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## Intertextuality and the Collaborative Construction of Narrative: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

[A] text is all the words that are in it, and not only those words, but the other words that precede it, haunt it, and are echoed in it.

—A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (46)

Transformative narratives may take a wide range of forms: an author may fill in the outlines of a tale with greater detail; move the story to a different setting; tell it from a different point of view or focalize it through a different character; offer a new interpretation of a story or invoke a story in order to subvert it, producing what José Ángel García Landa calls “counter-narratives” (422); or combine these approaches in various ways. The most exhaustive account of these possibilities is Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsests*, which, as Seymour Chatman observes, “sifts eruditely through literary tradition” (269) to produce a detailed taxonomy of what Genette calls “literature in the second degree,” including *hypertexts*, literary texts that transform, either directly or indirectly, other literary texts (Genette 5, 7).<sup>1</sup> Genette’s analysis of transformative narratives is especially useful if we wish to “classify” or “situate” a particular text, to ask, as Chatman does, “What kind of a narrative is *The Hours*? How best to describe its relation to *Mrs. Dalloway*—narratologically, stylistically, thematically?” (269).

If we wish to ask how readers actually make sense of such a narrative, however, we will find *Palimpsests* less helpful, for Genette is almost entirely uninterested in audiences; he regards literary transformation as a fundamentally textual rather than rhetorical phenomenon. Though he acknowledges that understanding such texts does to some extent “depend on constitutive judgement: that is, on the reader’s interpretive decision,” he explicitly states that he “cannot sanction” the practice of “invest[ing] the hermeneutic activity of the reader” with too much “authority” and “significance” (9). In Genette’s view, the texts themselves, not the processes of reading them, are of

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primary importance. For those of us who do ascribe significance to readerly activity and who understand readers' responses to literature not as inherently idiosyncratic affairs inspired by personal associations but as sharable experiences cued by textual phenomena and interpretive conventions, Genette's account of transformative narratives is necessarily incomplete.

All reading, of course, involves some degree of participation by the reader. On the level of an individual novel, we track and respond to characters, anticipate and react to plot developments, and otherwise connect the textual dots in various ways. More generally, we apply our knowledge of genres, the aggregations and mutual influences of texts that share assumptions or traditions. Even before we open a book, Peter Rabinowitz argues, our "prior knowledge of conventions of reading shapes [our] experiences and evaluations" of the text (3). Rabinowitz's metaphor of text as unassembled swingset (38–39) dramatizes the work that goes into any act of reading: the author supplies the pieces, and the reader must put them together.

But reading a transformative narrative requires a particular, and particularly pleasurable, kind of work: readers must not only assemble the swingset pieces we are given but also contribute some of the pieces ourselves based on our memory of the text that is being transformed. Individual readers' experiences are affected by our ability to provide these pieces. In practical terms, a narrative functions as transformative only to the extent that a reader recognizes and reads it as such: if readers do not collaborate in the construction of the narrative, the narrative does not work the way it was designed to. A reader who encounters Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* without having read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* may still enjoy the novel; she may still find it interesting, engaging, effective. But what she reads will be, in a very real sense, a *different* text than it would be for someone who brought to it a knowledge of *Jane Eyre*. Part of the transformative narrative's meaning therefore lies *outside* the text, in the space between text and intertext. The more we know about the overlaps and gaps between the two texts, the more complicated the project of assembly becomes, and the more clever we feel for managing it. Testing the new text against the known one, identifying the significance of changed and retained elements, guessing what might be altered next or how the changes encountered so far might affect the shape of the story to come—these readerly activities make for an especially high level of audience participation amounting to a co-construction of the text.<sup>2</sup>

MY GOAL in this essay, then, is to contribute to our understanding of the work that readers do to make sense of transformative narratives. Specifically, I argue that understanding these activities requires us to expand and extend Rabinowitz's work on what he calls the rules of configuration and coherence, which guide "the reader's experience of an unfolding text during the act of reading" and her process of "[reworking] its elements into a total pattern" once the act of reading is concluded (110). Rabinowitz argues that "in a given literary context, when certain elements appear, rules of configuration activate certain expectations. Once activated, however, these expectations can be exploited in a number of different ways. Authors can make use of them not only to create a sense of resolution (that is, by completing the patterns that the rules

lead readers to expect, either with or without detours) but also to create surprise (by reversing them, for instance, by deflecting them, or by fulfilling them in some unanticipated way) or to irritate (by purposefully failing to fulfill them)" (111). Rules of coherence govern a different set of readerly activities; they "allow us to make sense of, among other things, a text's failures to follow through on the configurations it seemed to promise—failures we cannot know about until the book is over" (112). Rabinowitz's examples and analyses of both sets of rules demonstrate that while our understandings of these rules are based on our aggregate experience as readers and our sense of patterns across texts, in most cases our *application* of the rules operates intratextually: the textual elements of which we're trying to make sense and our expectations of what will happen are restricted to the book we are reading at the moment.

Novels that rewrite other novels, however, require us to modify our application of these rules. When we read a novel whose intertext we know, our expectations are activated, completed, reversed, or frustrated not only by the narrative and discursive events within the novel we are currently reading but also by events within the intertext and by points of congruence and difference between the texts. Rules of coherence, too, are no longer merely intratextual: a reading that cannot account in some way for significant differences between texts—by attributing them to different narrators' different perceptions of events, for example, or by interpreting a character's experiences in one novel as the reasons for his actions in the other—is unlikely to feel entirely satisfactory.

Authors and readers of transformative narratives may draw on any of the rules of coherence, including (as we shall see) the "rules of surplus" (154) that allow us to interpret overabundant information. But we are most likely to draw on the rule of coherence that Rabinowitz calls "license to fill" (148): the understanding that narratives include blanks, both blanks that readers are expected to ignore as unimportant and blanks that readers are meant to fill in. In a transformative narrative, these blanks may be intratextual, but they may also be co-textual and intertextual: blanks that readers are meant to fill with information from the intertext, and blanks that can be filled only by examining the relationship between text and intertext. Additionally, transformative narratives can provide information meant to change our ideas about how we should fill the blanks in the intertexts or our sense of which blanks are significant in the first place. This process of interpolating co-textual and intertextual information may be prompted by the author, but it can only be completed by a reader who is both willing and able to collaborate on the construction of the text.<sup>3</sup>

Intertextuality thus affects readerly activity both broadly and specifically. Rabinowitz argues that there are "two metarules of configuration of which many of the more specific rules turn out to be special cases. First, it is appropriate to expect that *something* will happen. Second, it is appropriate to expect that not *anything* can happen" (117). Furthermore, he argues, there is a "fundamental rule of coherence" that is "parallel to the second metarule of configuration: We assume, to begin with, that the work *is* coherent and that apparent flaws in its construction are intentional and meaning bearing" (147). I would add to this assertion that, when we read a transformative narrative, attention to its intertext plays a significant role in both encouraging us to predict what might happen and limiting our sense of what is probable. The "some-

thing” that we expect to happen includes not only the unfolding of intradiegetic story events but the presentation of information that will allow us both to construct an extratextual understanding of how the texts fit together and to interpret the relationship between them—that will allow us, for example, to classify the relationship according to Genette’s categories, should we choose to do so. We expect this information because we assume not only that the work itself is coherent but that its relationship with its intertext is coherent, and that similarities and discrepancies between the two texts are intentional and significant.

My examination of these readerly assumptions and activities focuses on J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, which transforms selected characters and events from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* in order to encourage the audience to construct a fictional account of their production. *Foe* is, most obviously, a story about a woman who, while searching for her daughter, encounters a master and slave on an island and, when returned to England, tries to convince an author named Daniel Foe to tell her story. Readers aware of the castaway story of *Robinson Crusoe*—the shipwreck, the island—are likely to recognize the ways in which *Foe*’s story is different: Coetzee’s Crusoe never makes it back to England, his Friday does not speak, and the story of the island is told by a woman not present in the original to a man with a name that resembles Defoe’s. Readers familiar with additional details from the complete narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* may be able to begin to piece together an additional story not explicitly told in *Foe*: a story of the writing of *Robinson Crusoe* as we know it and of the rhetorical decisions that (De)Foe made, such as adding guns and seeds and cannibals for Crusoe, dividing the story of *Foe*’s Friday between *Robinson Crusoe*’s Friday and Xury, and deleting the female narrator. Readers who know *Roxana* can assemble a story not contained in any of the three novels—not only the story of silencing that other critics have so compellingly articulated (see, for example, Spivak, “Theory”; Begam; Gauthier) but a story of how (De)Foe split Susan Barton’s story in two for his own ends, eliminating her from *Robinson Crusoe* and turning her into a whore in *Roxana*.

A rhetorical reading of the three texts thus gives us access to interpretive possibilities that are located not within any of the individual texts but rather in their interactions: Susan’s attention to the construction of stories, including her own, draws the audience’s attention to the construction of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* and moves us back and forth among all three texts.<sup>4</sup> “Till we have spoken the unspoken,” Foe says, “we have not come to the heart of the story” (141). Within *Foe*, at least one such unspoken/unwritten story requires extratextual information to construct. We can see, then, that the novel exceeds Rabinowitz’s metaphor of unassembled swingset: instead of merely putting together the parts provided by *Foe*, the audience supplies additional crucial pieces, speculates about parts that are still missing, and, ultimately, finds in the structure’s negative spaces the shapes of additional stories. Readers can construct this narrative only if they are able to consider *Foe* in relation to its intertexts.

*FOE*’S MOST obvious and most discussed intertext is, of course, *Robinson Crusoe*; the relationship between the two novels is made explicit on the paperback edition’s back

cover and is thus presumably evident to most readers even before they begin reading. For those readers who have somehow missed the paratextual clues, both Friday and Crusoe appear and are named within the first five pages; these names, along with the desert island setting, connect Coetzee's novel to Defoe's.

But what of *Foe*'s other intertext, *Roxana*? The intertextual link here is not immediately apparent, both because *Roxana* is far less well known than *Robinson Crusoe* and because the clues are much less obvious. Unlike the names "Crusoe" and "Friday," which clearly point to *Crusoe*, "Susan" initially obscures rather than reveals, for although Susan is Roxana's real name, that fact is disclosed quite late in Defoe's novel and only in passing, and the name "Roxana" appears nowhere in *Foe*. *Roxana* is thus positioned as a secondary intertext, while *Robinson Crusoe* is primary. Even for the authorial audience familiar with *Roxana*, the allusions become clear only about half-way through *Foe*, when a girl appears outside Foe's house, claims to be Susan's daughter, and appears to be heartbroken when Susan denies her. The girl claims that she was born in Deptford, that her father was a brewer, that he gambled away his fortune and abandoned the family, that her mother was "left destitute," and that her mother had a maidservant "named Amy or Emmy"; she says that she has been searching everywhere for her mother (75–76). All of these elements of the story correspond neatly to elements of *Roxana*, in which Roxana marries a Deptford brewer who runs his business into the ground, is left in financial straits when her husband disappears, does indeed have a maid named Amy, and is pursued much later in life by the daughter whom she left with her husband's family.

Though the allusions to *Roxana* are more obscure than those to *Crusoe*, they raise similar intradiegetic and intertextual questions for an audience aware of them. Intradiegetically, how did *this* story, Susan's story, come to be rewritten as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*? Intertextually, what is Roxana doing in a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*? In addition, the appearance of the girl who claims to be Susan's daughter activates expectations that appear to be intratextual but that turn out to have intertextual significance: whether we know *Roxana* or not, we expect to find out who this girl really is, but whether we interpret this expectation as frustrated or fulfilled may depend in large part on whether we recognize *Roxana* as *Foe*'s secondary intertext.

The rules of configuration particular to second-degree narratives activate, as I have suggested, co-textual and intertextual expectations in addition to the intratextual expectations raised by any novel. First, we construct expectations based on textual elements not only of *Foe* but of *Robinson Crusoe* and perhaps *Roxana*; we expect some similarities between the plot and characters of *Foe* and those of its intertexts. (The specificity of these expectations is necessarily affected by how well we know or remember Defoe's novels.) Second, we construct expectations based on the assumption that there is some *reason* for these intertextual relationships; we expect that Coetzee's novel will, as Genette would say, either imitate or transform Defoe's in some perceptible and meaningful way. Like any other expectations activated by rules of configuration, these expectations may be fulfilled, reversed, deflected, or frustrated.

The first expectation—that there will be some similarities between the plot and characters of *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*—is reversed (or perhaps frustrated) fairly quickly; it doesn't take long to realize that Coetzee's characters are not identical to

or even clearly contiguous with Defoe's. In the case of Cruso, this difference is "orthographically marked" (Macaskill and Colleran 439) by the missing *e*. Cruso differs from Crusoe in both temperament and circumstances: he brought no supplies from shipwreck to shore and has not attempted to keep a journal (16); he protects "a patch of wild bitter lettuce" (9) but cannot sow grain, even inadvertently, as Crusoe does; despite having nothing to plant, he spends his days making terraces for planting (33); he has no stories of his life before the island (34), no tales of slavery among the Moors or plantations in Brazil. Friday is not Indian but African, "black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool" (5), and he does not speak English—perhaps cannot speak at all. Though both Fridays share a name given by Cruso(e) and neither one speaks his own language, the difference between them is marked by the presence or the absence of speech. The events of *Robinson Crusoe* are nowhere to be found: no discovery of a single footprint, no building of a canoe too heavy to move, no herd of goats, no adventures with cannibals. And though Cruso, like Crusoe, is rescued from the island, he dies before reaching England (44), less than a quarter of the way through *Foe*.

As this information accumulates, we stop expecting the story or characters to bear much resemblance to Defoe's and expect instead that we will eventually get some explanation—whether intradiegetic or metatextual—for the differences between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Our awareness of these differences is in part the result of the intertextual operation of what James Phelan has called disclosure functions, in which the narrator reports, interprets, and evaluates information for the narratee, but also "unwittingly reports information of all kinds to the authorial audience" without knowing that that audience exists (*Living* 12). Like Rabinowitz, Phelan describes the operation of this phenomenon within single texts: "The most important consequence of serial narration," he explains, is that "the disclosure functions work not only in relation to the narrative functions of each narrator but also across the serial narration; disclosure, in other words, arises both within individual narrations and as a result of their interaction" (197–98). Among his examples is *Lolita*, in which the disclosure of Lolita's death begins when it is reported, using her married name, in the preface; the disclosure is held in suspension for most of the novel and is completed or confirmed only when Humbert mentions her married name at the end of his narration, so that Nabokov uses Humbert to disclose information to the audience that Humbert himself does not know (14). In the case of *Foe*, Susan is unwittingly reporting to the audience that her story is not the story Defoe wrote; she is, as we see in retrospect, revealing what has been added (adventure) and excised (herself). Our expectation of an explanation, too, is the product of the disclosure that the narratee of the first section of the novel, the "you" whom Susan addresses, is a version of Defoe; Foe's presence in the narrative suggests that we will get some explanation for how the story Susan has just told came to be written, by (De)Foe, as the story (or stories) with which we're already familiar.

It becomes decidedly easier to see *Foe* as coherent if we begin by acknowledging that the novel is primarily *about* storytelling; it is, in large part, what García Landa calls "narrated narrating" (443) and Phelan calls a narrative of rhetoric, "a narrative whose central event is the telling of a story" (*Narrative* 1)—or, in this case, the writing of a story. In the first two sections of the novel, *Foe's* central event is its own process of being written as the book we hold in our hands. As Stephen Connor has noted, the

novel's "main concern is not with the events which have taken place on the island, but with the struggles over the narrative of those events" (93); Susan is writing to Foe for the particular purpose of passing along the raw materials, the events and perceptions, that she wishes him to transform into a publishable narrative. David Marshall argues that Coetzee "rewrites both the story of Robinson Crusoe and the story of the writing of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*" (225), and certainly both stories are at stake in *Foe*. But we do not in fact see Foe writing his novel(s). Rather, the audience must *imagine* the story of Foe's writing based on the clues Coetzee gives us and our knowledge of *Foe's* intertexts.

Such imagining constitutes a specifically intertextual version of Rabinowitz's license to fill. As I suggested earlier, readers of *Foe* are presented not only with the usual intratextual blanks but with co-textual and intertextual blanks: blanks that readers are meant to fill with information from the intertext, and blanks that can be filled only by examining the relationship between text and intertext. Susan expresses her desire to have her experiences written by Foe; *Foe* itself is silent on the question of what (De) Foe actually wrote, but that silence is a co-textual blank, one that the authorial audience can fill relatively easily. The intertextual blank—the explanation of *how* and *why* (De)Foe's versions of the story differ from Susan's—is more complex and can be filled only by the interpretive activity of a reader who considers the texts together.

Transformative narratives are also likely to require the application of intertextual versions of Rabinowitz's rules of surplus, ways of interpreting overabundant information. Once again, these rules may operate either intratextually or intertextually—or they may function intratextually but have intertextual resonance. In *Foe*, Cruso gives Susan so many apparently contradictory accounts of himself, of Friday, and of the island that Susan remarks with understandable exasperation, "[I]n the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling" (12). Faced with this overabundance, Susan herself attempts to apply the rules of surplus: to decide which stories can be discarded as "unnecessary or extraneous" (Rabinowitz 154). For the authorial audience, however, at least one set of Cruso's contradictory stories can be made intertextually coherent without discarding either option. Cruso offers Susan two different accounts of Friday's arrival on the island: Friday was shipwrecked with Cruso when he was "a child, a mere child, a little slave-boy," or he was "a cannibal whom [Cruso] had saved from being roasted and devoured by fellow-cannibals" (12). The second of these stories corresponds to the account of Friday given in *Robinson Crusoe* and is probably recognizable as such even to someone with only vague memories of the story: after Friday escapes his capturers and Crusoe dispatches the two pursuers with his gun, Friday places his head under Crusoe's foot (160–61). But Cruso's first account of Friday's origins recalls a different character in *Robinson Crusoe*: Xury, the African boy whom Crusoe takes with him when he escapes the Moors (20–21) and whom he subsequently sells into slavery (28–29).

For the authorial audience, then, *both* stories can be true: the surplus of origin stories for Coetzee's Friday, as well as the discrepancy between those two stories, can be resolved either intertextually or intradiegetically—or both, since they are not mutually exclusive. Intertextually, Defoe's Xury is the source of Coetzee's alternate origin for Friday. Intradiegetically, and keeping in mind the impulse to explain how Susan's



narrative came to be rewritten as *Robinson Crusoe*, a different story emerges: Foe, unwilling to give up either of Crusoe's accounts of Friday, creates two separate characters: the African slave boy and the Caribbean cannibal. Looked at this way, Foe splits Friday at the root—the point of origin—in *Robinson Crusoe*, just as Friday's tongue might have been split in *Foe* (84). The intradiegetic explanation has extratextual implications: the story of *Foe's* Friday—perhaps of both Fridays—is, as Susan says, “not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative” into which we must descend “to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar” (121, 142). To hear, and perhaps also to see: what is (not) inside, what was legitimated not only by colonialism and slavery but also by (De)Foe's white writing (see Begam), which, within *Robinson Crusoe*, disguises the blankness of Friday's page.

Coetzee's Friday has already received significant critical attention, which I will not recapitulate here. Instead, I turn once again to *Roxana*. *Foe's* relationship with *Roxana* has been recognized by a small number of critics—including Attridge, Marshall, David Attwell, Susan VanZanten Gallagher, Dominic Head, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—but the significance of that relationship and its effects on readers' attempts to make *Foe* a coherent narrative remain relatively underdiscussed. A reader familiar only with *Robinson Crusoe* can see that Foe has removed Susan from that novel, presumably because, as Susan suspects, he finds the story of the island “better without the woman” (72)—just as “it would have been better had Crusoe rescued not only musket and powder and ball, but a carpenter's chest as well, and built himself a boat” (55). But a reader familiar with *Roxana* can fill in additional blanks.

As with the Friday/Xury example from *Robinson Crusoe*, we can see the relationship between *Roxana* and *Foe* in two ways at once. Intertextually, *Foe* contains a series of allusions to *Roxana*; Coetzee has borrowed the real name of Defoe's “fortunate mistress” and written a story that can be understood as an extension of Roxana's history. Intradiegetically, *Roxana* is *Foe's* rewriting—and, it seems, misrepresentation—of Susan's story; he cobbles together the narrative we know as *Roxana* out of a girl's demands and Susan's denials. *Foe* thus frames both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* as instances of (De)Foe's beginning from a name and a situation—a castaway and his servant, an importunate girl claiming to be Susan's daughter—and building a new story on that foundation while discarding the elements of history that don't suit his purposes.

Attridge argues that “Barton's story—the one she does not want told—becomes Defoe's novel *Roxana*” (78). But in fact, there is little evidence within *Foe* to suggest that *Roxana* is really Susan Barton's story or that Susan could be the woman this girl is looking for. Susan herself insists that she is not and cannot be: she has never lived in Deptford, never known a brewer, never had a servant (76), and her daughter was not abandoned but abducted (10). We could assume that Susan, like Roxana, is simply lying about her relationship to the girl, but the fact that she claims to be pursuing a daughter, not evading one, tends to work against this idea: why would she deny the daughter she claims to have been seeking? We have no reason within *Foe* not to trust Susan's assertions. Further, Susan offers Foe her own evidence that the girl is mistaken:

“You confuse me with some other person.”

She smiles again and shakes her head. “Behold the sign by which we

may know our true mother," she says, and leans forward and places her hand beside mine. "See," she says, "we have the same hand. The same hand and the same eyes."

I stare at the two hands side by side. My hand is long, hers short. Her fingers are the plump unformed fingers of a child. Her eyes are grey, mine brown. What kind of being is she, so serenely blind to the evidence of her senses? (76)

To this suggestion that the girl is not in fact Susan's daughter, the authorial audience—who, unlike Susan, has read *Roxana*—can add one particularly telling piece of information: the girl in *Foe* never suggests that Susan has a history of prostituting herself. In Defoe's novel, Roxana's daughter recognizes Roxana's Turkish costume, infers (correctly) that her mother is a courtesan, and threatens to make that information public unless Roxana acknowledges her—all significant plot points; the girl in *Foe* mentions no such recognition and makes no such threats. Her story thus fails in several important ways to match up with the story of Roxana's daughter and therefore fails to establish that Susan can be equated in any simple way with Roxana.

Once again, Susan herself attempts to render coherent this overabundance of information by describing her purported daughter as "a poor mad girl" (77): madness would explain things. But this explanation, though perhaps intradiegetically satisfying for the character, is not particularly satisfying for an audience, who is likely to want to know how the girl, mad or not, fits into the novel. In this instance, then, it is decidedly difficult to understand *Foe* as a coherent whole *without* applying intertextual knowledge of *Roxana*.

If we do apply that intertextual knowledge, the novel begins to make more sense. Coetzee uses the mismatch between stories to suggest that *Roxana* is in fact *not* the story Susan does not want told about her past; to say, as Attridge does, that Susan's story "becomes" *Roxana* is to miss the extent to which Foe *invents* a different version of that story for the purposes of his own novel. The intertextual blank, then—the gap between *Roxana* and *Foe*—is better filled with a more complicated story: in addition to writing Susan out of *Robinson Crusoe*, Foe writes her into the role of whore. He begins with the girl's story of being abandoned by her mother, invents the courtesan history as a reason for the mother to leave, uses that courtesan history as the reason the mother will not acknowledge her daughter, and ends the story by suggesting a mental breakdown that would account for what he treats as Susan's repression of her memories of her daughter (130). His choice to represent Susan as a courtesan is based partly on her own wry comments about her uncertain reputation but seems also to derive from his discomfort with Susan's sexual experience and particularly her sexual assertiveness: "I drew off my shift and straddled him (which he did not seem easy with, in a woman)" (139). *Roxana* is Foe's attempt to control Susan's sexuality and her story; like the mother narrative proposed in *Foe*, it fixes Susan within the constraints of available roles for women.

Thus, while Spivak claims that, within *Foe*, we are to understand *Robinson Crusoe* as "the road not taken" ("Theory" 167), I would argue that in fact we are meant to see both *Crusoe* and *Roxana* as roads not *yet* taken—or, rather, as novels not yet written;

the story of their being written after all is the story that the authorial audience is meant to supply. Either reading requires the reader to apply specifically intertextual rules of coherence to *Foe*. Spivak's way of reconciling the differences between the novels is to see *Foe* as the alternate history of *Crusoe*. But, as I have suggested, *Foe* offers another way to reconcile the two texts. At the very end of the third section of *Foe*, when Susan thanks Foe for taking her in, for “welcoming [her] and embracing [her] and receiving [her] story,” Foe responds by saying, “Before you declare yourself too freely, Susan, wait to see what fruit I bear” (152). The authorial audience, unlike Susan, does not have to wait; the fruits are *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, written off-stage between the end of *Foe*'s third section and the beginning of the fourth section, in the gap between the end of Susan's narration and the other narrator's discovery of a blue plaque reading “*Daniel Defoe, Author*” (155). The contrast between the storytellers is clear: (De)Foe becomes a famous author, while Susan's memoir languishes in crumbling manuscript. But the full story of Foe's rhetorical choices is clear only to those readers who can fill *Foe*'s textual gaps with details from Defoe's novels.

Given that Defoe presents *Robinson Crusoe* as “a just history of fact” (3), we might expect Coetzee to call those “facts” into question by displacing or overwriting them with a different set of (fictional) facts, to ask the audience to accept his account as the true version of (fictional) past events. And to some extent we do accept that account: because Susan's tale of the island records events and conditions that are in many ways more plausible than those narrated in *Robinson Crusoe*, the audience can pretend that *Foe* is “the real story” on which *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* are based. At the same time, *Foe*'s metafictional elements are constant reminders that the book is a transformative work. Defoe's famously reportorial style creates the illusion that events are being narrated in an unselective way, but Coetzee, by foregrounding the process of narrative construction, emphasizes the rhetorical act itself, the author's power to present as found that which is always made; he suggests the processes of selection and exclusion by which a narrative—one of many possible narratives—becomes *the* narrative.

This emphasis on the process of narrating is a crucial part of the novel's politics. Within the novel, calling our attention to the act of storytelling also draws our attention once again to the places where telling stops: Friday's story, which remains unwritten and unspoken, and which cannot be written or told by Susan or Foe; Susan's story of her quest for her daughter, which she does not share with Foe. Through the differences between his text and Defoe's, Coetzee draws our attention to what must be—or, like Friday's tongue, might have been—*cut out* in order to produce coherent narratives; he immerses us in a fictional world but simultaneously reveals the constructedness of that world. *Foe* is thus not in any uncomplicated way the “true” story of Cruso(e) or Susan Barton but rather a reminder that no narrative—including *Foe* itself—can ever tell the whole truth.

ACCEPTING TEMPORARILY and provisionally the premise that *Foe* is the “true story” on which *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* are based does have the value of preserving mimesis: it offers a way of understanding the presence of (a version of) Defoe on the same fictional plane as his characters, so that, as Susan says, “we are all in the

same world" (152). From this point of view, the novel itself explores the conditions of textual production, the process by which authors make stories out of facts. But Coetzee also makes non-mimetic use of our metatextual awareness that characters from more than one Defoe novel are interacting with each other, that two previously separate novels have been brought together. As Linda Hutcheon says of Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*, "the realist notion of characters only being able to coexist legitimately if they belong to the same text is clearly challenged here in both historical and fictional terms" (*Politics* 77). Including characters from multiple novels suggests a kind of textual porousness: physical boundaries between books on a shelf have broken down; characters from one novel have wandered into the neighboring book; confusion if not chaos ensues. Spivak observes that "it is as if the margins of bound books are themselves dissolved into a general textuality" ("Theory" 163). Looking at the novel this way, when Roxana's daughter appears and tells her story in a novel that's ostensibly about characters from *Robinson Crusoe*, we recognize the girl as a specifically *textual* intrusion; as Marshall notes, the girl and her maid "appear to be fictional characters who have escaped from the pages of Defoe's *Roxana* to intrude upon Susan's 'reality' in *Foe*" (233–34). The daughter and the maid are not "real" characters in the sense that they stand for what Susan calls "substantial bodies"; they are a function of text, written into being, as Susan suspects, by Foe himself, and somehow come adrift from their own book.

When Susan describes her life as "drearly suspended till [Foe's] writing is done" (63), she explicitly, if unconsciously, raises the possibility that the characters are a series of floating signifiers untethered to "substantial" persons and events: Susan and the other "real" characters have been, within the world of the novel, written into being by Foe (as they were in our world written into being by Defoe—and Coetzee). Coetzee thus emphasizes what Phelan would call the characters' synthetic functions—their operations as "artificial constructs within the larger construct of the work"—and the tension between those functions and the more familiar mimetic functions—"the ways in which characters work as representations of possible people" (*Living* 13, 12). The dreamlike quality of Susan's interactions with the girl who claims to be her daughter, Susan's statements that the girl is from "another order of reality" and is Foe's creation, the possibility that Mrs Amy lives "not far, not far at all" (136) because she and the girl and Jack live in Foe's head, the implication that Susan lives there too—taken together, these things suggest an interpretation of the novel as purely textual, a matter of words that refer not to actual (if imaginary) bodies but to other words: "all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me" (133).

*Foe* has frequently been discussed as a poststructuralist novel; I would argue that recognizing its intertextuality with *Roxana* as well as *Robinson Crusoe* is key to understanding how *Foe* "does" poststructuralism. The conventional understanding of words is that they represent meaning—represent, as Susan would say, substantial bodies. Even if those bodies are fictional, we are supposed to imagine them as real, because that process of imagining is one of the pleasures of reading fiction: fictional bodies exist, they do fictional things, and those fictional actions are represented by real text. But the second-and-simultaneous way of making sense of *Foe* is that, just as language creates rather than represents knowledge, the process of writing creates

rather than represents characters. As Jean-Paul Engélibert puts it, “The texts engender the characters,” so that “to ‘be’ is to ‘be narrated’” (273). Susan and the other characters don’t represent substantial bodies; they represent other fictions. Susan herself articulates this possibility when she describes as “fatherborn” (91) the girl who purports to be her daughter and tells Foe that the girl is “a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her” (133). The girl is indeed, as Susan suspects, Foe’s, or Defoe’s, creation. The tension between the characters’ synthetic and mimetic functions thus serves thematic ends.

The possibility (however uncertain and unverifiable either for us or for Susan) that the characters are purely textual contrasts sharply to the persistence of Friday’s body in the novel’s final section, in which “bodies are their own signs” (157), in which only Friday is still alive. Susan and the rest of the characters may or may not be only text, but Friday, it seems, is more *substantial* than that. Coetzee thus simultaneously participates in a rhetorical (and, more recently, poststructuralist) tradition in which there is no history or knowledge outside language and insists on the possibility and legitimacy of personal and racial histories that are yet unwritten, unarticulated, or incomprehensible outside their own contexts—histories that can be neither represented nor created through white writing.

Coetzee’s invention of the fictional Foe makes decidedly *nonfictional* points about the conditions of textual production, the ways in which some stories—the stories of women, slaves, savages—are simplified or suppressed or silenced; other stories are made coherent by forcibly excluding anything that does not fit their patterns. *Roxana* as we know it is only possible if we exclude the island; *Robinson Crusoe* is possible only if we exclude Susan. One effect of Coetzee’s novel, then, is to point out how completely Susan Barton did *not* exist, to remind us that she was once unwritable. Even as he asks us to imagine the possibility of a female castaway, he reminds us that the eighteenth-century interest in the new, the *novel*, nevertheless did not legitimate the telling of such stories.

LITERARY CRITICISM “reads” a text, but also directs its readers back to the text being read; it attempts to ensure that when we re-read the text ourselves our understanding of it will be different. A transformative narrative, too, does critical work: as Genette observes, “the hypertext to some extent functions as a metatext” (397), so that to read *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to re-read, whether literally or figuratively, *Jane Eyre*. The author not only tells a story but draws our attention to particular elements of the intertext(s), particular details—of plot, of characterization, of narration—that an interpretation of the intertextual relationship must account for in some way. In any interpretation, Rabinowitz points out, “it is impossible to keep track of, much less account for, all the details of a text. . . . Readers need to ignore or play down many textual features when they read lyric poetry; they need to ignore even more in longer works like novels” (19–20). The rules that Rabinowitz identifies govern but cannot determine readers’ interpretive processes; the question of which textual elements matter *most* can never be definitively answered, and this perpetual contestability is of course what leads to interpretive differences. We might say, then, that transformative narratives such as *Foe* constitute

arguments about what should *not* be ignored or played down in their intertexts.

*Foe* models what Edward Said has called “contrapuntal reading” (51), in which, through a kind of double vision, we see canonical texts not only in conventional, established, aesthetic terms but also as artifacts of a colonial culture, artifacts that did not merely reflect but helped to build imperial “structure[s] of attitude and reference” (62). Spivak observes that “imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” and that “the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (“Three” 243); *Foe* foregrounds, through its emphasis on its own written-ness, precisely that scene of production. *Foe* encourages us simultaneously to join and to resist joining the authorial audience assumed or constructed by the transformed text; this doubleness is why Hutcheon describes historiographic metafiction—novels that “are . . . intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*Poetics* 5), including such transformative narratives as *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Foe*—as both re-installing and subverting the canon. But insofar as transformative narratives not only perform contrapuntal readings of specific texts but model that process of reading in a way that might be adopted and more widely applied by individual flesh-and-blood readers, their effects have the potential to reach beyond the borders of the particular books with which they engage.

Coetzee himself registers the need for readerly activity when he writes that “Storytelling . . . is not a way of making messages more—as they say— ‘effective.’ Storytelling is another, an other mode of thinking. . . . [It is] a mode favoured by marginal groups—groups that don’t have a place in the mainstream, in the main plot of history—because it is hard to pin down unequivocally what the point is” (“The Novel” 4). If fiction’s value is the difficulty of pinning down its point, then there must be value in the *attempt* to figure out what the point is—that is, in *the work the reader does*, the work that is difficult and interesting and rewarding because the text is a question whose answer is never fully agreed upon. Coetzee is interested in novels not merely as “imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances” (2) but as “a rival to history,” a way of “demythologising history” (3). If “history” is associated with closing down interpretive possibilities—if it is always and inevitably partial (in all senses of the word)—then the narrative that refuses to choose, that displaces the classic without replacing it, that complicates and multiplies and refracts itself, is positioned as an alternative—a rival—to history. But such novels require an audience who is prepared to collaborate with the storyteller in this demythologizing.

In historical as in literary narratives, the way in which a story is told affects our understanding of what that story is; the rhetorical features of historical narration restrict some interpretations of the narrated events and enable others. As Dorrit Cohn reminds us, however, historical narratives are “subject to judgments of truth and falsity,” while fictional narratives are “immune to such judgments” (15). Historiographic metafiction may complicate this distinction to varying degrees, but such fictions are still what Cohn calls “nonreferential” in the sense that their “references to the world outside the text are not bound to accuracy” and they do not “refer *exclusively* to the real world outside the text” (15; emphasis original). A transformative narrative can be neither more nor less “true” than its intertext, though it may be more or less com-

elling to an individual reader. We cannot call *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Foe* “the real story”; what appears to be “revealed” in these novels is just as much a rhetorically constructed fiction as is *Jane Eyre* or *Robinson Crusoe* or *Roxana*. But the rhetorical interanimation of text and intertext draws our attention to something that is neither rhetorical nor fictional: the historical events, the cultural prejudices, and the nationalist impulses that are, in different ways, the starting point of both books.

In the final section of *Foe*, an unnamed narrator writing three hundred years after the events of *Robinson Crusoe* finds the dead bodies of Susan Barton and Daniel (De)Foe and the living body of Friday and is then transported, through Susan’s manuscript, to an alternate history in which Susan has perished at sea and Friday remains underwater yet survives. The ending threatens to unwrite its own story: if Susan drowns, either before she ever gets to the island or before she makes it back to England, she cannot write the narrative that we have been reading, the narrative that brings the new narrator to this scene. Although a number of critics treat this narrator as a fictional version of Coetzee himself, it is, I think, significant that the narrator is represented not as a writer but as a reader, someone who is, quite literally, *moved* by Susan’s narration, the book that we are now both finishing and beginning to re-read—“At last I could row no further” (5, 155)—and that models for us both the difficulty and the necessity of reading and listening differently in order to recover untold stories.

## ENDNOTES

I wish to thank Becca Gercken, Stephanie Kerschbaum, Sarah Monette, Rob Nixon, and especially James Phelan for their generous responses to earlier versions of this essay.

1. I have chosen to use the term “transformative narrative” rather than Genette’s “hypertext” not only because, as Chatman points out, “hypertext” has come to have a specific meaning in the age of the Internet (270) but because the term, in the context of Genette’s larger schema, obscures the extent to which second degree narratives may be *both* hypertextual and metatextual—that is, the extent to which they may offer commentary or critique—though Genette himself acknowledges that the categories are not mutually exclusive (7). Chatman’s term “imitative” connotes a lack of originality that I find both misleading and unduly negative. García Landa’s term “counter-narrative” is an excellent description of one class of transformative narratives but flattens out the range of possible relationships between texts (422).
2. The practice of collaborative narration is one with which many of us are familiar in everyday speech. In his study of groups retelling stories in conversation, Neal Norrick finds that the introduction of a familiar story prompts collaborative narration: “[R]etold stories are typically prefaced in ways which label them as unoriginal; yet these signals animate participants to involvement, rather than cuing them to question the relevance and tellability of the stories . . . [I]t is precisely the familiarity of story content which influences participation rights, since it presents the opportunity for significant co-narration” (200). Transformative narratives, it seems, may signal “unoriginality” in similar ways and for similar purposes as conversational speech.
3. Although my discussion will focus on the ways in which knowledge of earlier texts informs the interpretation of a later text, intertextual applications of the rules of configuration and coherence can work in both directions: the authorial audience’s knowledge of the transformed text informs our understanding of the transformative text, but our knowledge of the transformative text may

also affect our understanding of the transformed. So, for example, a reader who reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* before she (re)reads *Jane Eyre* is likely to experience Brontë's novel rather differently than she otherwise might, in terms of both configuration and coherence. A transformative narrative may even *create* the perception of "textual disjunctures" (Rabinowitz 45) in the earlier text where we did not perceive them before.

4. *Foe* is an unusual case: rather than transforming one intertext, it transforms (and combines) two. But while understanding the interaction of these two intertexts is crucial to understanding *Foe*, the readerly activities involved are, I believe, comparable to those involved in reading any transformative narrative; differences are more likely to be of degree than of kind.

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