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Fiona Probyn-Rapsey
University of Sydney (USYD)

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J. M. Coetzee: Writing with/out authority

by

Fiona Probyn

University of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

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1. J. M. Coetzee's use of the white woman narrator in three of his novels -- *In the Heart of the Country* (1979), *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990) -- is closely aligned to the poststructuralist configuration of the feminine as necessarily disruptive of narrative. In particular, Coetzee engages with both 'difference feminism' and 'the feminine' as a means by which to address the problems (indeed crises) of narrative and discourse. Coetzee's three white women narrators do not exceed the limits of discourse but are placed as reconnaissance vehicles patrolling the boundaries of the Subject's breakdown; the white woman narrator's 'failure' to communicate, to authorise, to 'liberate', is precisely her value. Feminist discourse, and 'the feminine,' are *crucial* to Coetzee's elucidation of this nature of discourse. While numerous Coetzee critics have observed that he alludes to feminist texts in his fiction, it is most often in the context of elaborating on the ways in which Coetzee is "undermining" (see Mascaskill and Colleran) feminist discourse in order to critique a 'western feminism' (Anglo-American feminism in particular) that is inattentive to the ramifications of its universalising claims. Much as Coetzee provides a critique of Anglo-American feminist discourse, he is also inescapably reliant on these 'feminisms' and feminist writers for articulating a position of necessarily complicit marginalisation that he 'develops' in his own critical oeuvre. Not only does Coetzee utilise feminist discourse as a necessarily marginalised and complicit strategy, but he also adopts feminine symbols (fluidity, maternity, writing the body, silences, weaving metaphors), all of which are emphasised in the writings of difference feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, in order to suggest a space *beyond* the limitations posed by (phal)logocentric thinking.
2. So far the (proportionally small) critical enquiries focusing on Coetzee's white women narrators have fallen into roughly two schools of thought: those who see Coetzee's mimicry of the white woman's voice as an appropriation of otherness (Dodd, Parry), and those who see the white woman's voice as an appropriate vehicle or textual strategy for interrogating structures of power, authority and language (du Plessis, Attwell, Kossew, Dovey, Briganti, Bishop, Spivak, Gallagher). Here I intend to focus not on the either/or aspects of these readings (for I find them to be inseparable), but instead on Coetzee's use of the differences within feminism itself, as well as on his representations of his own self-positioning as not feminist but *feminised*, in order to show how this informs his use of feminism and white women narrators. While some critics (Dunbar and Rody) argue that Coetzee's work is 'feminist,' I argue that Coetzee's use of the feminine must instead be read in terms of the broader impact of the feminine as a textual strategy in the elucidation of settler postcoloniality.



[1]

3. Coetzee's adoption of the feminine narrative voice constitutes *both* a strategic evasion of a lack of an adequate vantage point from which to speak *and* a strategic encoding of that lack of authority in the figure of the white woman. All three women narrators are positioned as not only the narrators of the text, but also as authors of them. *In the Heart of the Country* is Magda's 'diary,' *Age of Iron* is Elizabeth Curren's 'letter' to her daughter in exile in America, and two of the chapters of *Foe* 'belong' to Susan Barton as her manuscript and as her collection of letters to Daniel Foe. The white women's possession of the 'word' is unstable, unauthorised and also outside recognised 'literary' forms. Furthermore, each narrative 'belonging' to Susan, Elizabeth and Magda constitutes an *act of writing*. Because of this the white women narrators are particularly self-conscious of the effects of writing and write self-reflexively, placing under question or suspicion the act of writing itself, which in turn highlights its attendant gaps and silences. For instance, Elizabeth describes her words as "devious discourse" while Magda insists (and thereby renders suspect) on her claim that she is "more than just the trace of these words passing through my head on their route from nowhere to nowhere" (*HC* 56). Susan Barton observes that "Some people are born storytellers: I, it would seem, am not" (*F* 81). The three white women narrators are all cautiously 'aware' of both the limitations of narration and of their own limited access to it.
4. Teresa Dovey and Brian Macaskill have pointed out that self-reflexive writing is an example of Coetzee's strategy of 'writing in the middle voice,' which he has described in this way: "[t]o write (middle) is

to carry out the action (or better, to do writing) with reference to the self" (Attwell *Doubling* 94). Macaskill's "Charting the Middle Voice: *In the Heart of the Country*" focuses on the "speculative linguistic" phenomena of the 'middle voice,' which is a writing position *between* the 'active' (such as in the declaration "I write") and the passive ("it is written"). Thus it approximates Magda's ambivalent claim to be "the medium, the median" (*HC* 133) who is caught somewhere between seeing her existence as a series of "citational practices" or as real and 'beyond' words themselves. Looking also at the notion of the 'middle voice' in Coetzee's writing, Dovey argues that *all* Coetzee's novels are "always making reference to the self of writing" and that they "exploit the notion of the divided subject of Lacan, the split between text and narration, or utterance and enunciation, in order to gesture towards the possibility of escaping complicity with the dominant discourses" ("J. M. Coetzee" 19). While Dovey and Macaskill do not consider the issue of gender in this representation of the 'middle voice,' it would appear that the voice of the white woman is particularly pertinent to this strategy. One of the most common features attributed to the white woman is her ambivalent status in between the colonial master and the colonised, ambiguously asserting both her (white) colonial status and her 'woman-ness,' which may undermine her power as a colonial.



- When Coetzee speaks about the position that he occupies as a white male author and academic in South Africa (Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town), he is cautious to ascribe to his own position a complex amalgam of both power and powerlessness, hence the equi-vocal title of this paper. In the most obvious sense Coetzee, as a white man, is necessarily associated with the most dominant group in a colonial society, and as a white man who is also a 'liberal,' he is uniquely vulnerable. This equivocal position has been described by Stephen Watson as being a specific feature of Coetzee's work (22). Coetzee has described the white man's position in South Africa as "the veiled unfreedom of the white man in South Africa" who is seated on a "lonely throne" (Attwell *Doubling* 97). Coetzee here alludes to Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic which posits the relationship between Master and Slave as mutually degrading. Although this dialectic is a theme to which Coetzee often returns, he problematises it by referencing to its inability to appear rhetorically/politically affecting. As the Magistrate from *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Elizabeth Curren from *Age of Iron* both discover, their suffering, both *inflicted* and *cushioned* by their authority as whites, is "ignominious" in comparison with the suffering around them. The Magistrate ponders: "How can I regard myself as a victim of persecution when my sufferings are so petty?" (*WB* 85). Elizabeth describes her meditation on her own pain as an "ignominous occupation, and in times like these ridiculous too, as a banker with his clothes on fire is a joke while a burning beggar is not" (*AI* 36). The constant need to measure one's own pain by the pain of others is a feature of the rhetoric of most political movements; it is a deceptive ploy that obscures the source of the comparison and emphasises the importance of that compared. While feminist writing has often used the highly problematic analogy of racism to lend rhetorical force to its depiction of the cruelty of sexism, Coetzee and many writers like him often use metaphors of feminisation in order to emphasise their own profound sense of disempowerment.
- In interviews conducted with David Attwell, Coetzee has described his own position as a white South African writer in terms of cultural feminisation: a kind of "unlearning that privilege as a loss" (Spivak, "Criticism" 9). In describing his own feminised writing position in the following excerpt, Coetzee speaks *of* himself rather than *for* himself and in the third person (he is 'doing writing' in the 'middle voice'), making a characteristic and paradoxical attempt to avoid mastery over narrative:

In the first half of this story -- a story spoken in a wavering voice, for the speaker is not only blind, but, written as he is a white South African into the latter half of the twentieth century, disabled, disqualified -- a man-who-writes reacts to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, *writing without authority*. (Attwell *Doubling* 392; emphasis added)

- Coetzee sees himself 'without authority' because the type of authority associated with his position as a white male in South Africa is one whose authoritarian connotations he rejects and, throughout his novels, attempts to dismantle. He does not 'see' himself as an author who commands words (the 'speaker' is 'blind'), nor necessarily as an author who has spawned considerable critical interest in the area of postcolonial, postmodern and South African literature; Coetzee is a writer who is conscious of the ways in which writing itself is inextricably bound up with power. Coetzee represents his marginality, his "writing without authority," in the characters of his white women narrators who construct "their" texts (or 'story' in the case of Susan Barton, 'letter' in the case of Elizabeth Curren, and 'pastiche diary' in the case of Magda) from a position of marginality in relation to the canon, its recognised literary forms, and its masculinist dominance. Certainly in the case of Coetzee's writing, the white woman narrators' containment within narrative serves to dramatise Coetzee's *own* containment within the industry of writing. This is demonstrated by Coetzee himself in his rejection of Tony Morphett's inference that as a 'successful author' Coetzee *shares* the powerful position of an Author like Foe/Defoe:

"Successful author" is a barbed phrase here, a highly barbed phrase. Foe in the book, or Daniel Defoe in "real" life is the type of the successful author. Am I being classed with Foe, though my interest clearly lies with Foe's foe, the *unsuccessful* author, worse authoress -- Susan Barton? How can one question power or "success" from a position of power? One ought to question it from its antagonistic position, namely, the position of weakness. Yet, once again in this interview, I am being installed in a position of power -- power in this case over my own text. (Morphett 456)

- Coetzee rejects Morphett's assumption that he can answer for his text because of the associated implication that the text begins and ends entirely within the confines of the author's own interpretative realm. And yet, in order to describe his impatience with the model to which Morphett subscribes (the Author as God), Coetzee makes an equally masterful declaration towards possessing the feminine position, declaring his "interests" and where they "clearly lie" and proclaiming in no uncertain terms that the "position of weakness," that of the feminine, is his own. Although Coetzee insists that he is "writing without authority" it is in his white women narrators that this non-position, outside the authority of writing and Authorship, is *realised*.
- Despite this insistence that his "interest clearly lies with the . . . *unsuccessful* author, worse authoress," Coetzee's position is paradoxical. The major paradox is that despite his awareness of the necessity and

the inevitability of undermining his own cultural authority as a white South African man, his authority is necessarily a very public one, and one which has been celebrated, heralded, narrated and *authorised* in numerous essays, articles, books and critical editions devoted to the exegesis of the white man's undoing. Coetzee's rejection of the white man's cultural authority has guaranteed his presence and his importance (despite his own resistance, or even because of it) as a translator for South Africa's position on the "lip of a volcano" (Coetzee "Tales" 21), as he has described pre-reform South Africa. Coetzee's self-proclaimed marginality in relation to the South African mainstream notwithstanding, his position of weakness in relation to power is paradoxically empowering, as Derek Attridge has argued (170).

10. Coetzee would reject the idea that he possesses "a certain mystique" (Attridge 170) unless it were informed by a sense of complicity, a sense of duplicity, and a sense of equivocation. For a writer who, by his own admission, is reticent to perform as a public figure, who wishes he "had nothing to do with journalists from the start" (Attwell *Doubling* 65) and who resents the incorporation (or "swallowing" as he calls it) of his work into any critical corpus, Coetzee is nevertheless interested in his own self-positioning as a white South African writer. In numerous interviews (mostly with Attwell), Coetzee has granted the reader access to whatever self-representation he has chosen for himself. His memoir *Boyhood; Scenes from a Provincial life* perpetuates this representation of his position and also his alienation from that position; he continues to use a third-person narrative mode where he is 'doing writing.' In his (other) fiction, Coetzee continually 'names' himself in the violent history of the country; there is Jacobus Coetzee, an eighteenth-century frontiersman in *Dusklands* and another Coetzee, Eugene Dawn's supervisor, described by Dawn as a "powerful, genial, ordinary man, so utterly without vision" (*Dusklands* 1). Coetzee's interest in his own genealogy is in part a response to the need to assert a sense of complicity in the colonial situation that he criticises. It is a response to the position in which he finds himself, as a complicit critic. As he has described:

The whites of South Africa participated, in various degrees, actively or passively, in an audacious and well-planned crime against Africa. Afrikaners as a self defining group distinguished themselves in the commission of that crime. Thereby they lent their name to it. It will be a long time before they have the moral authority to withdraw that landmark. . . . Is it in my power to withdraw from the gang? I think not. . . . More important, is it my heart's desire to be counted apart? Not really. Furthermore -- and this is an afterthought -- I would regard it as morally questionable to write something like the second part of *Dusklands* -- a *fiction*, note -- from a position that is not historically complicit. (Attwell *Doubling* 342-343)

11. The necessarily impossible escape from one's social caste is a persistent theme in much of Coetzee's fiction, and is also a theme to which Coetzee clearly relates on a more personal level. Of his own status from within the 'master caste' Coetzee has written: "The masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you cannot resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but short of actually shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually *doing* it" (Attwell *Doubling* 96). One way in which Coetzee has performed a "symbolic resignation" from the "master caste" is in his insistence that his own position in relation to the 'masters' is equivocal and feminised. In taking over the feminine and using it as a figure for the sense of disempowerment that comes from complicity, Coetzee is able to register a symbolic rejection of the caste to which he belongs. This is not to say that white women are not also born into the "master caste," but that their ability to perform as "masters" of that 'caste' is at the very least, according to Coetzee's own gendered description, rendered ambiguous.
12. Cast[er]ative imagery is often associated with liberal humanism in South Africa; it is "impotent," as Dovey has described it, an opposition with no voice, unable to act and feeling redundant, complicit and disempowered. Coetzee has pointed out that "[t]here are many authoritarian societies on earth, but Afrikanerdom strikes one as a society in which castration is allotted a particularly blatant role" (Attwell *Doubling* 374). This 'feminisation' of the enemy (liberal, other) is dramatised in Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the emissaries of the new Imperial force, Colonel Joll and his deputy Mandel, debase and humiliate the town Magistrate, now considered an enemy of the state, by staging a mock hanging. They reinforce the Magistrate's loss of power by parading the Magistrate dressed in a woman's smock, symbolically linking his victimisation and powerlessness with feminisation;

Mandel whispers in my ear. "Do your best to behave like a man". . . . A scapegoat is named, a festival is declared, the laws are suspended: who would not flock to see the entertainment? What is it I object to in these spectacles of abasement and suffering and death that our new regime puts on but their lack of decorum? . . . I am swinging loose. The breeze lifts my smock and plays with my naked body. I am relaxed, floating. In a woman's clothes. (*WB* 117-120).

13. Through this humiliation, the officers of Empire also reinforce the masculine nature of their own authority. By metaphorically castrating his enemy, the Colonel claims the Magistrate's phallic power for himself. But Coetzee's portrayal of this process is a great deal more complicated. The Magistrate's previous experiences of torture at the hands of the authorities have necessitated a psychological detachment from his body, to the extent that, though he *feels* the pain inflicted on his body, he describes it in a such a measured fashion that he appears to be distancing 'himself' from it. The Magistrate recounts the hanging itself in strangely muted tones; "I am strangled, speechless. The blood hammers in my ears. I feel my toes lose their hold. I am swinging gently in the breeze." The incongruity of this last phrase lies in its suggestion of a peaceful leisure activity rather than an attempted hanging. When the Magistrate comments (again, he is still 'being' hanged) "I am relaxed, floating. In a woman's clothes," it is as if the actual wearing of the 'woman's clothes' facilitates his displacement of pain; disguised by the woman's smock, *his* body is no longer 'present' and therefore the pain that it feels is displaced, perhaps even replaced by pleasure. Paradoxically liberated by the sensation of feminisation and no longer obliged to fight to defend his masculine 'self,' the Magistrate saves his life by not struggling against the rope that grips his neck.
14. The process of feminisation here can be seen as operating in two ways. Firstly, Joll and Mandel use it to threaten castration and enforce powerlessness. Secondly, the Magistrate uses it to *displace* the sensation of pain, death and powerlessness on to an 'other' whose weakness is its strength. By 'othering' the Magistrate, Joll and Mandel (paradoxically) provide him with a means by which to accommodate the experience of utter pain and degradation. It is cast into the realm of the feminine, and leaves the masculine world intact. According to Elizabeth Grosz (reading Irigaray), such detachment from the masculine body constitutes the nature of 'objectivity' which underpins the masculine claim to universality as well as the "masculine domination of the right to speak on behalf of the feminine." In a description which closely resembles the kind of psychic detachment that the Magistrate undergoes, Grosz describes 'objectivity' as the following: "The masculine is able to speak of and for women because it

has emptied itself of any relation to the male body, thus creating a space of reflection, of specularisation in which it claims to look at itself and at femininity from outside. This presumed 'outsideness' is equated with objectivity" (128). Thus by projecting the experience of bodily immanence onto the feminine, the masculine vision is maintained as universal transcendence. The Magistrate is both objectified (seen as 'woman' is seen) and also disavows this 'specularisation' (to use Irigaray's term) of himself by objectifying or detaching himself from his own masculine body. Furthermore, the Magistrate's feminisation is not resisted by him, but instead is embraced as a means of escaping the masculine power that is now overwhelmingly associated with Colonel Joll and his deputy. By stepping outside that masculine power, the Magistrate has survived his victimisation.

15. This scene provides a key to understanding Coetzee's narrative strategy of avoiding the mere replication of power by refusing to compete with it on its own terms. In his opposition to the State, in his opposition to "deformed and stunted" apartheid literature, in his opposition to censorship and in his opposition to his own (constructed) position as a white South African man, Coetzee has chosen to render his own positionality and therefore his op-positionality, not as a 'given' but as an *object* of discourse. This objectification is achieved via feminisation. Coetzee is continually rendering his own 'power' as a white man suspect; as he replies to Tony Morphett "[y]et, once again in this interview, I am being installed in a position of power -- power in this case over my own text" (Morphett 456). Coetzee is self-conscious about his own 'doing writing' and is wary about being placed in a position of power and authority: he is, as he *insists*, "writing without authority." By constructing his opposition or objection to power in terms of the feminine, Coetzee risks turning the feminine into the object of *his* (transcendent) discourse. The dangers of this are realised when Coetzee identifies his own authority with that of Susan Barton, the "unsuccessful author" of *Foe*. It is precisely by virtue of his authority as Author that he can make such a claim and such a pronouncement as to the *powerlessness* of his own position. By this action alone, that powerlessness, that failure of the "unsuccessful author" (that *he* has constructed) is rendered as the "docile body of difference" (Bhabha 31) which in turn overshadows or pre-emptly empties any difference that she may in fact pose.
16. It is the weakness of the feminine that is the key to its success: its position as object rather than subject is paramount. In *White Writing*, Coetzee's study of the (failure of the) pastoral novel in South Africa, he has also noted the dangers implied by any 'subversion' that becomes 'triumphant': "Ours ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence. . . . Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. . . . It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn" (81). This idea echoes Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida's argument that the power of the feminine stems from its strategic location 'outside' logocentrism. This idea leads them to oppose feminism as a phallic practice because of its roots in (phallogocentric) classical rationality and humanism (Jardine *Gynesis* 39). Feminists are of course worried that this reading valorises a position of weakness, and the suggestion that feminism is a 'little phallus' over-simplifies the *différance* of and within feminism. The configuration of feminism as a project of what may ironically be titled 'becoming man' features as the dominant reading of Coetzee's reading of feminism. It is this narrow view of feminism which is largely responsible for the exclusion of questions relating to Coetzee's use of the feminine and feminism in his novels and critical work. Coetzee is greatly reliant on the feminine for its promise of a position outside a position of rivalry with the state, with 'truth' and with realism. Clearly, Coetzee utilises the feminine as a textual strategy to avoid certain rhetorical strategies and to inhabit others.



17. René Girard's work on mimetic violence and sterile rivalries in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* informs Coetzee's understanding of power and in particular, how it effects literature.[2] According to Girard, the impotence of opposition in the face of brutality is partly the result of the individual or writer entering into a "sterile rivalry" with the state. This sterile rivalry appears when the writer tries to compete with the state (or any other dominant power) on its ground, thereby creating a situation of escalating rhetorical violence which *reflects* the state, rather than destabilises it.
18. In his collection of essays on censorship, *Giving Offense*, Coetzee finds that one of the most insidious effects of censorship in South Africa was/is that it creates a great deal of inverse pressure to represent *mimetically* what it was that the censors did not want seen. In keeping with his understanding of Girard's notion of sterile rivalry, Coetzee finds that a principal effect of writing under conditions created by a strict system of state censorship is that can urge writers to adopt a position of rivalry with the state, which in turn tends to make debate polarised and polemical. As the narrator in *Dusklands* says, "Power speaks only to power"(3), therefore implying that the only way to deconstruct or undo power (or truth) successfully is from a position of powerlessness, a position that Susan, Magda and Elizabeth occupy in their narratives. Avoiding this sterile rivalry is one of Coetzee's primary interests: as he has written: "[f]or the writer the . . . true challenge is how to not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority" ("Into" 13). By not competing with the state over the 'truth,' Coetzee is able to find a position outside this sterile rivalry with the state.
19. Coetzee's interest in 'sterile rivalries' partly explains why he continually seeks to place under suspicion his own authority to object to and oppose various forms of power. It seems as if, like Elizabeth Curren, Coetzee would prefer his readers to see his own writing as a kind of 'devious discourse,' and encourages readers, as Curren does, to "Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye" (*AI* 96). Coetzee continually views his own writing and his own writing (op)position with a similar 'cold eye' (objectively) or even, as he has described it, with a "blind" eye, (which again suggests objectivity, justice being blind, and also castration). Above all, Coetzee is self-reflexive about his own writing, and the challenge to "establish one's own authority" takes him to both the white woman narrator and, perhaps surprisingly, to Desiderius Erasmus, who also found refuge from sterile debate in the feminine.
20. *Giving Offense* features a chapter in which Coetzee praises Erasmus's *The Praise of Folie* (1509) because of a narrative strategy it features that allowed Erasmus to escape the confines of a bi-polar (and thereby stagnantly oppositional) debate between the Papacy and Lutheran reformers. While the rhetoric escalated in dogmatism and vehemence, Erasmus was able to "criticise all and sundry without reprisal"

by speaking through the position of the fool, the woman Moria whose voice dominates *The Praise of Folie*. Erasmus' critique of both sides of the debate was achieved by his construction of a marginal narrative position, which, like Elizabeth Curren, speaks words that are by the standards of the day "doubly negligible." Coetzee remarks that Moria "need not be taken seriously because, as she says, she is a woman" (*Giving* 97). From the very outset of Moria's dramatic monologue, Moria asks her readers/listeners to attend to her words *and* to her position beyond seriousness: "I am come forthe amonges you: upon condition ye will not thinke much to bestow on me your eares a while. I mean not those eares that ye carie with you to sermons, but those ye geve to plaiers, to jesters and to fooles" (Erasmus 8). Enabled by this position outside the institution of power-knowledge (or seriousness), Moria can poke fun at philosophers, who, she says, "plainely thinke themselves demygodes," and at religious leaders, while simultaneously reinforcing the precarious position of the feminine that she occupies: "An ape is an ape be she clothed in purple, so a woman is a woman (that is to say) a foole, what so ever a part she plaie" (24). Unsurprisingly by the 'disease of wysedom' that plagues men, Moria is able to criticise those who claim possession of wisdom as well as wisdom itself. Coetzee admires in *The Praise of Folie* the elucidation of "the problematics of finding or creating a position in-but-not-in the political dynamic, a position not already given, defined, limited and sanctioned by the game itself" (*Giving* 84). This 'paradoxical project' -- to step outside a rival political dynamic and maintain resistance to the logic of the debate while simultaneously appearing to offer an alternative to it -- is a concern that features throughout much of Coetzee's fiction and critical work.

21. Just as Erasmus used the figure of woman in *The Praise of Folie* to address the folly of man, and his 'wisdom,' so too Coetzee uses the figure of woman to address the folly of perceived wisdom and the rivalry that demarcates it. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* is one such figure whose position as a white colonial daughter isolated on a farm in the Karoo is so tenuous that it provides a location for a disruption of colonial paradigms. There are significant similarities between Magda and Moria which suggest that Coetzee has taken on Erasmus's narrative strategy of the folly of 'woman.' Both Magda's and Moria's voices dominate their narratives, both are (to different extents) metafictional, both are 'aware' of their positions on the verge of unreason and insight, and both take on and challenge the philosophers of the day (Magda is continually providing Freudian readings of herself, as Briganti shows). Like Moria, Magda continually undermines the 'seriousness' of her narrative: "I am not a philosopher. Women are not philosophers and I am a woman" (*HC* 119). Magda's name is suggestive of Mag, which means 'to chatter, to talk rapidly and to little purpose,' to speak 'nonsense,' often forming "onomatopoeic sounds" as Michael du Plessis has pointed out (120); Magda herself describes her speech as "'prattle' (*HC* 49), 'gabble' (*HC* 84), 'chatter' (*HC* 110), 'babble' (*HC* 48, 59, 113), 'cackling' and 'gibbering' (*HC* 45)". Because of this 'nonsense' language Magda is able to mediate a position beyond the black and white of oppositional politics, providing Coetzee with room to explore and critique both sides of the debate. While Elizabeth in *Age of Iron* complains that she has "[o]pinions in a vacuum" that she fears are 'useless,' Coetzee suggests that such a speaking position is far from useless, especially in an environment where 'useful' opinions are more often than not valued according to their adherence to a binary. Staying in between those two poles of thought may well be operating 'in a vacuum,' but, Coetzee suggests, a vacuum also describes the sterile rivalry of oppositional debate.
22. The way in which Coetzee constructs Erasmus' political positioning is similar to the way in which Coetzee describes his *own* discomfort with oppositional politics. He describes Erasmus thus: "at a personal level he found conflict uncongenial (which is not to say that his reluctance to take sides was merely a matter of temperament: in a deep sense it was political too)"; he was "[s]ympathetic to many of the ideals of the reform [of the Papacy], he was nevertheless disturbed by the intolerance and inflexibility of the actual reform movement" (*Giving* 83). Coetzee describes his own position as "[s]ympathetic to the human concerns of the left, he is alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language -- by all political language, in fact. As far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with language that lays down the law" (Attwell *Doubling* 395). There is also a sense in which Coetzee admires and indeed empathises with the charge laid by Luther against Erasmus, that he was the 'King of the Amphibians,' unable to take sides, but remaining (paradoxically) steadfast on the shifting sands between them. While Erasmus stood 'outside' the debate by utilising the ambiguous and therefore powerful disguise of the feminine, his fame and influence have remained *less* than ambiguous. Erasmus is, as Coetzee might describe him, 'a big phallus' whose narrative strategy of *playing* 'little phallus' guaranteed both his safety from impunity *and* his fame.
23. While Erasmus's critique of the Reformation debate is enabled by the "non-position" of woman because she does not occupy either (women were excluded from it), her position is very much inside patriarchal western thought, which defines, limits and sanctions the relegation of the feminine outside of reason in the first place. Moria is contained within what Irigaray has called the 'logic of the same' (*Speculum* 27); her position is valued according to its power to offer patriarchal thought an inverted confirmation of the positive. Her foolishness and her madness are attempts to breathe some sanity back into the debate; she steps outside the reason of the Reformation debate in order to Re-form it. While Coetzee worries that such a position 'off the stage of rivalry altogether' may be *harnessed* for its ambiguity and thereby become *less* ambiguous and more rigorous, he is not concerned with how Erasmus's choice of narrator may in actual fact also constitute an act of political conservatism, enabled as it is by misogynistic representations of woman. Alternatively, Coetzee worries that the value of Moria's non-position will come to represent a form of power that *rivals* the male power/knowledge coupling that she pretends to be outside of. Coetzee writes:

But of course, the very mark of the success of the paradoxical project of embracing the position of the fool, the eunuch, the woman, is that as, to the surprise of all, the power of that position reveals itself, the paradox dissolves and the rivalrousness of the project is revealed. The claims of the little phallus to dubiousness and provisionality dissolve; the little phallus grows, threatens the big phallus, threatens to become a figure of law itself. (*Giving* 100)

Thus, the problem for Coetzee is that while the fool or woman is powerful as a figure of enlightenment for the structurally powerful, that power is negated if it begins to compete with anything close to the same level of serious power as its 'others.'



24. Coetzee's novels and critical writing make reference to the work of diverse feminists including Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Catherine McKinnon, Virginia Woolf, and Adrienne Rich, whose poem "Diving into the Wreck" frames the conclusion to *Foe* (Dovey "The Intersection" 129). Not only is feminist criticism an important feature of Coetzee's work, but so are the feminine metaphors associated with fluidity, maternity, silence, weaving and the body. Both Susan VanZanten Gallagher (107) and Michael du Plessis have noted that these tropes suggest Coetzee's engagement with *écriture féminine*. With the exception of du Plessis and Gallagher, however, critics have not noticed the reliance on so-called "difference feminism" within Coetzee's work. This is because critics predominantly read Coetzee's use of feminism as an *unproblematic* expression of Coetzee's own "self-positioning" as a "dissenting coloniser" or marginalised white liberal in South Africa. The recently published *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee* (ed. Huggan and Watson) is a tribute to the dominance of this reading; the oversight is demonstrated by David Attwell who in the "Afterword" to the collection laments the lack of feminist readings of Coetzee's novels and then argues that Coetzee uses feminism to "dramatise his own self positioning." He writes:

In what direction is criticism of Coetzee likely to turn in the future? There are certain obvious possibilities. First the question of the feminine narrators has been insufficiently explored. Feminist readings of Coetzee have been slow to develop, perhaps because Coetzee seems in an immediate way to be a powerful ally of feminism: Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren are all displaced figures who resist pre-existing and more dominant modes of address, seeking to define themselves in worlds not of their own making. But there is more to it than this. The feminine in these narrators, as Glenn implies in his essay on *In the Heart of the Country*, serves to dramatise Coetzee's *own* self positioning with respect to the versions of authority, both social and discursive, that compete around him. In other words, here we have the feminine as a sign for other kinds of difference. ("Afterword" 215)

25. The assertion posited by Attwell (and supported by other Coetzee critics such as Dovey, Glenn, Watson, and Rody) is reinforced by Coetzee himself and is part of the reason why feminist readings of Coetzee's novels have struggled to find ground on which to critique Coetzee's representations of feminisms and white women narrators. Attwell, for instance, has responded to Coetzee's use of white woman narrators by tying himself in considerable conceptual knots. Whenever the issue of Coetzee's use of feminism arises, Attwell responds by attempting to dissociate feminism from the issue of gender entirely, and then goes on to resurrect feminism exclusively in relation to Coetzee's self-positioning:

[T]he feminism Coetzee constructs through Susan carries additional allegorical burdens that have little to do with gender. In the allegory of white South African authorship, Susan's womanhood suggests the relative cultural power of the province as opposed to the metropolis and of unauthorised as opposed to authorised speech; gender therefore serves as the sign of the position of semimarginality that I have called colonial postcolonialism. (*J. M. Coetzee* 112)

26. I agree with Attwell that *Foe* represents through Susan the attempt to elucidate a position of "colonial postcolonialism," which I take to mean a position that seeks to challenge colonialism but that is nevertheless made complicit with colonialism through the nature of its expression (which is arguably what the term 'postcolonial' means). I also agree that the feminism Susan represents is allegorised onto a postcolonial framework, rather than focused specifically on women's relation to power. Coetzee's use of feminism begins from the assumption that white women's access to power is different from that of white men, that they are 'semi-marginal;' he takes a reading of gendered power relations and grafts it onto a postcolonial paradigm. Susan Barton's disabled authorial voice allows Coetzee to register, through her, a rejection of the colonialist, humanist discourse represented by *Foe*, and also a sense of complicity in it. Above all, Susan's narrative is not about her but is about something else expressed in the form of feminism's "additional allegorical burdens."
27. Yet there are numerous problems associated with this 'use' of feminism, not the least being the idea that women's (and Attwell does refer to white women when he writes "gender") powerlessness is not significant in itself, but that it requires supplementation. In other words, feminist critical practice is most interesting as a discourse on power when it has little to do with women and more to do with the status of Coetzee's own "self-positioning" as a male writer. Another significant problem is that Attwell's arguments about Coetzee's "use of gender" repeat the dilemma located in a type of Anglo-American feminism which has appropriated race as an allegory of white women's plight. While he agrees with Dovey and Spivak that *Foe* constitutes a warning for western feminism against easy affiliations between "woman" and the racial other, Attwell nevertheless subscribes to a view of "feminism" that sees it as a "convenient figure" for issues broader than 'women's issues.' Attwell warns against the flexibility of the sign "woman" in terms of Anglo-American feminism's engagement with postcolonial issues, and yet his own eclectic view of postcolonialism relies on the flexibility of woman as an allegory and as a discursive sign for other postcolonial positions.
28. The fact that Coetzee uses 'feminism' to dramatise his *own* self-positioning is not as unproblematic as Attwell suggests, and it is a strategy which brings us back to the poststructuralist and postcolonial use of the feminine as a figure of 'crisis.' It is in this area that a feminist reading may find ground on which to frame a critique of this particular correlation, for as Attwell's interpretation shows, the feminine is here functioning as an expression of a postcolonial settler crisis. Indeed, Caroline Rody has argued that Magda's "feminist voice" has afforded Coetzee a masterly reading of "the horror and absurdity of his own postcolonial condition" (179). Ian Glenn writes that "Magda as writer mediates on the limitations of writing as a way of articulating a poetics for Coetzee himself" (127). Sue Kossew claims that Coetzee's portrayal of women's writing encompasses a self-referential or ironic twist that reflects back on Coetzee himself; further, she points out that Coetzee "implicates his own authorial performance as a potentially colonising activity, thus highlighting the ambivalent speaking position of any "liberal" settler writer"' ("Women's Words" 169). While this is true (Coetzee *is* implicated), it is unclear as to whether or not Coetzee's 'performance' would be heralded as an achievement had the object of his 'potentially colonising activity' been other than the white woman. Moreover, does the fact that Coetzee is 'aware' of the

colonising impulse behind writing also mean that he is attentive to all the ways in which that impulse may manifest itself? Benita Parry has noted that the attribution of this kind of self-reflexive textual sophistication has the effect of disabling criticism: "it has been suggested that . . . Coetzee's fiction registers the author's understanding of his own 'positional historicity,'" which according to Parry, has the effect of "preempting any effort by critics to theorise the elisions and ideological complicities inaugurated by the texts' spoken and unspoken cultural affiliations" (39). The question of the white woman narrators remains relatively unexplored because it is often conflated with Coetzee's own position, self-reflexively secure in paradox. More often than not, the question of the white woman narrators arises in relation to the way in which their position approximates position of the 'subject' in/of language.

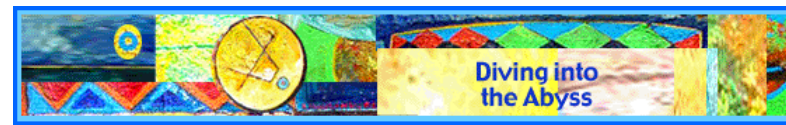
29. Some critics, including Pamela Dunbar, David Attwell, Teresa Dovey and Caroline Rody, have insisted that Coetzee's writing is 'feminist.' Coetzee, however, is reluctant to take on this description and has stated, in reference to *Foe*, that: "I would hate to say . . . that there is a feminist point" (Morphett 460). A 'use' of the feminine in his writing, and even a prolonged engagement with feminist writers, is not coterminous with a feminist interest in the position of women. As du Plessis maintains, rather than Coetzee writing a 'feminist' text, he is interested in the "textual enunciation of femininity" to "test the limits of meaning" (120). This use of the feminine is predicated on the idea that women's access to representation, to writing, to literacy, and to power has been marginalised under patriarchy. The already written crisis of *female* subjectivity -- her diffuseness, her multiple, contradictory and displaced subjectivity which embodies the historical situatedness of the postmodern subject -- is the product of patriarchy. Consequently, the appearance of the feminine is not necessarily due to an interest in feminism; instead, the female subject can be seen as an appropriate *model* for the decentred, fragmented, postmodern subject. As Dodd argues: "Discursive sign she might be, but it's a gender inflected discursive sign for sure" ("Textual" 162). Attwell's refusal to see gender as anything other than a textual device for undermining narrative authority, then exposes the major difference between a feminist interest in such a project and a postmodern or postcolonial interest in such a project.
30. Critics of *Foe* have often fallen into the trap of reading feminism according to this inflexible position, where the feminist position is seen as "nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man" (Derrida, *Spurs* 64-65), and is primarily a phallic practice par excellence (Derrida "Women in" 187-203).] One example of this can be seen in Macaskill and Colleran's collaborative work on *Foe*, with its suggestive title "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in Coetzee's *Foe*." They suggest that Coetzee's strategy of "undermining, while participating within, a feminist critique of patriarchal power relations" entails that the author-ity of Foe and Susan is interchangeable (452). This reading of Susan's position is deeply problematic given that Macaskill and Colleran have suggested prior to this point that Susan is the feminist focus of the text. Another example is Dunbar's reading, which owes much to Dovey's in that she argues that Susan ends up colonising the position of Friday through her assumption of "masculinist attitudes." Dunbar believes that this appropriation of a masculinist power dynamic (the pen) allows Susan to move "from a position of subjugation to the white, patriarchal male (Cruso at first, Foe later on) to that of feminist domination and literary autonomy. She achieves this transition through her symbolic usurpation of the male instrument of domination and of communication" (107). Similarly, Rosemary Jolly points to "Susan Barton's *replacement* of Foe as Author-Narrator within the novel" (*Colonization* 13). Such assertions of the literary equality or equivalence between Susan and Foe are based on a fundamental misreading of the text, whereby Susan's absence at the conclusion of Foe's writing is ignored. Furthermore, such a reading overlooks Barton's equivocation over the Friday's silence. As Benita Parry has pointed out, "Barton articulates a reluctance to exert the narrative power which she holds over those who are muted, when she resists Foe's urgings to invent Friday's story" (50). Susan's exclusion from the text of 'history' (prefigured as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) and from the story that she seeks to tell (that of the island rather than of the search for the daughter) are vital to the depiction of writing in *Foe*, exclusions that Susan rightly predicts:

"Better had there been only Cruso and Friday," you will murmur to yourself: "Better without the woman." Yet where would you be without the woman? Would Cruso have come to you of his own accord? Could you have made up Cruso and Friday and the island with its fleas and apes and lizards? I think not. Many strengths you have, but invention is not one of them." (*F* 72)

31. Not only do Colleran and Macaskill patiently describe what they see as Coetzee's reading of feminism, but they also go on to prescribe, somewhat self-contradictorily, *against* reading Coetzee from a feminist perspective. They argue that Coetzee's text should not be "swallowed up" by feminism: "Coetzee's text can ill afford to have itself swallowed up by deconstructionist, or feminist, or any other form of theorizing that might desire to expose every kind of secret other than those of its own" (442). They quote Coetzee's concern over a type of critical activity which "swallow(s) one kind of discourse into another kind of discourse . . . when one may not want that" (fn 443). Far from being 'swallowed up' by feminism, however, Coetzee has been *enabled* by it. It constitutes the textual body on which he has (de)constructed not only his own op/positionality, but also his challenge to textuality. Furthermore, the problems of Anglo-American feminism and its tendencies towards essentialism and universalism (as seen in the criticisms of Gilbert and Gubar) constitute the ground on which Coetzee maps his rejection of liberal humanism -- albeit by utilising the tools of post-structuralism and difference feminism.
32. Dovey's suggestion that Susan epitomises an Anglo-American feminist attempt to construct the racial other as a "fetishistic shelter" has been extraordinarily successful in its influence on subsequent readings of *Foe*. Gayatri Spivak reads *Foe* as an illustration of the "wholly otherness of margins" ("Theory" 157) and points to a warning against feminist readings of the racial other that do not heed the "Eurocentric arrogance" inherent in any attempt to give voice to the margins. Spivak writes that "a concern with women, *and* men, who have not been written in the *same* cultural inscription, cannot be mobilised *in the same way* as the investigation of gendering in our own . . . attention to the wholly other must be constantly renewed" ("Theory" 159).
33. These kinds of readings, which generate a critique of liberal or Anglo-American feminism via the limitations of the white woman narrator, appear to be predicated on the notion that 'behind' the failed 'liberalism' of Susan Barton, and indeed of Elizabeth Curren and Magda, is 'Coetzee.' Macaskill and Colleran, for instance, describe *Foe* as "the text she [Susan] is producing on Coetzee's behalf" ("Resistance" 446). Coetzee has himself described *In the Heart of the Country* in these terms: "Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* may be mad (if that is indeed your verdict), but I behind her, am merely passionate" (Attwell *Doubling* 61). The conclusion to *Foe* has also generated a conflation of author and text in readings where 'Coetzee' is brought *into* the text as the 'unnamed narrator' who dives into the wreck. Sheila Roberts argues that the unnamed narrator is "Coetzee, using his own I/eye" (88), as does Josephine Dodd ("Textual" 161), while Sue Kossew agrees with Helen Tiffin that the "author figure is . . . perhaps 'Coetzee'" ("Women's Words" 174).
34. Readings that focus on a 'difference' between Coetzee and his white women narrators imply that the difference is one of expertise, whereby the master takes over from the apprentice in order to complete the

tale (just as Foe masterfully recreates and finishes Susan's story). Yet it is Susan Barton who, throughout *Foe*, negotiates the limits between what is representable and what is unrepresentable. While she brings the *question* of Friday continually to the forefront, she is, at the same time, placing his difference out in the open and on the line; but in speaking of his difference, she is in danger of turning it into the Same. It is not surprising that commentators often *blame* her for doing this, for Susan is constructed in a way that positions her as a target for an informed postcolonial reading which seems to *favour* the 'unnamed narrator' and 'his' highly poetic reading in the last chapter. While Susan laboriously questions and experiments with the writing process from the position of novice, the unnamed narrator at the conclusion sweeps onto the stage, repeats 'her' lines, and reveals the writing process to be one of failure, however poetically rendered. Consequently, the final chapter of *Foe* seems to represent, for some critics, the (postcolonial) master taking over from the (colonial) amateur to 'establish' the voice-lessness of Friday.

35. Readings predicated on a belief that Coetzee is (masterfully) correcting a wayward and universalising line of feminist thought are not attentive to the ways in which Coetzee's use of feminism or the feminine is related to broader phenomena of the use of the feminine as a medium for the postcolonial settler identity crisis, for the authority of the author, and for the crisis of representation. Consequently, the critical response to Coetzee's use of feminism and the feminine has been limited to an examination of *liberal or Anglo-American feminism's* problems of universalism. While this examination is valid, it does not adequately account for Coetzee's engagement with, and indeed reliance on, feminism; it is important to situate his use of the white woman's voice within the context of a poststructuralist interest in the feminine, difference feminism, as well as the postcolonial crisis of the settler identity. Apart from Gallagher and du Plessis, critics have failed to notice the prevalence of difference feminism in Coetzee's writing because his implied criticisms of Anglo-American feminism have generated more opportunities for critics to chastise "western feminism" as a (presumed) whole for its cultural appropriations and thereby move the debate away from feminism and the feminine and into the realm of postcolonial and postmodern readings.



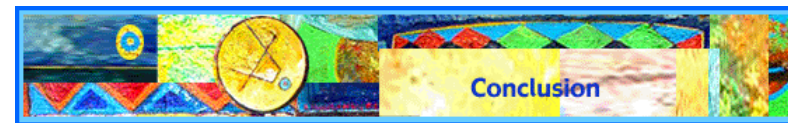
36. Coetzee emphasises his reliance on the differences between Anglo-American feminism and difference feminism in the conclusion to *Foe*. Susan Barton's question at the end of *Foe*, "who must dive into the wreck?" alludes to Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck." Rich's poem can be read as an allegory of the retrieval of women's histories or women's voices submerged *beneath* a dominant patriarchal discourse represented in the poem as a "book of myths/ in which/ our names do not appear." Rich suggests that it is in the body and in fluidity that a non-phallic language might be found. So too the unnamed narrator in Part 4 of *Foe* is moving through an underwater wreck, and in asking Friday "what is this ship?" realises that it is also not so much "a question of power" (as Rich describes the sea) because it is "not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused" (157). This home of Friday, which is not a place of words, signals the impossibility of ever attaching a final authoritative meaning to Friday.
37. Like Friday's 'slow stream' of imaginary words -- air bubbles filled with water -- Magda's discourse is also submerged: "when I wake on the ocean floor it will be the same old voice that drones out of me, drones or bubbles or whatever it is that words do in water" (*HC* 54). Like the 'unnamed narrator' at the conclusion to *Foe*, Magda also imagines herself 'diving into the wreck' in a kind of mock suicide that parodies both the traditional representation of women's affinity with water as well as the presumed 'presence' of a woman's language (an 'underground kingdom') beneath phallic discourse. Coetzee 'writes' Magda writing:
- Far down in the earth flow the underground rivers, through dark caverns dripping with crystalline water. . . . I wade out in to the tepid dam looking for the sinkhole which in our dreams beckons from the deep and leads to the underground kingdom. My skirt billows and floats around my waist like a black flower. . . . Of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder. With the story coming to an end, all one's last bad poetry finds release. I cast a long calm look of farewell at the sky and the stars, which probably cast a long calm vacant look back, exhale the last beloved breath (goodbye, spirit!), and *dive for the abyss*. (*HC*13)
38. Here Coetzee is not only satirizing Magda's nihilistic pretensions to literariness but also the feminist preoccupation with submergence as an allegory for women's plight. Magda fails in her attempt to 'dive into the abyss'; *surfacing*, she makes a most un-literary mockery of the feminist quest for 'presence' beneath the surface of phallic discourse: "My underwear balloons with water. I strike the bottom all too soon, as far from the mythic vortex as ever. The first willed draught of water through my nostrils sets off a cough and the blind panic of an organism that wants to live" (13). While this scenario is amusing, in *Foe* the 'dive for the abyss' is presented with a great deal of seriousness. In Friday's case, the water imagery serves to represent his history, words, voice, as unattainable, silent, absent and yet 'present' at the margin, while in Magda's case, the water imagery is self-consciously deployed and thereby underlines her folly. Why is there such a difference between these two similar dives into the wreck/abyss?
39. The difference stems, I would argue, from Coetzee's treatment of liberal Anglo-American feminism and his utilisation of difference feminism. Magda is a parody of Adrienne Rich's diver in "Diving into the Wreck," and she is a parody of the feminist quest for identity *beyond* phallic discourse. That poem represents (here) a kind of liberal (Anglo-American) feminism which privileges a contradictory reversal of positions over a deconstruction of positionality per se; it assumes that women's language exists underneath or outside of a system which disavows them.
40. Whereas Rich implies that the submerging of women's histories (and bodies) is the *effect* of patriarchal discourse, Coetzee appears more closely aligned with a Kristevan view that valorizing a 'silent underwater body' prevents women's entry into history.' With her underwear ballooning with water, preventing her submergence (beneath phallic discourse), Magda is unable to satisfy the feminist quest for the "silent underwater body" and is instead, pushed back above the surface 'into history' -- all of which implies that the liberal Anglo-American feminist quest to oppose phallogentrism cannot but ignore the extent to which it is itself historically complicit in its operations. Magda cannot survive under water; she suffers the "blind panic of an organism that wants to live" (*HC* 13) in the same way that women's

language cannot survive outside of phallic discourse. There is no 'underneath' or 'outside' of language; it must be resisted or deconstructed from within.

41. In *Foe*, the unnamed narrator's dive into the wreck is 'different' from that experienced by Magda. The unnamed narrator doesn't have any problems in the 'underwater kingdom' of the wreck: no 'blind panic,' no 'cough' and no ballooning underwear. He moves slowly through the wreck and, in asking Friday "what is this ship?" (rather than 'what is your truth?'), is witness to the inaccessibility of Friday's meanings. The unnamed narrator cannot 'speak' clearly underwater and each word in his question is "filled with water and diffused" (*F* 157). Friday 'responds' with a 'slow stream, without breath, without interruption," empty bubbles that evoke the "O's" that Friday learns to write: "He is writing the letter o" (*F* 152) as well as Susan's description of Friday as 'a buttonhole.' The unnamed narrator's dive into the wreck does not resuscitate the truth of Friday's experience, and does not attempt to make it speak -- for that, Coetzee implies, would be an appropriation of his wholly 'otherness.' As Attwell describes it, "Friday's home is his body: his existence is a facticity that simply asserts its own priorities. The trials of marginal authorship are irrelevant to Friday. . . . *Foe* ends . . . with an image in which the absolute limits of its own powers of authorization and signification are defined" (*J. M. Coetzee* 116-117). Similarly, difference feminism does not try to make the 'feminine' speak in opposition to phallogocentrism (the 'silent underwater body') but rather it looks to the feminine as a model of marginality that necessarily disrupts phallogocentric attempts to frame and signify it, much like Friday's body being its own sign.
42. Coetzee's imagery in these two 'dives into the wreck' of textuality utilises the feminine symbol of lack as well as water imagery. The "O's" that come out of Friday's mouth (as well the unnamed narrator's mouth) have invariably been read by critics as representing absence in the form of Omega or aporia. The "O" can also be traced to Coetzee's readings of the feminist author Monique Wittig, and in particular her work *Les Guérillères*, which features O's as symbols of feminine excess, or that which logocentrism has relegated to a position outside representability. Coetzee, reading Wittig, has written (in a footnote): 'The O, the circle, the hole are symbols of that which male authoritarian language cannot appropriate' (Attwell *Doubling* fn 404). Again, Magda is also associated with this sign of feminine absence and excess: 'If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman' (41). Elizabeth is also represented by this "O"; her cancer eats her away from the inside leaving her feeling: "I am hollow, I am a shell" (*AI* 103). Coetzee is engaging with feminine symbols of lack-turned-to-excess to challenge and *represent* the limitations of language.
43. While Coetzee is clearly influenced by poststructuralist readings of the feminine by writers including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva (as Gallagher has also noted, 107), his writing also demonstrates an interest in the evocation of the body, both as a site that resists or disrupts representation and that also stubbornly insists upon itself *despite* the inadequacies of representation. Friday, whose body "is its own sign," is a good example of this. Dovey has described the rhetorical power of the suffering victim in South African literature in relation to Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (as has Rosemary Jolly), and relates Coetzee's use of the suffering body to a liberal humanist discourse which she describes as "impotent" and which "implies the *fetishistic* and guilt-ridden attachment of South African liberal humanist discourse to the figure of the victim" ("*Waiting*" 61). But Coetzee does not stand outside liberal humanism in its attachments to the figure of the suffering body. In writing about the authority of the suffering body, in not only *Waiting for the Barbarians* but also *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, Coetzee sees his fiction as very much empowered by 'the body,' as the following answer to Attwell's question about the body of Friday in *Foe* demonstrates:

If I look back over my own fiction I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is the not "that which is not", and the proof that it is the pain that it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure.) . . . Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. . . . And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words, its power is undeniable. (Attwell *Doubling* 248)

44. One way around the problem of 'writing without authority,' a crisis that Coetzee has described as his own, is to mimic the authority of the suffering body, which "takes" its authority from the pain that it feels and therefore provides an 'ethical groundedness.' In *Age of Iron*, the same reference to the immediate ethical power and authority of suffering is made by Elizabeth Curren through a belief that her own crisis with cancer is a smaller version of the larger crisis around her. Similarly, Magda "pinches" herself to measure her existence. Jolly has pointed out that the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* shows a "fascination for the 'barbarian girl'" which "stems from her body as the site of torture. . . . He treats her body as a text which, if he pays enough attention -- if he 'reads' it 'properly' -- will alert him to the truth behind the scene of torture" (*Colonization* 127). The idea of the body as *the* significant site on which politics are played out and made manifest is a dominant theme in feminist theory, as is the accompanying rhetorical force of the suffering body. Coetzee is able to ground his explorations of textuality and postcolonialism in a body which, in feminist terms, is a recognised and politicised space or site of oppression and resistance. Although patently attentive to postmodernism's problematisation of all types of authority, Coetzee cannot deny that the suffering (South African) body encapsulates the "sense of struggle" against oppression. The body, as Spivak has argued, is greatly overdetermined in Friday (and in feminism), and that power of *signifying* signification itself is arguably what attracts Coetzee to the female body and feminist readings of the body.



45. Coetzee is indebted to feminism as much as he is participating in a critique of its limitations. Coetzee's white women narrators are situated between complicity in the totalising schemes of logocentrism (Anglo-American or liberal feminism) and a search for an impossible position *outside* the discourse that binds them (also the problematic of difference feminism). Coetzee's reading of feminism and the feminine enables his critique of the master narratives of realism and liberal humanism because white women have always had an uneasy relationship to these master narratives and are therefore in a 'privileged' position to undermine them. While most critics tend to read Coetzee's engagement with feminism and the feminine as secondary, I have argued that Coetzee's writing not only features the

feminine as a sign of crisis in his position and as a 'privileged term' for the crisis of modernity, but that the feminist writers to whom Coetzee alludes are the same writers who make Coetzee's oeuvre possible in the first place. Furthermore, that his critics often overlook his reliance on difference feminism while arguing that he critiques 'feminism' as a whole is probably the result of the inability to recognise 'difference feminism' as well as an eagerness to 'rescue' Coetzee from being 'swallowed up' by a feminist critique which may otherwise question the validity of that engagement.

Notes

1. The title of Nicole Ward Jouve's work of the same name. [Back](#)
 2. Coetzee describes Girard's influence as significant: "[i]n our time, the most extensive account of vicissitudes of rivalry has been René Girard" (*Giving* 85). [Back](#)
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