J M Coetzee, *Foe*

Arts One
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René Magritte, *La Reproduction Interdite*
Through the Looking-Glass

- Multiples
- Mutation
- Minutiae
- Muteness
- Monsters
“How Do We Read?”

• Read Three Times
• First: A preliminary foray, assessment
• Second: Read for flow, plot, narrative
• Third: Re-read for detail

• Read selectively and reflectively
A preliminary foray

MULTIPLES
A Preliminary Foray

• What kind of text is this?
• To what genre does it belong?
• What expectations does it raise?

• Chart the voyage ahead
“My name is Alice, but — ”
“It's a stupid name enough!” Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. “What does it mean?” "Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

“Of course it must,” Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: “my name means the shape I am — and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.”
Multiple: Title and Name

• This an author with a “name”
• Booker Prize: 1983 and 1999
• Nobel Prize: 2003
• Transcendent: As canonical as you can get
• South African: burden of representation
“In our knowledge of the human suffering on our own doorstep of thousands of detainees who are denied recourse to the rule of law, Foe does not so much speak to Africa as provide a kind of masturbatory release, in this country, for the Europeanising dreams of an intellectual coterie.” (Michael Chapman)
Nobel Prize Banquet, 2005
“I am a representative of these times and of the present struggles which fill my poetry. [. . .] I am proud to belong to this great mass of humanity, not to the few but to the many, by whose invisible presence I am surrounded here today. In the name of all these peoples and in my own name I thank the Swedish Academy for the honour which has been shown me today.” (Pablo Neruda, Banquet Speech)
“My partner Dorothy burst out as follows: ‘On the other hand,’ she said, ‘on the other hand, how proud your mother would have been! What a pity she isn't still alive!’ [. . . ] I said, ‘she would be ninety-nine and a half. She would probably have senile dementia. She would not know what was going on around her.’

But of course I missed the point. Dorothy was right. My mother would have been bursting with pride. My son the Nobel Prize winner. And for whom, anyway, do we do the things that lead to Nobel Prizes if not for our mothers?” (J M Coetzee, Banquet Speech)
“When I began to write as a very young person in a rigidly racist and inhabited colonial society, I felt [...] that I existed marginally on the edge of the world of ideas, of imagination and beauty. [...] It took the realization that the colour bar - I use that old, concrete image of racism - was like the gate of the law in Kafka's parable [...] to make us realize that what we had to do to find the world was to enter our own world fully, first. We had to enter through the tragedy of our own particular place.” (Nadine Gordimer, Banquet Speech)
Multiple: Title and Name

- For whom does an author speak?
- To whom or what is he or she responsible?
- What are a writer’s ethical responsibilities?
- What are the politics of literature?
- In what way is literature political?
- Or are novels useless, secondary, ornamental?

- Coetzee often refuses even to speak for himself
Multiple: Title and Name

- Title is both a common and proper noun
- Foe: Both generic and particular
- Daniel (De)Foe
- Defoe Deformed
- Who or what is the “foe”?
Multiple: Genre

- A novel
- A historical novel, an epistolary novel
- An episodic novel
- Also a self-reflective, meta-fictional novel
- Parody? Pastiche? Parasitical?
- A postmodern novel? Demythologizing?

- A novel that’s multiple, divided, fissured
Multiple: Genre

- A novel “in quotes”
- Quotation marks: sign of voice
- Quotation marks: sign of veracity
- Quotation marks: sign of irony
- Is this a novel that says what it means?
Multiple: Genre

- A rewriting or remaking of a classic text
- A homage to *Robinson Crusoe*...
- ...and also a somewhat violent revision
- Affirming and undermining the canon
- Multiplying perspective à la Nietzsche?
MUTATION

Reading for flow, plot, narrative
Reading for Flow, Plot, Narrative

• “One damn thing after another”
• What follows what?
• Plots and subplots
• Flashbacks and flashforwards
• Are there diversions, eddies, undercurrents?
• Narratives have narrators
• Narratives encode time
“It seems very pretty,” she said when she had finished it, “but it’s RATHER hard to understand!” (You see she didn’t like to confess, ever to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!”
Mutation: the opening

• The story is both like and unlike Defoe’s
• It seems to start much more directly
• Very “literary”: “like a flower of the sea”
• The frame is only implied: ‘
• “the author who had heard many confessions”

• If Barton is not an author, what is she?
Mutation: the frame

• It’s not so much that the frame is broken...
• ...as that it’s finally revealed
• We realize this story is mediated
• We’d been lulled into false sense of immediacy
Mutation: perspective

• Cruso(e), Friday... and Susan Barton
• Friday is a) African and b) mute
• Terraces for tools; silence for story
• No footprint
• Cruso dies

• Both recognizable and radically different
“Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso’s bed and closed Cruso’s eyes, as it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island.” (45)
• Whose story is it? Who has “disposal” of it?
• Whose “will” has precedence?
• How is that will to be read?
• What is the law of the letter?
• A story under dispute

Mutation: story
“‘It is a story you should set down in writing and offer to the booksellers.’ [. . .] ‘A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art.’ [. . .] ‘You may depend on it, the booksellers will hire a man to set your story to rights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there.’” (40)
“We therefore have five parts in all: the loss of the daughter; the quest for the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, and the adventure of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with her mother. It is thus that we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end.” (117)
Mutation: structure

• Part I: 5-45: Barton’s testimony of island life
• Part II: 47-111: Barton’s letters to Foe
• Part III: 113-152: Barton and Foe dialogue
• Part IV: 153-157: Back to island? Who speaks?

• What is the story? The making of a book?
• Which book is here being made? This one?
MINUTIAE

Reading for detail
Reading for Detail

• What words do you stumble upon?
• What words repeat?
• What is apparently superfluous, decorative?
• Can we see a figure in the wallpaper?
• Details may undercut, derail narrative
• The devil (monster?) is in the details
“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.”
Minutiae: The Island

• “It was the rocking of the island itself” (26)
• Both comforting and disconcerting
• What is certain here and what is not?
• Is there a foundation to this narrative?
“I fell asleep smiling. I believe it was the first time I smiled since I embarked for the New World.

“They say Britain is an island too, a great island. But that is a mere geographer’s notion. The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Cruso’s island.” (26)
Minutiae: Statues

- “Even a statue in marble is worn away” (17)
- A statue is solid, but it too changes
- A statue is life-like but not lively
- A statue is both artificial and material
“With every day that passes, our memories grow less certain, as even a statue in marble is worn away by rain, till at last we can no longer tell what shape the sculptor’s hand gave it.” (17)

“Friday stood like a statue. [ . . . ] The unnatural years Friday had spent with Cruso had deadened his heart, making him cold, incurious.” (70)
“It was late in the afternoon. She stood before me stiff as a statue, wrapped in her cloak.” (72)

“Why do you think we do not kiss statues, and sleep with statues in our bed, men with the statues of women and women with the statues of men, statues carved in postures of desire? [. . .] There is no game in which each word has a second meaning, in which the words say ‘Statues are cold’ and mean ‘Bodies are warm.’” (79)
Minutiae: Terraces

• “I wondered who would cross the ocean to see terraces” (18)
• Enormous but futile, useless effort
• Activity for the sake of it? Inscrutable.
• Should they be seen as monuments, as art?
“‘I will leave behind my terraces and walls,’” he said. ‘They will be enough. They will be more than enough.’ And he fell silent again.” (18)

“I asked Crusoe how many stones had gone into the walls. A hundred thousand or more, he replied. A mighty labour, I remarked. But privately I thought: Is bare earth, baked by the sun and walled about, to be preferred to pebbles and bushes and swarms of birds.” (33)
“The world expects stories from its adventurers, better stories than tallies of how many stones they moved in fifteen years, and from where, and to where; Cruso rescued will be a deep disappointment to the world.” (34)

“Might not Foe be a kind of captive too? I had thought him dilatory. But might the truth not be instead that he had laboured all these months to move a rock so heavy no man alive could budge it.” (151)
MUTENESS
Muteness: Silence at Margins

- Those furthest from centre speak least
- Silence a result of violence
- No chance to give testimony
- But Friday’s silence becomes central
“Friday has grown to be my shadow. Do our shadows love us, for all that they are never parted from us?” (115)

“In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story.” (141)
Muteness: Silence at Centre

• Foe dramatizes the limits of literature
• These limits are internal, not merely external
• The depths plumbed in art are always illusory
• The mirror necessarily distorts
• But literature is still the object of struggle
• As such, does it tell us that “ghosts” matter?
“What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born.” (121-22)
“I could return in every respect to the life of a substantial body, the life you recommend. But such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body.” (126)

“All of which makes up a story I do not choose to tell. I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world.” (131)
MONSTERS
Monsters

• Who or what are the monsters here?
• No cannibals?
• Foe? Susan? Friday?
• Note multiple references to ghosts and phantoms
• Is writing monstrous? Speech?
“Worse by far than the pain of rowing was the prospect of being adrift at night in the vast emptiness of the sea, when, as I have heard, the monsters of the deep ascend in quest of prey.” (11)

“I picture the kraken lying on the floor of the sea, staring up through tangled fronds of weeds at the sky, its many arms furled about it, waiting. It is into that terrible orbit that Friday steers his fragile craft.” (140)
“Hauling myself hand over hand down the trunks, I descend, petals floating around me like a rain of snowflakes.

“The dark mass of the wreck is flecked here and there with white. [. . .] If the kraken lurks anywhere, it lurks here, watching out of its stony hooded undersea eyes.” (156)