

**Articulating Substance: on Silence and Namelessness
in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *Life & Times of Michael K***

Marte Schallenberg

3176142

dr. Birgit Kaiser

Master Thesis Literatuurwetenschap

July 2011

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: Silence and Namelessness in <i>Foe</i>	6
Chapter 2: Silence and Namelessness in <i>Michael K</i>	21
Conclusion	33
Literature	35

INTRODUCTION

Within postcolonial theory, the issue of gaining a voice has been very important. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin explain in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (2008), language has the power to provide, because of its function of naming, a means for knowing the world that surrounds us (with, in a colonial situation, the surrounding world being a colonized place or people): “To name the world is to ‘understand’ it, to know it and to have control over it. (...) To name reality is therefore to exert power over it (...)” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2008: 261). The one that names is able to understand the world and control it; he or she is in a subject position. Thus, in a postcolonial situation, a way for the colonized to take back control over their world is to name it; to make their voice heard, where at first the voice of the colonizers was made heard loudest.

As Benita Parry has noted, having a voice provides a subject position, while keeping silent entails disempowerment (Parry 1996: 43). An example of a postcolonial text concerned with this issue is Gayatri Spivak’s famous article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in which she stresses the importance (and the difficulty) of the subaltern - people without lines of social mobility (Spivak 1999: 28) gaining a speaking position. Although Parry has been critical of Spivak on several points, both acknowledge the relevance of the issue of having a voice. The process of gaining a voice has often, like in Spivak’s article, been acknowledged as a highly complicated practice, but the importance of it nevertheless has been widely acclaimed.

This emphasis on the importance of having a voice, sheds an interesting light on the fictions of J.M. Coetzee. Many of his novels contain characters that have trouble speaking or do not speak at all: characters without a voice. Two examples of this kind of characters are Friday (the completely silent character in *Foe* – 1986) and Michael K (a character that has trouble speaking, because of a hare lip and a mental condition that tends to be interpreted as a mental deficiency in *Life & Times of Michael K* – 1983). These characters are likely to be interpreted as being marginalized, for their lack of a voice and, consequently, a subject position. Friday, for example, often is foregrounded as the voiceless and thus powerless servant, oppressed by his speaking masters Cruso and Susan, as for instance Robert Post asserts in his article “The Noise of Freedom”, by claiming that

(...) Friday is denied one of the most powerful implements for securing and expressing freedom: speech. (...) He is further imprisoned by his inability to

understand English, responding only to the few words Crusoe taught him.

(Post 1989: 147)

Post emphasizes the importance of speech to gain a subject position and he portrays Friday as a prisoner, because of his lack of speech and of understanding English. This is an interpretation of the character of Friday that is often purported, as Lewis MacLeod shows in his article “‘Do we of necessity become puppets in a story?’ or narrating the world: on speech, silence, and discourse in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*” (MacLeod 2006: 7).

However, what I would like to explore in this thesis, is the idea that, even though Coetzee’s (nearly) silent characters do not have a (strong) voice, it seems possible to attribute a certain positive value to their silence. Although they are supposed to be in a powerless position because of their voicelessness, they are not portrayed as such. Their silence seems to be important, rather than a problem. It is this importance of silence, within the novels *Foe* and *Life & Times of Michael K* by J.M. Coetzee, and the way in which this perspective on silence differs from the usual perspective within postcolonial thinking, that I want to address in this thesis.

The concept of being silent can be connected to the idea of not having a (personal) name. Whereas language can be considered a way to categorize our surroundings as human beings, naming may be considered a way of categorizing other human beings; a way of fixing them, and therefore an act of power. As Kimberly W. Benston explains in his article “‘I Yam What I Am’: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature”, naming is ‘(...) the means by which the mind takes possession of the named, at once fixing the named as irreversibly Other (...)’ (Benston 1982: 3). Next to this, as explained by Sigrid King, the practice of slave owners renaming slaves, forcing them to abandon their African identity, also enforces the idea of naming as an act of power (King 1990: 683). Unnaming, then, can be considered to be an act of taking back control; an act of defying this fixed otherness and escaping categorization (cf. the unnaming of Malcolm X). This escape from categorization and gaining power in this way, can already be found in Greek and Hebraic tradition, like Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* who calls himself *Outis* (i.e. ‘no one’) when he encounters the Cyclops that wants to know his name and in this way escapes designation and consequently death, or Yahweh, the Hebrew name of God that should be avoided to name or write according to Hebraic tradition, for it is considered to be too holy. Because someone without a name escapes all categories and transcends patterns, which gives him an ‘ungraspable’ quality, namelessness can be said to, as Benston states, invoke ‘the power of the Sublime’ (Benston 1982: 4). This transcendental

(ungraspable) power could also be ascribed to silence, for silence can be seen as a way of escaping all categories and patterns as well, while a silent person is ungraspable too, because of the difficulties in communication his silence brings forth. I will address this connection between namelessness and silence in the first chapter of this thesis, “Namelessness and Silence in *Foe*”, and take a closer look at namelessness itself in the second chapter, “Namelessness and Silence in *Life & Times of Michael K*, concerning Michael K (whose last name indicates a certain kind of namelessness).

In the first chapter of this thesis, the focus is on Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986). The chapter addresses the power struggle in the novel, that evolves around Susan’s life story and how (and whether) to tell it. The role of Friday within this power struggle will be examined, by looking at his supposed mutilation (the cutting out of his tongue), of which Lewis MacLeod, in his article “ ‘Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?’ or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*”, states that his tonguelessness is at least debatable. Important here is the question to what extent Friday’s voicelessness is able to determine his position within the power struggle over ‘narrating the world’. Through a discussion of the connection between namelessness and silence, and articles by Benita Parry and Derek Attridge, I will explore the extent to which ‘unchallenged authority’ can be attributed to Friday and I will discuss Friday’s substantiality within his silence.

In the second chapter, the focus is on Coetzee’s novel *Life & Times of Michael K*. (1983). The chapter first addresses the idea that Michael K, despite his namelessness, does not show to be an ‘unchallenged authority’. However, it is possible to say that his namelessness (together with his speech impediment) marks a certain kind of singularity, which distinguishes him from others, for he does withdraw from categorization. Still, he is being patronized and they try to force him to speak. Through a discussion of Leist’s interpretation of Michael K’s existence, concerning the modern reduction of human beings to their words (Leist 2010: 203) and Michael K’s substantiality in his silence and his namelessness, I will end the chapter with a discussion of Michael K’s passivity.

Finally, I will give a conclusion on the role of silence within *Foe* and *Life & Times of Michael K* and the way in which this role differs from the usual postcolonial interpretation of silence.

Chapter 1: Silence and namelessness in *Foe*

As stated in the introduction, gaining a voice has been an important issue on the postcolonial agenda. Many postcolonial works, literary as well as theoretically, have had their focus on the subaltern speaking up: speaking up is presented as the way to gain control over one's own life again and escape (former-)colonial oppression. The term subaltern, is used by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to designate people without lines of social mobility (Spivak 1999: 28). In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she stresses the difficulty for the subaltern to speak up and gain a subject position, because of the impossibility to categorize the subaltern as one coherent group with a collective consciousness. According to Spivak, the subaltern's heterogeneity prevents the construction of a unified effective voice, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin point out in their introduction to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2008: 10). However, although Spivak's article identifies the difficulties of speaking up, it underlines, at the same time, the relevance of speaking up, which is what I am concerned with here: the importance that is attributed by postcolonial theorists to having a voice.

Where gaining a voice is presented in postcolonial works as the way to gain control and escape oppression, silence, on the other hand, has been read, as Benita Parry points out in her article "Speech and Silence in J.M. Coetzee", as a 'signifier of disempowerment' and 'of the denial of a subject position' (Parry 1996: 43). This chapter will focus on the way in which the idea of 'having a voice' is approached in the novel *Foe* by Coetzee. We will see how complicated it is to truly gain a voice and I will explore the extent to which silence is presented in *Foe* as an even more powerful tool than speech, within the postcolonial struggle of gaining control over one's own life and existence.

The novel *Foe* tells the story from the perspective of Susan Barton, a woman that has been washed ashore at an island where two men have been living: a white man named Cruso and a black man named Friday. They take care of her and she lives with them for about a year. The character Friday does not speak at all. Cruso tells Susan that Friday has lost his tongue: slave traders have cut out his tongue. After having lived on the island for about a year, the three of them get saved by a ship that passes by. On the trip from the island to England (where Susan comes from), Cruso dies. Back in England, Susan and Friday are together alone. After Susan and Friday have arrived in England, Susan gets in touch with a writer named Foe. She asks him to write down their story (that is, Susan's, Cruso's and Friday's- story), for she desires to become rich and famous. She addresses him by writing letters, for Foe has

disappeared in the mean time; he left his house and no one knows where to find him.

After a while, Susan and Friday go and live in Foe's empty house. One evening, there is a girl standing in front of the house. She claims to be Susan Barton jr., Susan Barton's daughter.

Susan does not believe her and sends her away.

In the mean time, Susan feels she cannot stand it to be around Friday any longer. She wants to set him free and give him the opportunity to ship back to Africa. They travel by foot through the country and finally arrive at Bristol, where Susan tries to find a captain that wants to take Friday to Africa. However, she notices that the people that are willing to take Friday are not being honest and have the intention to sell Friday again as slave instead of setting him free. She decides he should not go, but stay with her in England.

In the third chapter, Susan and Friday have found the residence of Foe and they stay with him. After a while, the girl that calls herself Susan Barton (jr.) shows up with her supposed nanny Amy. Susan (sr.) still does not really believe that the girl is truly her daughter and discusses this with Foe. He does not provide an answer to her questions but instead he kisses her.

After the girl and her nanny have left, Foe suggests that Susan should try to teach Friday how to write. He may not be able to speak, but this does not necessarily mean that he cannot write either. The next day Susan tries to teach him but it does not really seem to work, although in the end Friday sits down at Foe's writing table and starts writing on Foe's papers. Susan does not like it, but Foe soothes her and says she must let him learn. In the end, Friday turns out to have written the letter *o*. Foe states this is a beginning. The letter *a* should be next.

In the last chapter, the narrator enters a house that seems to be Foe's. He or she finds the body of a woman or a girl, lying on the floor on his back. He or she also finds a couple lying in bed. After this, the narrator finds Friday, lying on the floor. He or she puts his ear near Friday's mouth and listens: the narrator hears a roar coming from Friday; the sounds of the island.

In the second paragraph of the last chapter, the narrator enters the house of Daniel Defoe, where he or she also finds a girl and a couple. The narrator discovers a scar around Friday's neck. Also, the narrator discovers a box with a script in it and he or she reads the first words, which say "Dear Mr. Foe, At last I could row no further.". This sentence is also the first sentence of the novel *Foe* (Coetzee 1986: 5). Then the text becomes surreal, with the narrator 'slipping overboard' (Coetzee 1986: 155) and beginning to swim under water to the sunken ship (the ship with which Crusoe supposedly arrived at the island). In the shipwreck, the narrator finds Friday as well. He is chained. The narrator tries to speak to him, but he cannot speak to him, for he is under water. The narrator tries to open Friday's mouth. Then, from Friday's mouth comes a slow stream, flowing up upon the narrator and passing through the

ship, the island and the rest of the world.

First of all, I want to focus on the structure of the novel and on the role of the narrators, because by focusing on the structure of the novel and its narration, it is possible to designate a hierarchy between the different parts of the novel. This hierarchy between the different parts of the novel can tell us something about the (lack of) value of storytelling that is purported by the text.

The first three chapters of the novel are narrated by Susan Barton. Remarkable are the quotation marks at the very beginning and the end of the first as well as the second chapter. These quotation marks imply a narration within a narration; Susan is narrating within a narration. Thus in these chapters she can be seen as an intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. Although we, as readers, have not been provided with an introduction by an extradiegetic narrator, the quotation marks show that the first two chapters are narrated on a hypodiegetic level. The third chapter, however, does not start off and does not end with quotation marks. In this chapter, Susan is also narrating, but now she is narrating directly. Her narration is not embedded within another narration anymore: this chapter is narrated on diegetic level (the first narrative level), which makes her an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator here. Chapter I and II can therefore be seen as subordinate (hypodiegetic) to the first narrative (chapter III, diegetic level).¹ The first two chapters are Susan's story: her time on the island with Crusoe and Friday, her trip back to England and her time in England with Friday. She explicitly addresses Foe in the second chapter (the second chapter seems to consist of letters written to him, in which she tells her experiences), but, although shortly, she addresses Foe at the end of the first chapter as well. So in both chapters, Foe is the agent who is addressed by the narrator: the narratee.² The first chapter then is Susan's actual act of telling the story of the island to Foe; this is an act to which she often refers in the second chapter. The subordinate quality of the story that Susan tells Foe (subordination of the story of the island to the diegetic level in which Susan actually encounters Foe instead of merely telling him things) is a structural element of the novel, but there is a parallel between this structural subordination and the thematic subordination of Susan's story. As we will see later in this chapter, there is a shift in Susan's views on her storytelling about the island. The first two chapters of the novel can be seen as the act of narration, while the third chapter of the novel can be seen as a

¹ See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 2002 *Narrative Fiction*. New York: Routledge. p. 92

² A term used by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, basing her account of it on studies of Prince (1973), Genette (1972) and Chatman (1972) (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 104)

chapter of reflection, in which Susan expresses her doubt on her act of narration and telling stories in general.

What is relevant about the structural subordination of Susan's initial story (Chapter I and II, on hypodiegetic level), is that it questions the importance of storytelling itself. The subordination of Susan's story (on hypodiegetic level) can be seen as an indication of the lack of value that is attributed to telling a story. This lack of value of storytelling is underlined, as we will see, by the amount of value that seems to be attributed to Friday's silent existence. Where Susan, in her narration on hypodiegetic level (chapter I and II), lends her proof of existence and concept of self from the life story she is constructing for herself, Friday is the character without a story, but nevertheless exists. His proof of existence is not extracted from telling a story, but from merely being present. He is no less present in the novel than Susan is, although he does not tell his story. Thus, merely by taking a look at the structure of the novel and its narrative levels and voices, it is already possible to designate within the text, an attitude towards language and storytelling that seems to be somewhat negative (which is remarkable because this attitude is embedded within a story itself: within the text of the novel *Foe*): the structure of the novel shows us how telling a story does not automatically provide power. On the contrary, for Susan, telling her story means joining the struggle of who gets to name reality. This struggle eventually makes Susan doubt her own existence, as we will see later on in this chapter.

To determine the role of silence and possession over a voice in *Foe*, it is necessary to take a closer look at the conflicts concerning who is in charge of 'the' story: the struggle, in which Susan gets entangled, of who gets to name reality

When we look closer at the relation between Susan and Foe, we find a power struggle evolving around how to write down (how to 'tell' in fact) Susan's story. Foe and Susan's discussions on the correct way in which to tell the story, take up a very large part of the book. As explained shortly above in the summary of the novel, Susan wants Foe to write down her story exactly as she has told him and nothing more, while Foe tries to explain to Susan that if one wants to write a book, one needs to add more exciting elements. Trying to convince Susan to include her story of Bahia within the story of the island, he tells her:

'The island is not a story in itself,' said Foe gently, laying a hand on my knee. 'We can bring it to life only by setting it within a larger story. (...) The island lacks light and shade. It is too much the same throughout. It is like a loaf of bread. It will

keep us alive, certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had?' (Coetzee 1986: 117).

In this passage, Foe explains how Susan's story should be adjusted by adding elements (that do not necessarily need to be the truth), to make it 'tastier'. Susan's stay on the island (or more appropriately, her depiction of her stay on the island; the way in which she has told Foe what happened) is too boring: readers do not want to read a story that is boring, even when it is a true account of events. But Susan holds on to the necessity of a true account; she does not want any lies. The following passage, from the first chapter of the novel, shows her attitude towards adjusting her story. An attitude that she tends to stick to throughout the whole novel. In this passage, she explains her idea of the necessity of a true account to the captain that takes them from the island back to England, after he has suggested she should write down the adventures on the island. Susan explains that she is not an author and cannot write down her story without losing some of the liveliness of it. Then the captain says it is possible to hire an author who will write down the story and

"(...) put in a dash of colour too here and there."

"I will not have any lies told," said I [*Susan*]. (...) "If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it?"

(Coetzee 1986: 40)

In this quote, Susan makes it clear how important it is to her to have a true account written of her story (while the text, at the same time, shows the impossibility of a true account). When the story does not contain the truth, she feels it is worthless. This statement raises the question to what extent the 'truth' is truly within Susan's reach. She claims ownership over the story of the island at the end of Chapter I:

(...) it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island. (Coetzee 1986: 45)

In this passage – which is directed at Mr. Foe – Susan claims that she has been telling *the* one and only story of Cruso's island. She does not seem to be aware of her personal involvement. Because she is the only one left to tell about the island, she feels in charge of the truth, for the facts are at her 'disposal'. However, although in this quote she affirms her position of

authority with regard to the truth of the story of the island, she is showing Foe, the captain and the reader her own version of the island, claiming to be showing the truth, while the dead Cruso and the silent Friday may have had another version of the island in mind. There may be many truths and thus Susan could never swear to the truth of her tale. The idea that her story is personal (that it is her account of what happened and that she cannot speak for the others involved) is again underlined by the quotation marks; by the emphasis on the very act of narrating. Thus the subordination of her story is not just structural (because of its taking place on hypodiegetic level), but also thematic: it seems to be a true account of the island, but the quotation marks and the text itself show that it is personal and that it is just one account of the many accounts possible. It is not the main narrative; not in the structure of the novel, but neither in the plot of the novel. For the novel is not about what really happened on the island; it is about the power struggle on who may tell the story. The main issue in the power struggle between Foe and Susan is not necessarily about the truth: it is about not letting others manipulate your story. Susan does not want her story to be manipulated by Foe, while, at the same time, she is manipulating the story of Cruso and Foe by telling their story from her perspective. Coetzee's text thus shows, by portraying the portrayal of a story within a story, the difficulty of telling a story and the difficulty to rely on it.

In his article "Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?' or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J.M. Coetzee's Foe", Lewis Macleod stresses the importance of having the authority of telling the story:

(...) what matters, it seems, is who gets to tell the story and who ends up listening to (and living inside) it. To "narrate the world" is to gain power and authority, to be subject to outside pulses is to lose them (MacLeod 2006: 3)

The one who tells the story creates the discursive framework in which others live their life; thus, the one who tells the story can be seen as the one creating an outside world others are subjected to. Susan and Foe's conflict therefore is a struggle of power: whose story will overpower the other? Who will gain power over the outside world?

We have seen how this leads to many discussions between Susan and Foe on the way in which the story should be told. In the end of the novel, there does not seem to be a clear outcome on whose story (whose discursive framework) eventually prevails. Although Foe certainly confuses Susan by presenting her a girl that claims to be her daughter, Susan does

not give in. She still lives inside her own story; she does not let Foe manipulate her discursive framework and defies most of his suggestions. The struggle remains a struggle, there does not seem to be a winner. But when we look at the very last chapter, in which another narrator comes along, we might be able to say someone else turns out to be the one who has the last 'word': Friday. Now, I would like to take a look at Friday and examine his role and the role of his silence within the power struggle to gain authority by 'narrating the world'.

The reason we are given by Susan Barton (through her storytelling) why Friday does not speak is because someone cut out his tongue. Cruso told her slave-traders have cut it out, and although Susan is not sure about this particular statement (she sometimes suspects Cruso of having cut it out himself), she definitely is convinced about the idea that Friday does not have a tongue anymore. To be exact, she is convinced that nothing more rests in his mouth than a mutilated thing that used to be his tongue.

In fact, Susan has never actually seen the lack of Friday's tongue, for when Cruso wants to show her, it is too dark to see:

Friday opened his mouth. "Look," said Cruso. I looked, but saw nothing in the dark save the glint of teeth white as ivory. (...) "He has no tongue," said Cruso. Gripping Friday by the hair, he brought his face close to mine. "Do you see?" he said. "It is too dark," said I. (...) I drew away, and Cruso released Friday's hair.

(Coetzee 1986: 22-23)

This passage shows how Susan has not been able to actually determine whether Friday has a tongue or not, because she was not able to see anything in Friday's mouth (she has not seen a tongue, but she has not seen the lack of a tongue either). Later on, she avoids looking closely, for the fear of encountering mutilation makes her shiver (Coetzee 1986: 32, among other pages).

MacLeod states that, as far as he has been able to determine, all critics have taken over this idea that Friday's silence has somehow been inflicted on him, even though the only proof there is to find in the novel for this is Susan Barton's statement (MacLeod 2006: 7). Although it is hard to agree with MacLeod's statement that (nearly) all critics have taken over this idea of inflicted silence (Derek Attridge for example in fact admits in a footnote accompanying his article "*Foe* and the Politics of Canonisation", that our only proof for his tongue being cut out is Susan's report), it is remarkable to note how the question whether Friday's silence was

inflicted on him or whether his silence is voluntary, does not seem to be of that big importance in many articles concerning the novel *Foe*. First of all, the fact that Attridge merely discusses the doubts around Friday's inflicted silence in a footnote shows how he considers this to be of minor relevance. Next to this, Attridge stresses the importance of Friday's otherness due to his silence (Attridge 1996: 179 – 184). Friday is 'other', because he is silent, whether his silence is inflicted on him or not is irrelevant for this statement. It is Friday's silence itself, which provides him with this otherness. The emphasis is on the consequences of his silence, not particularly on the cause or intentions that lie behind it. However, the causes or supposed intentions that lie behind Friday's silence, may be able to shed a new light on the consequences as well. Therefore I would like to take a closer look at this.

Here, I would like to go along with MacLeod's thoughts on Friday's tongue and examine the implications of the idea that Friday does have a tongue and that his silence was not inflicted on him. Thus, that he chooses to be silent. That he, where Susan struggles to get her story told and, consequently, struggles to receive acknowledgement for her life story (which is presented as a subordinate story, because of its structure), Friday withdraws from telling his story voluntarily. As MacLeod shows (and Attridge admits in a footnote), there is no evidence that Friday is truly without a tongue, for the only account we have for his tonguelessness is Cruso's statement (Susan has not seen it herself), while the reader learns early in the novel that Susan sees Cruso as an unreliable narrator (MacLeod 2006: 8). I would like to add to this that Susan Barton herself is an unreliable narrator, because of her personal involvement (emphasized by the quotation marks in which her story, and consequently her representation of Cruso's statement regarding Friday's tonguelessness, is presented). This provides enough ground to explore MacLeod's idea of Friday's voluntary silence.

In his article, Lewis MacLeod mainly addresses the problem of the postcolonial discursive project making the postcolonial critics overlook the 'truth' of Friday's tonguelessness:

The signals of the novel are swallowed by the demands of certain kinds of postcolonial thinking, thinking that in critical contexts operates as its own master narrative and drives a desire for the false coherence such a narrative provides (MacLeod 2006: 10)

According to MacLeod, postcolonial theorists are bound to stop looking further into the novel

and the facts of Friday's tongue, for they are concerned with establishing a coherent interpretation that will stroke with (the, by MacLeod presented as, master narrative of) certain kinds of postcolonial thinking. In this paper, however, I am not concerned with the (supposed inconsistencies within) critical reception of *Foe* and Friday's silence, but with the consequences of approaching the novel from an angle that is different from usual perspectives on *Foe* within its critical reception. Although it does not seem to be his main point, this is something MacLeod addresses as well.

MacLeod states that with the thought in mind of Friday having a tongue, but being silent out of free will:

(...) it becomes possible to read Friday's silence as an epic gesture of defiance (...).
(...) his silence becomes a kind of heroic restraint, a triumph of individual agency against insistent demands that he participate in some kind of master narrative and the discourse it posits. (MacLeod 2006: 12)

By considering Friday's silence as voluntary, MacLeod interprets his silence as a heroic act; Friday is someone who is able to overcome the discourse that is created by others (Susan and Foe), because he refuses to participate. This way of thinking attributes to Friday's silence a positive value: his silence does not entail he is without a voice and therefore that he is the one that is marginalized, but Friday is someone that triumphs exactly because of his silence. MacLeod notes Friday's silence is a different way of communicating: "Friday's silence, then, can be read as a mode of communication, a counter-discursive utterance (...)." (MacLeod 2006: 12). For MacLeod, Friday's silence is, although he does not utter words, a way of communicating as well; it is, in a certain way, an utterance. And it is an utterance that opposes the discourse of Susan and Foe, which is a discourse of language (using words). Friday's silence is, in a sense, the mode of a different kind of voice. Interesting here, is that MacLeod uses the term 'counter-discursive', which implies that Friday's discourse (of silence) challenges the discourse of the other characters that try to fit him into theirs. In MacLeod's eyes, Friday willingly challenges the discourse of power by being silent.

Benita Parry, in her article "Speech and Silence in J.M. Coetzee" also attributes a certain positive value to Friday's silence, thereby, like MacLeod, also differing from most other interpretations of the novel. However, she sees Friday's role as a silent protagonist slightly different, as we will see. Whereas MacLeod sees Friday's silence as an undeniably

positive force, Parry acknowledges there is a value in Friday's silence, but whether this silence is also counter-discursive remains to be seen. Where MacLeod approaches Friday's silence concretely, on the level of the text itself, Parry approaches Friday's silence in a more abstract kind of way, transcending the intentions of the fictional characters (not really addressing the question whether his silence was inflicted on him or not) and instead, focusing on the text within the context of Coetzee's oeuvre.

First of all, although she does not address the issue of Friday's tongue as extensively as MacLeod, Parry does seem to agree with most other theorists on the idea that Friday's silence has indeed been inflicted on him:

(...) whereas (...) the gardener, in *Life & Times of Michael K.* (New York, 1983) and the enslaved black Friday, in *Foe* (New York, 1987), are muted by those who have the power to name and depict them (...). (Parry 1996: 41)

In this quote, Parry shows she is not concerned with the question whether Friday has a tongue or not, but, more abstractly, that she is concerned with the idea that Friday, in general, has been muted by those who are able to speak about him and therefore have the power to depict him as they choose. Whether he is silent out of free will or not is not the issue here: what matters is that stories are told and that the storytellers can shape his figure in the story as they like, because he is silent. This is a negative view on his silence. However, Parry goes a little further and shows that, within the context of Coetzee's oeuvre, we can consider Friday and his silence to be signifying something else.

Despite Parry's statement that Friday is situated through his silence as an object that is represented by those who have the power, she also explores, in her discussion of Attridge's work, the idea that this silence (not just of Friday but also of other silent characters in Coetzee's work) could nonetheless endorse resistance to the dominant discourse:

This (...) possibility is offered by Derek Attridge, who reads Coetzee's fictions as a continued and strenuous effort to figure alterity as a 'force out there disrupting European discourse', a force which is both resistant to the dominant culture and makes demands on it, not by entering into dialogue but by the 'very intensity of an

unignorable “being there” ‘ (Literary Form and the Demands of Politics’)
(Parry 1996: 42)

The concept of alterity Parry speaks of, in this case means the alterity of the figure of Friday: his being different from the other characters in his actions, but most notably in his act of being silent. Parry discusses Attridge’s idea that Coetzee’s characters that are ‘different’ may simply disrupt European discourse by their presence, while withdrawing from dialogue. I want to emphasize here that this dialogue is set within European discourse. The discourse we encounter in *Foe* is a European one, for it is Susan, a British white woman, who is narrating (on hypodiegetic level in the first two chapters, but on diegetic level in the third as well – the fourth chapter can be considered to be different for we encounter a new unknown narrator there and this chapter seems to evolve around Friday’s own discourse, on which I will come back to later). The fact that Friday does not participate in her discourse, can be seen as a withdrawal from European discourse. I would like to argue here that his withdrawal implies a transcendence of European discourse rather than a resistance to it. Where MacLeod has stated that Friday’s silence functions as a countering of the ruling discourse, I think Friday’s silence functions as the transcendence of discourse.

As Kimberly W. Benston has noted, in relation to the topos of unnamings within African-American Literature, namelessness can ‘invoke the power of the Sublime’. It invokes:

(...) a transcendent impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies and reifications, and thrust the self beyond received patterns and relationships into a stance of unchallenged authority. (Benston 1982: 4)

Although in this quote Benston emphasizes the implications of the very *act* of unnamings oneself (thus the active choice to free oneself from a name), I want to stress that it is namelessness itself that entails this Sublime quality. As Benston explains, the act of unnamings leads to the undoing of categories and patterns, with transcendence of all that is categorized and known and therefore authority over these categories as a consequence. Someone that refuses to be named, becomes ‘ungraspable’. I think this very act of self-unnamings is not that relevant: I want to emphasize the fact that one without a name automatically escapes all category which makes him ungraspable *an sich*, leaving out of account how exactly this namelessness came into being.

In my view, there is a strong parallel between namelessness and silence. Both are a

form of withdrawal from articulation and both are a way of escaping categories and patterns, for silence is the escape from the referential quality of language that categorizes the world. Parry attributes qualities to silence that have affinity with Benstons discussion of namelessness. In both cases, there is a surpassing of what can be known. Benston signifies this surpassing quality of namelessness as the positioning of the self ‘beyond received patterns and relationships’, while Parry describes this surpassing quality of silence, in relation to Friday, as the surpassing of meaning:

(...) the outflow of sounds from the mouth of Friday gives tongue to meanings – or desires – which precede or surpass those which can be communicated and interpreted in formal language. (Parry 1996: 45)

The outflow of sounds Parry speaks of here, must consist of Friday’s flute music³, for that is Friday’s only utterance of sound we encounter in the novel *Foe*. However, I feel the term ‘sounds’ is not appropriate and that the way in which Friday gives tongue to meanings can be viewed much broader. There is, in fact, also his dancing and the stream that comes from his mouth in the last chapter (of which we do not learn whether it has a sound or whether it is silent). I want to consider Parry’s formulation of ‘outflow of sounds’ to be the outflow of all different forms residing within Friday’s entire discourse of communication, that is his collection of utterances, audible as well as non-audible. Nevertheless, important here is Parry’s statement that Friday’s utterances utter meanings that cannot be communicated within language that is known to us. Thus, that Friday communicates on a transcendental level and surpasses what is known to us. Linking this to Benstons conception of namelessness, we can state that Friday gains unchallenged authority through his mode of communication that lies beyond known patterns. When we look at Friday’s silence from that perspective, we can say that Friday’s discourse of communication is not counter-discursive, as MacLeod has stated. Instead it is what I would like to call ‘trans-discursive’. Friday’s discourse does not challenge the discourse of language of the other characters: it transcends it. In this sense, Friday can be seen as being unchallenged and powerful. He does not ‘triumph’ against ‘insistent demands’ of the discourse surrounding him, as MacLeod states, because he simply does not join the struggle. One cannot win if one does not participate in the game. Friday’s discourse goes

³ Perhaps the term ‘silence’ is not very appropriate in this paper (because Friday does utter sounds) and it would have been better to use the term ‘speechlessness’ instead. However, because my emphasis in this paper is on his ‘lack of articulation’ (which I consider to be a lack of the use of language in all forms, also a lack of the use of clear –bodily- gestures) and not merely on his lack of speech, I chose to use the word silence after all.

beyond the discourse of his other characters. All in all, in the end, he is – and in this I agree with MacLeod – not at all the marginalized voiceless character he usually is considered to be.

But, where Benston refers to godlike figures in his depiction of nameless entities, Friday still is substantial within the world of the other characters (Susan in particular). He and his discourse of communication may be inaccessible, but he nevertheless *is* there and cannot be ignored.

It is exactly this non-ignorable presence, this physically ‘being there’ that Attridge notices of figures of alterity in Coetzee’s work (Parry 1996: 42) and which also seems to play a very big role in *Foe*. Friday does not speak to the other characters with words and his utterances can be seen as being part of a transcendental discourse of communication, but there is one area that cannot transcend Susan’s world and this is Friday’s body.

The prominent role of the body, and especially Friday’s body, becomes clear in the surreal last part of the last chapter of *Foe*, in which the (unknown) narrator seems to enter Friday’s world. He tries to talk to Friday, but because he is under water, the words diffuse:

(...) this is not a place of words (...). This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday. (Coetzee 1986: 157)

In this quote, the narrator makes clear how Friday’s world does not consist of words, but that it is the body that counts: the body, that which is of substance, as opposed to words, that are merely referential and do not signify anything in themselves.

This focus on the substantial quality of the body as opposed to the referential (empty, in a sense) quality of words is something which comes along more often in the novel, though less obvious than in the last chapter. Especially towards the end of the novel, it seems Susan realizes more and more how words fail to contain meaning. Where, at first, she is determined to tell her story (which shows her belief in the relevance of words) and to tell it in her own words, later, she is not that convinced about words anymore. When Foe asks her to talk about her time in Bahia, she refuses and argues:

I choose not to tell because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. (Coetzee 1986: 131)

In this quote we can see the shift in Susan’s thinking. At first, she wanted Foe to write her

story down and she wanted to tell him the story of the island (which is the part with narration on hypodiegetic level), but later on she feels how a story does not make her existence anymore substantial (which is in the part that is narrated on diegetic level, which therefore can be viewed as a kind of reflection on her story earlier). She simply *exists* and does not need a story to prove this. It is the storytelling in particular which eventually even gives Susan the feeling of having (or even being?) nothing more in life than a story:

(...) now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. (...) Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? (Coetzee 1986: 133)

The storytelling and the struggle that comes along with it makes Susan doubt everything, even her own existence. In this quote, the insubstantial quality of words (the elements that eventually make up a story) becomes clear.

The substantial quality that is ascribed to the body, as opposed to words, in the last chapter seems to provide a solution to the problem of referentiality of language. Words can be considered to be empty, without substance, without coherent meaning and thus they can be used as tools of manipulation. The body, however, simply is there and cannot be ignored. It is of substance and it is not something to doubt about. It simply is there or it is not. It seems as if the text gives preference to the body over language. This becomes clear in the very last paragraph of *Foe* as well:

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (Coetzee 1986: 157)

In this quote, a certain force is described, coming from Friday's body and going all over the world. The fact that this stream flows all over the globe, indicates a universal quality: the stream may be something that conquers the world or perhaps something that should be conquering the world, or perhaps something which is already there, maybe in all of us? In any case, important is the emphasis on the body. The stream comes from Friday's body (in a place in which bodies are their own signifiers), it flows up through the narrator's body and even the

bodily sensations of the narrator are described (it is 'soft and cold' and 'it beats' against the eyelids of the narrator and against the skin of his face).

Although this description of Friday's 'stream' is not necessarily a positive one, it is not negative either. Also, the stream is depicted as something that is universal and thus cannot (or should not) be ignored. Apparently, it is a fundamental aspect of our existence as humans. To truly determine what this stream exactly is, would probably go too far. Nevertheless, it is the emphasis on the body, as opposed to words, which is unmistakably present.

This idea, of the body being of more substantial value than language, is something I would like to explore further in an analysis of the novel *Life & Times of Michael K*.

Chapter 2: Silence and Namelessness in *Life & Times of Michael K*

Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* consists of three parts. The first and third parts are presented to us by a heterodiegetic narrator. This narrator tells us the story of Michael K, a 31-year old gardener, born with a hare lip and a mind that is 'not quick' (Coetzee 1983: 4). After having spent his childhood in Huis Norenius, a boarding school for 'afflicted and unfortunate children' (Coetzee 1983: 4), he gets a job as a gardener at the municipal services of the City of Cape Town. Because of his disfigurement (and the reactions of other people), he feels more at ease when he is alone and lives his life as a gardener in solitariness. On Sundays he visits his mother, Anna K, who works as a cleaning lady for a fortunate family and lives in an apartment below their house.

When his mother asks Michael K to take her to the country, to Prince Albert, where she grew up, he agrees to go with her. He builds a cart for his mother and takes her by foot, because they do not have a permit to leave. After a first attempt that fails, because they run into a convoy of the army, they eventually succeed in getting quite far. However, near Stellenbosch his mother becomes very ill. Michael takes her to the hospital and there she dies. After her death, he roams the streets around the hospital for a while, not knowing exactly what to do with himself, but eventually decides to go to Prince Albert by himself.

After a few encounters with police that sets him to work and strangers that take care of him and feed him, Michael K discovers, near Prince Albert, the farm of the Visagie family, which he believes to be the family of his mother. He starts trying to make a living there by killing animals, drinking water from a pump near the farm and starts planting seeds. Although his future is dark and he feels weird thinking about it, he finds a certain kind of happiness in cultivating the land.

One day, a stranger appears, who turns out to be the grandson of the Visagies. He has deserted the army and wants to hide out on the farm. He thinks of Michael K as the family's servant and treats him as such. Michael therefore runs away into the mountains.

In the mountains, Michael tries to live off eating lizards and flowers, but nearly starves to death. When he realizes he is bound to die if he goes on like this, he descends the mountain and into the town of Prince Albert again.

Weak and starved, the police find him. They take him to a camp of the Free Corps, called Jakkalsdrif. He is told it is no prison, but the people inside are not allowed to leave. Inside the camp many people live their life, including families. Although Michael is an outsider in the camp and does not like to be surrounded by other people, the regime in the camp seems to be

livable.

However, one day the police arrive. The captain decides to take over the camp and announces a much stricter policy from that day forward. Michael therefore escapes and returns to the Visagie farm.

When he arrives back at the farm, it seems the grand son has left. Michael takes up his work on the land around the farm again. He begins to sleep during the day time and works on the land at night. He gets very weak, for the only things he eats are pumpkins.

Too weak to watch out and hide, the police discover him. They blow up the farm and take him away.

In the second part of the novel, we encounter a homodiegetic narrator, the medical officer of the camp to which Michael has been brought by the police after taking him away from the Visagie farm. He is very interested in Michael and touched by his different way of thinking. It makes him wonder about the meaning of his own life. When Michael eventually escapes, the medical officer convinces the camp leader to register Michael as having died, so he can be free. In the end of the second chapter, the narrator describes how he would have desired to go along with Michael; to let Michael guide him towards a different mode of existence. One that is preferable over his way of living now.

Finally, in the third part of the novel, again narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator, Michael K is back in Cape Town and goes back to his mother's old apartment. Here he finds traces indicating someone has been sleeping there. Then the novel ends with Michael fantasizing about how he would convince this stranger into going back with him to the Visagie farm and how he would show the stranger in what way he would manage to get water from the depth of the earth, by using a teaspoon.

First, it is important to note the similarity in the lack of (verbal) articulation within both *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe*. As we have seen in *Foe*, Friday is completely silent. And, although Michael K sometimes does speak, he does not do it very often and he has trouble talking because of his hare lip (Coetzee 1983: 131). Next to this, the lack of articulation is notable in the lack of a last name for Michael (and his mother Anna). It is this namelessness that I would like to go into first.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Kimberly W. Benston shows how namelessness can 'invoke the power of the Sublime' (Benston 1982: 4). Because of the withdrawal from all categories, the entity without a name reaches a state of 'unchallenged authority' (Benston 1982: 4). On a practical level, we can say this idea of authority definitely

cannot be attributed to Michael K. Throughout the novel, there are many examples available in which K is turned into an object of oppression. Although his namelessness is not explicitly presented as being the cause for this oppression, his namelessness can be linked to his 'being no one' for the law and the police. We come across this element of Michael K 'being no one' for the law and police several times in the novel, for instance when Michael attempts to take his mother to the country for the first time and they encounter a convoy of the army. One of the policemen tells them they have to stay at least fifty metres off the roadside, because: "Anything nearer, you can get shot, no warning, no questions asked." (Coetzee 1982: 22). In this quote, we see how the police attributes this 'being no one' to Michael K's existence: it does not matter what his story may be, where he comes from or what he is up to; when he approaches the roadside, he is nobody to the law and can get shot whenever the police feel like. This police statement, however, does not apply to Michael K and his mother alone: it is applicable to every person that comes near the roadside. Michael K is not the only one 'being no one'; within the novel, there are many people that are portrayed as having no rights when encountering the police. Michael K's namelessness therefore can be viewed from several perspectives. First, interpreting the novel allegorically, his namelessness can be seen as signifying the lack of identity of people that live in a kind of world (a social context) as Coetzee describes in *Life & Times of Michael K*. It is this interpretation that strongly invokes the association with Franz Kafka's character Jozef K. in *Der Prozess* (1925), who succumbs as an individual to the overwhelming power of a system. It is this Kafkaesque idea (of the individual having no position of power within a system) that, in this allegorical interpretation, could be attributed to *Life & Times of Michael K* as well. Next to this, a connection between Kafka's and Coetzee's work could be made, considering that J.M. Coetzee has expressed his admiration for Franz Kafka at several times, as Patricia Merivale shows in her article "Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka" (Merivale 1996: 152). Also, Merivale points out that Heinrich von Kleist's story "Michael Kohlhaas", an intertext for Kafka that has often been noted, can be seen as a 'grandfather' intertext for Coetzee's Michael K as well (Merivale 1996: 165). However, although this analogy between the novels of Coetzee and Kafka is striking, the connection between Michael K and Jozef K has often been debated, as Patricia Merivale also shows. She presents the opinion of Nadine Gordimer on the matter:

In her influential article, 'The Idea of Gardening' (1984), Gordimer formulates her refutation of the Kafka link in *Life & Times of Michael K*: 'Michael K (the initial

probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka) (...) ‘

Gordimer feels the letter K refers to Kotze or Koekemoer, surnames that are common among coloured people from Cape Town (Merivale 1996: 165), instead of Jozef K. Also, Merivale quotes Coetzee himself in an interview, after being asked how he feels about this ‘Kafka Connection’: “I don’t believe that Kafka has an exclusive right to the letter K. (Morphet interview, Coetzee 1987, 457)” (Merivale 1996: 152). Subtly evading clear statements regarding his intentions as an author, Coetzee’s humorous reply signifies the difficulty that would lie within a clear-cut connection between Michael K and Jozef K. However, an allegorical interpretation like this, concerning Michael K as an example of ‘Everyman’ who succumbs to the system, is not my aim here. Although there are many examples in the novel that show how Michael K, like many others, is treated without respect for his autonomous being, his namelessness can also be seen as something that brings forth aspects of Michael K’s existence that unmistakably distinguish him from the rest. Seen from this perspective, his namelessness marks his extraordinary singularity, instead of signifying him as an example of everyman. And these distinguishing qualities, entailed by his namelessness, are what I want to focus on now.

As we have seen, Michael K’s namelessness does not invoke a position of unchallenged authority for him on a practical level. However, he does withdraw from categorization, because of his namelessness and also his silence, which I will address later on in this chapter. K’s namelessness - he refers to himself as Michael, when asked what his name is (Coetzee 1983: 131) – signifies his ‘unknowability’: other people do not know who he is or where he comes from (endorsed by his silence). After having getting to know Michael *a little* (emphasis added, for it is very hard to get to know him), the medical officer attributes a certain miraculous quality to him and his unknown whereabouts: “No papers, no money; no family, no friends, no sense of who you are. The obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy.” (Coetzee 1983: 142). The obscurity of Michael K’s background (entailed by his namelessness), makes the medical officer think of him as a strange, but wonderful thing. Something that, because of his unknown background, escapes categorization. The medical officer himself, even ascribes a position of authority to Michael. While starting to wonder about the meaning of his own life, he ascribes a mysterious ‘meaningfulness’ (Coetzee 1983: 165) to Michael’s and feels Michael could guide him towards this meaningfulness, which lies

in a place that cannot be determined within the categorized boundaries we ('normal' human beings) are familiar with:

(...) I am convinced there are areas that lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of the camps (...). I am looking for such a place in order to settle there (...). I am not so foolish, however, as to imagine that I can rely on maps and roads to guide me. Therefore I have chosen you to show me the way.
(Coetzee 1983: 162-163)

In this quote, the medical officer addresses Michael as a leading figure: someone who has access to a place nobody else would be able to find, for it is impossible to find it by using the usual tools (maps and roads) and therefore is the only one who can lead him. The medical officer chooses to be led by Michael and in this way approaches him as a figure of authority. According to the medical officer, Michael does not belong in this world; he is of another world and belongs in this particular place, which he describes as a 'sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life' (Coetzee 1983: 166). This description reminds us of Paradise, which would lend to Michael K, belonging there, a certain godlike quality. This idea, expressed by the medical officer, is similar to the idea expressed by Benita Parry with regard to *Foe's* Friday, as we have seen. Not that she alludes to Friday as being godlike, but Parry does describe Friday's silence as a mode of surpassing meaning: the meanings Friday brings forth 'precede or surpass those which can be communicated and interpreted in formal language' (Parry 1996: 45). Friday is the one that has access to other meanings, while the rest of us do not, just like K is considered to be a guide to another world or other mode of existence by the medical officer. Both of Coetzee's 'figures of alterity' are thus interpreted to be of a kind of transcendental, unreachable or value with access to a different, meaningful world. However, Michael K is interpreted as such by another character: the medical officer, an unreliable narrator that is personally involved. As we will see, this makes the interpretation of K's transcendental value questionable. Especially because it is possible to distinguish a tendency to take over control and overpower Michael K in the medical officer's attitude.

Although the medical officer ascribes to Michael K transcendental qualities, he still tries to act out his power on him, while he may not be aware of this himself. He patronizes Michael K (and flatters himself), by claiming he is:

(...) the only one who sees you [Michael K] for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as (...) a human soul above and beneath classification (...). (Coetzee 1983: 151)

Although well-intentioned, the medical officer here shows that *he* is the one depicting and categorizing Michael, by stating that he alone can see him for what he is. This becomes even more clear when the medical officer tries to emphasize Michael's special uncategorizable value, exactly by pinpointing him down (thus, categorizing) as uncategorizable:

We ought to value you and celebrate you, we ought to put your clothes on a maquette in a museum, your clothes and your packet of pumpkin seeds too, with a *label*⁴ (...). (Coetzee 1983: 152)

This positive way of approaching Michael's state of being ('We ought to *value* you..') goes hand in hand with the statement that he should be in a museum and should be labeled: he should be categorized as being valuable. The medical officer contradicts himself in first stating that Michael K is 'above and beneath classification' and later on stating that he should be classified as a museum piece. It is important to bear in mind we are dealing with an unreliable narrator here: the medical officer is personally involved in the story and – important to note – he seems to be unhappy with his own life. A tendency to celebrate or even worship another way of living (another mode of existing) is therefore understandable and not very surprising. Because of this, as I said before, the transcendental quality the medical officer attributes to Michael K is questionable. To us, readers, Michael K does not leave the impression he is transcendental. Where in *Foe*, we, as readers, do not have any more access to Friday's inner world than the other characters, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, we are able to follow some of K's chains of thought, because he often is the focalizer. To us, K is accessible, unlike Friday, who is accessible to no one. This makes it difficult to go along in the medical officer's thoughts and consider Michael K as a Friday-like transcendental figure. What Friday and K still have in common, however, is a life in which others try to force them to express themselves and articulate their existence.

The medical officer forcing Michael K to speak may be the most striking aspect of his patronizing attitude. He threatens Michael that if he will not, his story will die out:

⁴ My emphasis

You are going to die, and your story is going to die too, forever and ever, unless you come to your senses and listen to me. (...) The truth is that you are going to perish in obscurity and be buried in a nameless hole (...) and no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. (Coetzee 1983: 152)

Remarkable in this quote is the addition of the adjective 'nameless'. In this quote, both Michael K's silence and his namelessness invoke in the medical officer the image of K dying unknown and in obscurity. Whereas, on the one hand, the medical officer characterizes the obscurity surrounding Michael K as part of his prodigy-like existence, on the other hand, the obscurity is driving the medical officer himself, personally, crazy, for he wants to know K's story (Coetzee 1983: 149) and obviously feels he should have the right to know his story, because he feels he is 'the only one' who takes time to truly 'see' Michael K for what he is. This reminds of the character Susan Barton in *Foe*, desperately wanting to hear Friday's story. But, just like Susan who does not get her answers, Michael K will not yield to the medical officer. Not even when he is encouraged to talk by the officer through the questioning of his substantiality: "Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed." (Coetzee 1983: 140). The medical officer here explicitly connects silence to being insubstantial.

In his article "Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee's Archaic Postmodernism", Anton Leist discusses this quote and its condescending implications as well:

Suggestions like these⁵ reflect the modern reduction of human beings to their words and becoming visible only through words. Michael is not good with words and therefore (...) does not exist. (Leist 2010: 203)

Leist here approaches the medical officer as part of a world in which the relevance of language seems to be omnipresent, purporting the modern idea that one does not exist when one does not speak. The medical officer denies Michael K his substance (one might even say, his existence), because of his silence. However, analogous to the undeniable substance ascribed to Friday (with his body as signifier) in spite of his silence, we can say that Michael K's substance is undeniable as well in spite of his namelessness and silence. It seems both

⁵ i.e. to give oneself substance to prevent oneself from sliding 'through life unnoticed'

Coetzee's texts defy the modern idea Leist describes of human beings being reduced to their words.

When in Jakkalsdrif, Michael K and the other people living there had been referred to as 'parasites' by the captain that invaded the camp. The people from the camp were, according to him, eating the substance of the town, 'giving no nourishment back'. Back at the Visagie farm after his escape, he ponders over this qualification:

Parasites too had flesh and substance; parasites too could be preyed upon. Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest.

(Coetzee 1983: 116)

With Michael K as the focalizer, the narrator presents us K's idea on 'making your voice heard'. Where, in postcolonial thinking, as we have seen, the idea of 'having a voice' is emphasized as an important tool to gain back subjectivity, K's chain of thought here invokes the image of a never-ending struggle: oppression in general is inescapable, it seems that the only thing one can do is make one's own voice heard loudest as to avoid being oppressed, while oppressing others (without this loud voice) himself in doing so. Michael, by cultivating the land and minding his own business, withdraws from the war and, consequently, from this power struggle. Similar to the way in which Friday withdraws from the power struggle between Foe and Susan, K chooses a life of passivity; the life of the parasite, in the captain's words. Nevertheless: the presence of parasites cannot be ignored, they also have *substance*. The term 'substance' would probably not be a term K came up with himself. Derek Attridge, in his book *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, shows how often we encounter sentences in the novel that 'begin as statements about K's mental world but which carry on in language that hardly seems his' (Attridge 2004: 50). This quote can therefore be considered the narrator's paraphrasing of K's (perhaps verbally ungraspable) thoughts instead of free indirect discourse. But exactly who uses the term is irrelevant, what matters is the purporting of the idea that the ones who do not make their voice heard loudest also have substance, which counters the medical officer's point of view (according to Leist, the point of view of modern – Western – society) regarding silence and insubstantiality.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in *Foe*, the substance of that which is silent, seems

to be signified by the undeniable presence of the body. This emphasis on the body has been noted by Brian May in other works of Coetzee as well. In his article “J.M. Coetzee and the Question of the Body”, he states that in Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), the familiar poststructuralist theme is invoked that

(...) we do not speak language, language speaks us, (...) a theme often found consorting with a familiar premise of epistemological skepticism: we do not know things, we know only our signs for things, our signifiers, our mere words, all of which transcend the things they name. (May 2001: 394)

This poststructuralist theme and in particular this premise of epistemological skepticism connected to it - the idea that we cannot know things, for we know only their names (we only know language, which refers to itself) – can be designated within *Life & Times of Michael K* in a certain way as well. Whereas, according to May, the character of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* ‘prefers not the thing itself but the words about the thing’ (May 2001: 395), so does Michael K definitely not prefer words, for he is ‘not clever with words’ (Coetzee 1983: 139). It seems Michael K prefers the thing itself instead of the words about the thing.

Although my focus is how Michael K himself deals with his lack of communicative skills, it is interesting to note the analogy with *Foe* here. The portrayal of a preference for things instead of words is remarkable for a text, which itself consists of words. Just like in *Foe*, in which the preference for not telling a story is portrayed within the story of the text itself, here, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, a preference for not using words is expressed by the use of words by the text itself. In this way, both novels show the paradoxical complexity of language: the novels seem to purport a preference for silence, but they cannot purport this preference without using language itself. In the novels, we can identify how withdrawal from language in texts is impossible without the involvement of language. Both *Foe* and *Life & Times of Michael K* show this ironic quality.

Taking our focus back to the character of Michael K, we can say that, throughout the novel, Michael often feels helpless because of his lack of communicative skills; he feels particularly bad about not even being able to reason with himself or telling his life story to himself:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour

words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (Coetzee 1983: 110).

Because of his mind that is 'not quick' (Coetzee 1983: 4), Michael K lacks the ability to form his own story. Words are useless, for he fails to make the connection between them. His uneasiness with talking or expressing a chain of thought is expressed often throughout the novel, for example when 'his heart was full' of gratefulness towards the stranger that has taken him home and fed him. Michael K feels the need to thank him, but 'the right words would not come' (Coetzee 1983: 48). However, at the very end of the novel, in a clear moment, K seems to accept his inability to communicate, seemingly questioning the use of storytelling:

I have become an object of charity, he thought. (...) They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. (...) And if I had learned storytelling at Huis Norenus instead of potato-peeling and sums, (...) I might have known how to please them. I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me off to scrub the floor. (...) Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground. (Coetzee 1983: 181)

This quote portrays the uselessness of storytelling (which shows, again, similar to *Foe*, the novel's paradoxical quality by portraying the uselessness of storytelling within a told story). K has noticed how everyone (the medical officer in particular) has wanted him to tell his life story, but because he did not have the skills to do this, he did not give them what they wanted. However, he wonders about what would have happened if he would have learned storytelling in Huis Norenus where he grew up. Then he would have known how to 'please' them; which implies he would not be telling his story for himself, but for the others only. He feels he would have been able to please them with a dramatic story of a life behind bars. Nevertheless, he himself realizes this would not be the truth. For him, the only truth, perhaps not a very interesting one but nevertheless the truth about him, is that he has been a gardener. Telling the medical officer (and others that asked for it) his story to prevent being forgotten, is not important to K at all. To him, what is important, is his own truth: being a gardener and

spending his time with his nose to the ground, because that is what they do. That is what is substantial to him.

This passage can be seen as signifying how words (stories) merely signify words, instead of referring to the thing (the truth) itself. For K, although he has been urged to tell his story to give himself substance, the stories lack substantiality.

So we see that, as well as in *Foe*, the idea of language lacking substantial value can be designated in *Life & Times of Michael K*. But where in *Foe* the emphasis on the body as an instance of more substantial value than language has been made clear, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the emphasis on the body is not as clearly presented as being of more substantial value. The emphasis on the body definitely is there, in the way in which Michael K's bodily sensations are presented extensively and in full detail throughout the novel (his sensations of pleasure as well as of pain) and in the way in which his bodily disfigurement is presented as one of the main reasons for his solitariness (his solitariness being a very important element of K's life). However, I would like to argue that in *Life & Times of Michael K*, it is not the emphasis on the body that the lack of articulation entails, but the emphasis on passivity. The text does not provide a solution for the referentiality of language by bringing forth something else (like *Foe* seems to do by emphasizing the body as substantial), but by showing how one might withdraw from language and life and still be of substance; how one that is not involved with other people is still substantial, although passive.

In the previous chapter, we have seen in Benita Parry's discussion of Derek Attridge, how, according to Attridge, Coetzee's fictions make an effort 'to figure alterity as a force (...) which is both resistant to the dominant culture and makes demands on it, not by entering into dialogue but by the 'very intensity of an unignorable "being there"' (Parry 1996: 42). Whereas Friday and his body seem to portray this 'being there' that cannot be ignored, Michael K seems to do the opposite: he does the opposite of 'being there'; he hides and eats as little as possible, almost to the point of disappearing.

The last paragraph of the novel is striking in this respect. In this passage, Michael fantasizes about explaining to the stranger who has been sleeping in his mother's apartment how to get water at the Visagie farm, while the pump has been blown up by the soldiers:

(...) he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend

the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (Coetzee 1983: 184)

Remarkable is the statement at the end that ‘one can live’ in that way, by bringing up teaspoons of water. This is a very minimalistic presentation of living a life, like his desire to sleep so very often and long (Coetzee 1983: 34, among many others) is as well. His minimalistic and passive way of living is also strongly expressed through the fact that he supposedly leaves almost no traces behind. He does not create things to pass on to other generations (Coetzee 1983: 101) and when he gets arrested by the police at the Visagie farm, at the end of the first part of the novel, he knows ‘there will be not a grain left bearing my marks’ (Coetzee 1983: 124). Next to this, he starts to love idleness (Coetzee 1983: 115) and feels it is not hard living his life just passing time (Coetzee 1983: 104). Also, his thinness can be seen as a way of taking as less space as possible, spending his time where he is out of the way being presented as a good thing in K’s eyes (Coetzee 1983: 105). In all kinds of different ways, the passive aspects of K’s life are emphasized. The lack of articulation in the novel does not merely consist of K’s speechlessness and silence but also of confining his life and his own being to a minimum.

This emphasis on passivity strongly differs from familiar kinds of postcolonial thinking that encourage subjectivity (assertivity) and engagement or at least ‘being there’ (Parry 1996: 42, 43) instead of withdrawal and hiding. However, *Life & Times of Michael K* marks, by signifying a passive life, but at the same time asserting this life by portraying it, how a passive life is no less substantial than an assertive one.

CONCLUSION

This thesis engaged with the issue of ‘having a voice’ within postcolonial thinking. As we have seen, having a voice in postcolonial thinking has always been considered to be an important way to gain a subject position and to escape oppression. Whereas the silent characters within the novels of J.M. Coetzee, and especially Friday, have often been considered to be powerless because of their lack of a voice, the aim of this thesis was to explore the extent to which this supposed powerless position may be interpreted differently: the extent to which the silence of these characters may bring forth positive value and even power instead of oppression, based on the idea of namelessness as a quality providing power.

We have seen in *Foe* that the character Friday is completely silent, which provides others the opportunity to manipulate his story. However, his silence can also be considered a way of withdrawing from the power struggle around the authority to ‘narrate the world’ in which Susan and Foe are involved. In this sense, Friday’s silence can be interpreted as a heroic act, as MacLeod states: a counter-discursive utterance. Nevertheless, like namelessness entails the escape of categories and patterns, the actual withdrawal from articulation can also be seen as a transcendence of discourse. In this view, Friday is not merely countering the discourse of the other characters, he transcends them in his unchallenged authority by uttering meanings that cannot be communicated within language, as Benita Parry has noted. Within this state of transcendence, however, Friday still is substantial within the world of the other characters. This undeniable presence, described by Derek Attridge, invokes a discourse of the body. The body, which is of substance, as opposed to words, that are merely referential and do not signify anything in themselves. Friday does not need words to prove that he is of substance. To the body, as opposed to words, substantial quality is ascribed. This idea, of the body being of more substantial value than language, shows how not having a voice does not automatically imply lacking a subject position.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, we encountered a similar lack of articulation. Although Michael K does speak sometimes, it costs him trouble and he prefers silence. In addition to this, his name indicates a kind of namelessness. This namelessness can be linked to the idea of being ‘no one’: Michael K is not treated as a full human being, which, as becomes clear in the novel, counts for many other people as well. In this way, his namelessness could be seen as allegorical: Michael K and his namelessness symbolize the way in which people, that are caught up in an overwhelming power system, are viewed and treated. However, his namelessness also invokes the medical officer’s inclination to ascribe peculiar qualities to K:

the medical officer sees him as mysterious and an authority connected to another mode of existence. Still, we as readers encounter Michael K in a way that is less miraculous: because of Michael's frequent position of the focalizer throughout the novel, he is not transcendental to us, but accessible, in opposition to Friday, who is inaccessible to his surrounding characters as well as to the reader at all times. Next to this, the medical officer patronizes K a lot and it becomes clear that, on a practical level, K cannot be seen as an unchallenged authority because of his namelessness. This is where the aspect of his silence comes along: the medical officer forces him to speak, to give himself 'substance', which, in the eyes of the officer, can only be done by telling about yourself. But, as Leist notes, K's silence does not necessarily assert that he is without substance. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, as well as in *Foe*, the insufficiency (or even uselessness) of language is purported. In both novels, language is portrayed as lacking substantial value. K cannot speak properly, but that does not automatically mean that his existence is without substance, like the officer wanted him to believe. K is a very passive character, who desires a passive life, but he nevertheless exists. In this novel, the lack of articulation does not invoke a discourse of the body, like in *Foe*, but a discourse of passivity. This passivity strongly differs from familiar kinds of postcolonial thinking, that encourages the gain of a subject position, instead of a withdrawal from it. However, by portraying a passive life like this, *Life & Times of Michael K* asserts how passivity is just as substantial as subjectivity. Not having a voice in this novel does not generate a certain kind of power or authority, but it nevertheless ascribes a positive value to being silent and withdrawing from power struggles.

Thus, as we have seen, in Coetzee's novels *Foe* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, positive value can be attributed to silence. This positive value of silence and passivity counters the usual postcolonial emphasis on gaining a subject position through gaining a voice. This celebration of non-lingual and passive characters could perhaps be seen as an exposure of some impairment within this kind of postcolonial thinking: how this kind of thinking itself may have the tendency to exclude and how it may rely too much upon 'the modern reduction of human beings to their words' (Leist 2010: 203).

Literature

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.) 2008 *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*.
New York: Routledge.

Derek Attridge 1996 "Oppressive Silence: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of Canonisation". In: *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (eds). London: Macmillan Press Ltd. pp 168-190.

Derek Attridge 2004 *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Kimberly W. Benston 1982 "I Yam what I am": Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature". *Black American Literature Forum* 16:1. pp 3-11.

J.M. Coetzee 1983 *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

J.M. Coetzee 1986 *Foe*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Lewis MacLeod 2006 " 'Do we of necessity become puppets in a story?' or narrating the world: on speech, silence, and discourse in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*". In: *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52: 1. pp 1-18.

Brian May 2001 "J.M. Coetzee and the Questions of the Body". In: *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 47:2. pp 391-420.

Patricia Merivale 1996 "Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka". In: *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (eds). London: Macmillan Press Ltd. pp 152-167.

Anton Leist 2010 "Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee's Archaic Postmodernism". In: *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*. Anton Leist & Peter Singer (eds). New York: Columbia University Press. pp 197-222.

Benita Parry 1996 "Speech and Silence in J.M. Coetzee". In: *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (eds). London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
pp 37-65.

Robert M. Post 1989 "The Noise of Freedom: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*." In: *Critique* 30:3.
pp 143-155.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 2002 *Narrative Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1999 "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In: *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (eds). New York: Routledge. pp 28-37.