee’s novels, in conjunction with their often allegorical nature, in a certain sense primes them for canonicity beyond the immediate scope of his South African background, for “the high literary canon, in its most traditional form, is premised upon an assumption of universal moral and aesthetic values,” and Coetzee’s novels “are not about the South African situation per se, which would render them contingent and propagandist, but about the permanent human truths exemplified in that situation” (71).

5 Ian Watt writes that “All Defoe’s heroes pursue money”; moreover, “they pursue it very methodically according to the profit and loss book-keeping which Max Weber considered to be the distinctive technical feature of modern capitalism,” and they “keep us more fully informed of their present stocks of money and commodities than any other characters in fiction” (63).

6 Note that Friday in the original is almost certainly a Carib Indian (see Robinson Crusoe 206 for Defoe’s physical description of his tawny-skinned character), whereas Susan’s Friday is more obviously African, an identity which brings with it an entirely different set of associations about who might have been involved in his capture. In Defoe’s novel, the conflict between Friday and his original captors is described as a local dispute, and his relocation to Crusoe’s camp is not a radical geographical move; there are moments when he can actually see his homeland. For Coetzee’s Friday, on the other hand, there is implied capture or purchase by a European trader, a long journey at sea, and a true sense of foreignness on arriving in a strange land, as much as Cruso would have experienced himself in being marooned on the island.
This reversal calls to mind Franco Moretti’s remarks, in *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, on later novels set in colonial spaces (*Heart of Darkness, Around the World in Eighty Days*), in which the fact of imperial ownership and mastery is subverted or normalized by the imposition of a rescue narrative—rather than a conquest narrative—onto the place in question. In Jules Verne’s novel, for example, the role of the Englishman in India is represented by Phileas Fogg as Aouda’s savior, sparing her from the barbaric indigenous cultural rite of suttee and ultimately claiming her as his bride (a less politically charged version of conquering). Marlow, likewise, is on a rescue mission in the Congo; the man he seeks is another European, but he has gone native to the extent that he must be saved from himself. (Moretti 58–64.)

On this topic, Derek Attridge quotes an amusing interview exchange in which Coetzee, asked why Friday has no tongue, responds, “Nobody seems to have sufficient authority to say for sure how it is that Friday has no tongue” (“Two Interviews with J. M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987.” With Tony Morphet. In Bunn and Taylor, *From South Africa*, 454–64. Qtd. in Attridge 89).

See “Of Mimicry and Man” in Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*: the mimic man “is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (87, Bhabha’s italics).

In the end, Thieme argues, “Foe’s dismantling of English canonical discourse adopts a particularly transgressive form, since it radically destabilizes any notion of definitive authority” (69). This includes removing Defoe from the center of the story, undermining the primacy of the source text by engaging the plots and characters of other Defoe stories, “confus[ing] the relationship between author and character” (69), and finally, through the mysterious ending, introducing a new unidentified narrator altogether, and concluding the text in great obscurity.

As to the question of why Coetzee gives pride of place to bankruptcy in the first place, it is the opinion of at least one biographer of Defoe, Paula Backscheider, that the episodes of financial struggle Defoe incurred and endured in the 1690s led, whether directly or indirectly, to his career in letters, changing him “forever from a prominent joiner of respected groups to a solitary with secrets, and from a tradesman to a writer” (61).

**Works Cited**


