

Grace, the Body, and the Aesthetic in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract

This essay¹ revisits J. M. Coetzee's representation of Friday's body in his 1986 novel *Foe* in the context of his long-standing interest in the idea of grace. Through a reading of Friday's dancing in *Foe*, I argue that Coetzee's representation of Friday consistently invokes grace as a physical and aesthetic concept, rather than the theological emphasis that has prevailed in critical discussions to date. The reading is amplified by evidence from the Coetzee Papers at the Harry Ransom Center, which points towards Coetzee's engagement in the early 1980s with the work of German writer Heinrich von Kleist and his 'On the Puppet Theatre'. I draw on contemporary scholarship that revisits aesthetic theory, the backdrop for Kleist's dialogue, in the context of the transatlantic slave trade in order to understand the implications of Coetzee's use of the figure of the puppet and the significance of grace as an aesthetic concept for his novel.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; *Foe*; Heinrich von Kleist; Simone Weil; grace; dance; aesthetics; race; agency

In the early 1990s J. M. Coetzee responded to a question about the significance of the body in his work with a comment about Friday in his 1986 novel *Foe*:

Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple [...] standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not', and the proof that it *is* is the pain it

¹ I am grateful to John Coetzee for permission to quote from unpublished material in the Coetzee Papers at the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Earlier versions of this essay were presented at Grace in English Literature (QMUL, 2015), Coetzee's Other Arts (University of the Western Cape, 2017), and ESSE (Mainz, 2022).

Kelly, Michelle. 2024. 'Grace, the Body, and the Aesthetic in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*.' *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 23(1): 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.35360/njes.2024.23314>. Copyright (c) 2024 Michelle Kelly. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (Coetzee 1992: 248)

The interview appears in *Doubling the Point* (1992), a collection of Coetzee's academic essays punctuated by interviews with David Attwell. It prefaces the essay 'Confession and Double Thought: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' which was first published in 1985, just a year before *Foe* appeared. In the essay, Coetzee situates confession as part of a sequence: transgression, confession, penitence, and eventually absolution—the end point of confession that Coetzee, in the later interview, identifies with 'the intervention of grace in the world' (1992: 249). In the absence of a god to grant absolution or grace, the secular confessions of autobiography and fiction take the form of an infinite spiral of self-consciousness that Coetzee terms 'double thought'. 'True confession', he concludes in the essay, 'does not come from the sterile monologue of the self or from the dialogue of the self with its own self-doubt, but [...] from faith and grace' (1992: 291). In the terms of the essay, such grace is available only within the Christian worldview of Dostoevsky, exemplified in the confrontation between Stavrogin and Tikhon in *The Possessed*; the confessions of Rousseau and Tolstoy, by comparison, achieve only arbitrary or unsatisfactory conclusions. But as the emphasis on endings and conclusions suggests, absolution—closure through grace—is translated by Coetzee into non-Christian and even formal terms: it 'means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter', and as such is 'the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular' (1992: 251–252). So, while Coetzee explicitly disavows the availability to him of grace in its Christian guise ('I am not a Christian, or not yet' [1992: 250]), grace nonetheless operates as an idealised endpoint for writing itself.

This has been echoed in scholarship that draws on the essay explicitly or implicitly to examine grace as an important formal and ethical principle in Coetzee's fiction more broadly.² But if grace brings the endless self-

² I take just two examples. Patrick Hayes' persuasive account of Part IV of *Foe* as a wisdom tale, influenced by Dostoevsky, and informed by Coetzee's understanding of grace as a form of closure (2010), is an example of how grace is deployed as a formal feature of Coetzee's work. In Derek Attridge's emphasis on the aleatory and non-instrumental aspects of grace in his reading of *Disgrace* it is closer to an ethical principle (which in Attridge's work also has implications for form). He describes grace as the 'experience of finding oneself personally

doubt of double thought to an end, how do we read the echoes of this argument in his claim, in the later interview, that 'The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt'? The comment seems to align the body with the idea of grace and installs it—alongside grace?—as an alternative horizon for his work. And, indeed, Coetzee's interview comments about the body continue in this vein: 'Not grace, then, but at least the body' (1992: 248).

I revisit 'Confession and Double Thought' and Coetzee's intriguing interview comments as a starting point for thinking about the relationship between grace and the body in this essay, in particular as they relate to the representation of Friday in *Foe*. At the core of my argument lies the multivalence of grace—unacknowledged by Coetzee in his comments—as a theological *and* aesthetic concept. Through a reading of Friday's dancing in *Foe*, an aspect of the novel that concentrates our attention on Friday's body, I argue that Coetzee's representation of Friday consistently invokes grace as a physical and aesthetic concept. This reading is amplified by evidence from the Coetzee Papers at the Harry Ransom Center, which points towards Coetzee's engagement in the early 1980s with the work of German writer Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811). The opposition between grace and self-consciousness that we find in Coetzee's writing on confession echoes Kleist's description of the unselfconscious and hence graceful movement of the marionette in 'Über das Marionettentheater' (1810; 'On the Puppet Theatre'). Reading *Foe* through Kleist, as the archive encourages us to do, therefore compels us to consider grace not only as a theological concept but as a physical and aesthetic quality in Coetzee's work.

But if Kleist can reshape our understanding of Friday, Coetzee's reinvention of Defoe's Friday as an enslaved and emancipated African demands that we proceed carefully in reading *Foe* through Kleist. For Martin Puchner, the puppet inhabits 'the zone between living organism and lifeless object' (2016: 187), making it a provocative figure through which to engage the extreme violence and dehumanising logic of the transatlantic slave trade, and breathing new life into debates around agency that have informed critical discussions of Coetzee's Friday (see for example Spivak 1990). The context presents similar challenges to a

commanded by an inexplicable, unjustifiable, impractical commitment to an idea of the world that has room for the inconvenient, the non-processable' (2004: 187).

concept like grace. As a theological concept, grace cannot be disentangled from the Christian-imperialist worldview consolidated by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Coetzee's *Crusoe* articulates most clearly the unholy alliance of Christianity and chattel slavery, explaining to Susan Barton that Providence must 'sometimes sleep', otherwise, 'who would be left to pick the cotton and cut the sugar-cane?' (Coetzee 1987: 23). For the purposes of this essay, my focus is rather on grace as an aesthetic concept, and here too Coetzee's *Friday* and the terms in which Coetzee reflects on the significance of the body impedes any straightforward celebration of the *graceful*. Grace is intimately entangled with the philosophical formalisation of the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere of interest, a set of values that were consolidated at the peak of the slave trade, as Simon Gikandi has described in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2017). Gikandi's work, like that of David Lloyd (2018), is part of a lively interrogation underway in contemporary scholarship of the relationship between aesthetics and the transatlantic slave trade that calls into question both the bracketing of the aesthetic as a non-instrumental area of human endeavour and the instrumentalisation of black life under chattel slavery. All of this gives fresh impetus for revisiting Coetzee's *Foe*, confronting the implications of the figure of the puppet, and thinking anew about the role of grace in his work and the terms on which it continues to exert force in critical debates.

'Giving voice to Friday'?

Foe is a Robinsonade in which Susan Barton is determined to achieve fame as 'the female castaway' by convincing the well-known author Mr Foe to write the story of the island that she shared with the now-dead *Crusoe* and the silent *Friday*. Holed up in London with *Friday*, she increasingly installs the story of the former slave as the truth of the island, and therefore her ability, or inability, to tell *Friday*'s story is the standard by which her narrative will stand or fall: 'The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to *Friday*' (Coetzee 1987: 118). *Friday*'s silence is a source of fascination for Barton, who believes his tongue was cut out by slavers, an injury that animates her imagination. The first three parts of the novel, narrated by Barton, turn on the tensions between her investment in *writing* as the path to self-realisation for her and freedom for *Friday*, and *Friday*'s lack of speech, on account of which his every action is framed by Barton as simultaneously replete with meaning

and indecipherable. To this end, she recounts Friday's island ritual of floating out onto the sea on a log, always to the same place, and spreading flower petals on the top of the water: 'This casting of petals was the first sign I had that a spirit or soul—call it what you will—stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior' (Coetzee 1987: 32). Later, she imagines that Friday's flute-playing might be an avenue of communication: 'as long as I have music in common with Friday perhaps he and I will need no language' (Coetzee 1987: 97). She attempts to duet with him, but he seems not even to hear her playing; he was, she writes to Foe, 'insensible of me' (Coetzee 1987: 98). At Foe's suggestion, she tries to teach Friday to write, but he produces only row after row of identical characters—the letter *o* and symbols that resemble eyes sitting on feet—and erases the images when Barton investigates.

Friday's dancing

As the novel progresses, dance—or, more precisely, spinning in a circle—becomes Friday's main activity. He is observed by Barton, who claims his truth is revealed to her through movement. She describes how Friday follows the sunlight around Foe's house, 'spinning in a circle, his eyes shut, hour after hour, never growing fatigued or dizzy' (Coetzee 1987: 92). 'In the grip of the dancing', she writes to Foe, Friday 'is not himself. He is beyond human reach. I call his name and am ignored, I put out a hand and am brushed aside' (Coetzee 1987: 92). She reads it as a form of 'primitive' expression, 'a trance of possession [...] his soul more in Africa than Newington' (Coetzee 1987: 98). In a moment of desperation she imitates his dance, and claims an experience similar to the one she projects onto Friday: 'I fell, I believe, into a kind of trance' (Coetzee 1987: 103–104). Dance, we are to believe, is at odds with consciousness.³

Friday's dancing is both implicitly and explicitly aligned with writing. Not only does it give Barton something to write about, the dancing begins only when Friday adopts the robes and wig of Foe, suggesting that he is performing or imitating the role of author as he dances. This prompts her to expand on her earlier epistolary account to 'tell the whole story' in Part

³ Barton's framing of Friday as beyond consciousness is pointed in the South African context where political agency was articulated precisely as *Black Consciousness*. This is one of many moments in which we are alerted to the limits of Barton's view of Friday.

III, which turns out to be that, while dancing, Friday ‘would wear nothing but the robes and wig’ (Coetzee 1987: 118). As she goes on to describe it to Foe, several of the novel’s central preoccupations converge around her description of Friday’s dance:

In the dance nothing was still and yet everything was still. The whirling robe was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday’s shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them.

I saw and believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound. (Coetzee 1987: 120)

The language of the passage casts Friday’s body as spectacle and Susan as spectator or voyeur. The supposed revelation relates to Barton’s obsession with Friday’s potentially severed tongue, which she fears may be merely a ‘figure’ for a ‘more atrocious mutilation’—his castration (Coetzee 1987: 119). The scene is framed as a kind of revealed truth in the form of Friday’s dance, but this is undercut by Barton’s wavering belief which she identifies with the ‘doubting’ Thomas, for whom touching the wounds of Christ restored his unsteady faith. We are reminded here of Coetzee’s interview comments about the suffering body as a counter to the endless trials of doubt. But the dance, however revealing, does not allow Barton to touch Friday’s ‘wound’. Indeed, her obsession with Friday’s mutilated body stands in contrast to his persistent positioning by her as ‘insensible’, immune to pain, to touch, even to sound (Coetzee 1987: 98). In their earliest encounter Friday carries Barton in a ‘strange backwards embrace’ after she stands on a thorn and ‘could not so much as hobble for the pain’ (Coetzee 1987: 6). Friday, on the other hand, ‘crushed under his soles whole clusters of the thorns that had pierced my skin’ (Coetzee 1987: 6–7). Coetzee’s insistence on the authority of the suffering body draws our attention to the inconsistencies in Barton’s representation of Friday, from her morbid fascination with spectacular mutilation to the insensibility that she projects onto him. It also alerts us to the link between pain and aesthetics, the latter both in its now conventional use as the philosophy of art and its origin in the term *aisthesis*, or sense perception.

Dance in the archive

The combination of notebook reflections and manuscript drafts that constitute the *Foe* archive at the Harry Ransom Center provide valuable insight into Coetzee's representation of Friday and the role of dance in it. A range of references in the *Foe* notebook from late 1984 to March 1985—quite late in the writing process—suggest that Coetzee was inspired by dance and reflections on the aesthetics of movement, as well as exploring the distinctive challenge of translating physical movement into narrative prose. This represented something of a breakthrough in the writing process, especially in the representation of Friday. While the earliest notebook entries show Coetzee developing a novel based on aspects of Defoe's fiction and biography, there are also references to a newspaper story about a young man beaten to death in South West Africa (now Namibia), who had been photographed with a chain around his neck (Coetzee Papers, 33.6, March 28, 1983).⁴ In the notebook, details from the image surface through different versions of the Friday character, sometimes raising a defiant fist, often with a rope around his neck, and eventually a chain. The novel's link to the African continent, and the racist violence that characterises its history and the period in which Coetzee was writing, is cemented in a notebook entry from September 1983 when Cruso is reinvented as a slave trader, and Friday the sole surviving African from a shipwreck in which the bodies of skeletons remain chained in the hold off the shore of the island—a version of the photograph that would eventually crystallize around Friday in Part IV of the novel.⁵ By this point, in another key departure from Defoe's novel, the Friday character is silent (see Attwell 2015: 154–155).

Dance and movement, I argue, are bound up in these figures of enslavement, suffering, silence, defiance, and death, and do not stand in simple opposition to them. In early examples Friday dances at the behest of Cruso, and later when drunk alongside 'bouts of drunken confession'

⁴ The story appears in newspaper clippings (dated March 27, 1983) stored among Coetzee's archival materials (Coetzee Papers, Container 110.12). The photographs reproduced in the newspaper are extremely disturbing and document scenes of sadistic violence. For a full account of Coetzee's use of this and other photographs see Hermann Wittenberg's forthcoming monograph on Coetzee and Visual Arts.

⁵ Namibia's Skeleton Coast is known for the number of shipwrecks caused by its perilous Atlantic waters.

from Cruso and Foe, as Coetzee imagines that ‘Friday tells his “truth” in actions and gestures’ (Coetzee Papers 33.6: December 16, 1983). Dance is implicitly an alternative to language for the silent Friday in these early examples, but it is not a *free* act. The references to dance culminate in a series of Notebook entries in January 1985. ‘The answer to the question of how you talk with Friday’, Coetzee writes, ‘is of course that you and he dance’ (Coetzee Papers 33.6: January 16, 1985).⁶ This entry is followed the next day by a reference to Kleist’s ‘Über das Marionettentheater’, in which Kleist famously describes the grace of the marionette as superior to the human dancer. Three days later, Coetzee drafts the scene that I discuss above, in which Barton observes Friday dancing (Coetzee Papers, 11.1 Version 10: 66–67). He is still preoccupied by dance in March 1985, and clearly seeking inspiration widely as he refers to Norman McLaren’s path-breaking dance film *Narcissus* (1983):

Saw Norman Maclaren’s [sic] Narcissus last night. Flurries of motion on the canvas. Can it ever be written? How is it done (technically)? Can Susan feel there is something wrong with her eyes? And come back to the doorway again and again? (Coetzee Papers, 33.6: March 25, 1985)

McLaren’s film takes the form of a sequence of *pas de deux* in which a male dancer, Narcissus-like, finds an ideal ‘partner’ in his own reflection as he appears to dance with himself, an effect created by McLaren’s use of an optical printer to combine images of the dancer’s two roles. In the notebook entry, Coetzee refers to a sequence in the later part of McLaren’s film in which the movement of the Narcissus figure and his reflection is captured in an almost still or slow-moving blur. Such effects are defining of McLaren’s dance films, for which he records real human dancers’ choreographed movements and then essentially re-choreographs them using animation techniques which estrange and enhance the natural movement of the dancers.

So, Barton’s impression that ‘In the dance nothing was still and yet everything was still’ is directly inspired by McLaren’s film (Coetzee 1987: 120). Her wavering belief is suggested in Coetzee’s speculation that she might return to look at Friday dance ‘again and again’ to establish exactly what is before her. In several notebook entries in this period Coetzee

⁶ In the same entry Coetzee refers to Martin Pops’ essay on American poet Charles Olson, in which Pops discusses Olson’s interest in dance and emphasises the poet’s commitment to a language that ‘possesses bodily resonance’ (1974: 55).

registers the danger of falling into a clichéd representation of Friday, the black man, as 'opaque' or 'inscrutable' (Coetzee Papers 33.6: January 11, April 5, 1985). Through McLaren's film he confronts such opacity as the combined effect of the technology of representation and the point of view of the spectator. But we must turn to Coetzee's interest in Kleist's 'Über das Marionettentheater' to fully appreciate the significance of the mechanical effect of McLaren's animation for Coetzee's representation of Friday.

Coetzee and Kleist

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* David Attwell (2015) describes the importance of Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* to Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), the novel immediately preceding *Foe*.⁷ Although direct reference to Kleist fell away in the course of drafting, the novel bears traces of Kleist's fast-paced vigilante narrative, and descriptions of the malnourished, skeletal K as a stick-insect or wooden man suggest that the influence of Kleist stretched to his well-known dialogue 'Über das Marionettentheater'. As such, references to Kleist in the *Foe* Notebook (to the dialogue, and an earlier reference to Kleist's fiction) need to be seen as part of Coetzee's sustained engagement with the German writer in the early-mid 1980s, which remains evident in references to Kleist as recently as *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) and to Coetzee's inclusion of two Kleist novellas in his *Biblioteca personal*, the series of classics published in Spanish by his Argentine publisher.⁸

'Über das Marionettentheater' is a philosophical dialogue between a narrator ('I') and Herr C, a dancer, in which they take turns telling stories that illustrate the tensions between self-consciousness and grace. In the dialogue's best-known exchange, Herr C celebrates the grace exhibited in the unselfconscious movement of the marionette—an ideal that, he claims, the embodied and conscious movement of the human dancer can only aspire to: '[...] it would be quite impossible for a human body even to equal the marionette' (2004: 414). He describes how in the marionette theatre 'Every movement [...] had a centre of gravity [*Schwerpunkt*]; it sufficed if this, inside the figure, were controlled; the limbs, which were

⁷ I write about Kleist in both novels in my forthcoming monograph.

⁸ Coetzee's introduction to the Spanish volume is reproduced in English in *Late Essays: 2006–2017* (2017: 85–94).

nothing but pendula, followed without further interference, mechanically, of their own accord' (2004: 411–412). The grace of the marionette's movements emerges, Herr C speculates, in the interplay of the operator [*Maschinist*] 'putting himself into the centre of gravity of the marionette; in other words, *by dancing*', and the puppets who as a result become 'resistant to gravity' [*antigrav*]: '[...] because the force lifting them into the air is greater than the one attaching them to the earth' (2004: 414, emphasis in original).

As I have shown, the opposition between grace and self-consciousness that guides Kleist's dialogue is present in Coetzee's work, albeit in his writing on confession rather than in his engagement with dance or puppetry. What Coetzee calls confession's 'sterile monologue of the self with its own self-doubt' can only be brought to a close by 'faith and grace' (Coetzee 1992: 291). But these terms also resonate remarkably with Susan Barton's account of Friday's dance. Her preoccupation with revealed truth and faith, undercut by doubt, sits uneasily in a description of dance; the word that she fails to use is grace, the term shared across the theological and the aesthetic registers through which she sees Friday. In Coetzee's confession essay grace is invoked explicitly as a theological concept, which translates into the German *die Gnade*. The terms for grace in Kleist's dialogue, however, are those that acquired prominence in eighteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics, *die Grazie* or *die Anmut*, both of which refer to grace as a physical and aesthetic concept.⁹ Kleist's German therefore concentrates our attention on the latter and, read through Kleist, we begin to understand grace in Coetzee's work beyond the strict terms of the confession essay, as a physical and aesthetic quality. This in turn offers an alternative vocabulary for the power of Friday's body. Friday's dancing embodies a physical and aesthetic grace, 'the dark pillar' of his body forming the centre of gravity (Kleist's *Schwerpunkt*) for the movement of the dance around which the author's robes are suspended (Coetzee 1987: 120). This physical and aesthetic grace meets the scepticism, doubt, and confession of Susan Barton, shifting across the different meanings of the English term grace, and between the German *die Grazie* or *die Anmut* to *die Gnade*. The potentially endless double thought that for Coetzee is a hallmark of self-consciousness and confession is

⁹ It is likely that Coetzee would have read Kleist in English and German. Afrikaans too has different terms for the concepts that translate into English as *grace*.

therefore brought to an end by grace, which is achieved only through a shift to the physical and aesthetic register of a different art form. But as I will show, Kleist offered an enabling set of figures for Coetzee's *Foe* that extend well beyond Susan's description of Friday's dance.

Reading Foe through Kleist

Kleist's emphasis on the inhuman grace of the marionette allows us to rethink the mechanical qualities achieved by McLaren's animation techniques as giving a Kleistian grace to his human dancers, which Coetzee in turn draws on for Friday. This positions McLaren, and by extension Coetzee, as Kleist's puppeteer or *Maschinist*. It suggests a rather clichéd version of the puppet as the plaything of a controlling operator, but this is complicated by the uncertain agency of Kleist's dialogue, where the 'aesthetic power' of the dance, according to Paul de Man, is located 'in the text that spins itself' between puppet and puppeteer (1984: 285). Undoubtedly, the marionette acts as a figure for the dubious power exerted by the author, a metafictional reflection by the white South African Coetzee whose reluctance to put words in the mouth of Friday is an intervention in a long tradition of white authorial ventriloquism—a tradition that he discusses in *White Writing* (1988).¹⁰ This is reinforced by his reflections on the writing of *Foe* in the Notebook. Just six months into the writing process, he comments that 'The only figure I can generate anything but puppetry out of is myself. When am I going to enter?' (*Foe* Notebook, October 24, 1983). The comment points to the negative connotations of the puppet (*mere* 'puppetry') and suggests that agency and control lie firmly with Coetzee as author/*Maschinist*. But his description a few days later of the experience of ventriloquizing Defoe's eighteenth-century prose complicates this: 'Where is this voice from that speaks in me, that I speak in?' (Coetzee Papers 10.2, *Foe* Version 4, November 4, 1983). And he ventures that it creates the impression of 'an irrevocable innocence' that 'pretend[s] not to know what it means for a merchantman to be plying between Bristol and the New World' (Coetzee Papers 10.2, *Foe* Version 4, November 30, 1983). In this context, Kenneth Gross's description of the puppet's voice as 'always alien, never its own' (2011: 67) allows us to think of Coetzee as both puppet and puppeteer, and points

¹⁰ See Chapter 5, 'Simple Language, Simple People: Smith, Paton, Mikro' (1988: 115–135).

towards the forms of repetition woven into *Foe*, to which I will return below.

To consider Friday as possessing a Kleistian grace is not to overlook the significance of Coetzee's explicit engagement with the transatlantic slave trade; indeed, I argue that it is through the figure of the puppet that Coetzee confronts its violent effects. Reading with Kleist draws attention not only to Friday's dancing, but to his frequent characterisation by Barton as lifeless, dull, unresponsive, statue-like.¹¹ In a manuscript draft dated October 17, 1984, Friday is described as being 'like a statue'; 'deadened' by the years with Cruso, 'he had become more like a machine than a man, obeying orders when they were given him, otherwise wrapped entirely in himself' (Coetzee Papers 11.1, *Foe* Version 10). The thing-like puppet, in other words, becomes a figure for the suffering of the enslaved and freed Friday—and in Part IV, the dead Friday. The figure of the puppet literalises 'the denial of black sentience and [...] the slave's status as object of property' that underpinned chattel slavery, as Saidiya Hartman powerfully illustrates (2022: 25). It also points to its deadening, and murderous, effects. The latter come to the fore in the writings of Simone Weil, which resonate remarkably with Coetzee's Friday. In 'The Iliad or the Poem of Force', force is 'the ability to turn a human being into a thing', either by killing him or 'while he is still alive' (2005: 185). Slavery exemplifies such force in Weil's work and produces the abject state of 'affliction'. In 'Human Personality' she writes that slavery, like war, empties 'human lives of their reality and seem[s] to turn people into puppets'; the slave, having suffered too much, 'may seem to be dead' but 'is never quite dead' (Weil 2005: 72).¹² Only through the 'supernatural force of grace', according to Weil, can a soul recover from such affliction (2005: 91). But while Weil's Christian-mystical worldview relies on the divine to counteract such suffering, Kleist's dialogue complicates questions of agency, will and intentionality, and compels us to suspend the

¹¹ Mehigan draws attention to Kleist's slippage in his description of the marionettes between *künstlich* and *geistlos*, or artificial and lifeless, a slippage also relevant to the statue (2011: 88). *Künstlich* also resonates with a character who is, after all, based on another fictional character, Defoe's Friday.

¹² Weil associates this state of 'affliction' with silence: it is 'by its nature inarticulate', 'eternally condemned to stand speechless in our presence'; the afflicted are 'like someone whose tongue has been cut out' (Weil 2005: 85, 88, 91).

question of Friday's agency. Neither can the archive settle the question. In a notebook entry from the months of intense engagement with dance, Coetzee asks 'What if Friday's blankness is all learned?' (Coetzee Papers 33.6, May 8, 1985).

Slavery, grace, and aesthetics

While the puppet may be a figure for the dehumanising effects of slavery, and its legacies in white supremacist violence in South Africa and elsewhere, it is equally clear in *Foe* that the work of *humanising* Friday through art—as we might read Barton's efforts—is no less problematic. Any humanity that relies for its legitimacy on a 'sign', as Barton puts it, 'that a spirit or soul—call it what you will—stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior' (Coetzee 1987: 32), is flimsy indeed, and recalls the historic exclusions of the Christian-imperialist and aesthetic frameworks through which grace conventionally signifies.

Kleist's marionettes with their inhuman grace are widely considered an ironic comment on, if not an outright parody of, Friederich Schiller's argument in 'Über Anmut und Würde' (1793; 'On Grace and Dignity') that grace is defined as 'the beauty of the form moved by freedom' (2012: 350), and therefore an innately human and moral quality.¹³ Or, in terms that resonate with Barton's efforts to 'humanise' Friday: 'Where grace thus appears, the soul is the moving principle, and in her is contained the cause of the beauty of movement' (Schiller 2012: 341). Defined by freedom, Schiller's grace is a product of human will, but 'the subject itself must never look as though it knew about its grace', which is therefore 'the unintentional in intentional movements' (Schiller 2012: 353, 354).

Schiller's terms allow us to see grace as part of 'the racial regime of aesthetics' that David Lloyd describes in *Under Representation* (2018). Lloyd argues that 'Aesthetics from its inception has been a regulative discourse of the human' which establishes 'the set of discriminations and distributions by which the Savage comes to be distinguished from the civil subject, the partial and particular human from the universal Subject, and the "pathological" or suffering, needing, desiring human from the ethical human Subject' (2018: 3). Aesthetic theory requires a 'splitting that severs the corporealized human being from the formal subject of aesthetic judgement that is identified with the universal Subject of humanity',

¹³ See Hart (1994) and Mehigan (2023).

constituting ‘the very lines of demarcation that separate human subjects from subjected humans’ (Lloyd 2018: 7, 2). Susan Barton’s efforts to mediate and represent Friday thus position her as such a ‘universal Subject of humanity’—the role of ‘the female castaway’ that she fights so fiercely to obtain, while resisting the version of motherhood that Foe seeks to impose on her.

Lloyd’s focus on the ‘corporealized human being’ of the ‘racial regime of aesthetics’ amplifies the emphasis that Simon Richter (1992) and John B. Lyon (2005) place on the suffering, corporealised human in eighteenth-century German aesthetics. Drawing attention to the shared concerns of medicine and aesthetics in sensory perception, *aisthesis*, they describe the gradual bracketing of the physical, especially the experience of pain, through theories of aesthetic refinement and judgment in the key writers of the period. Grace occupies a central role in this process. According to Richter, grace [*Anmut*] marks the artwork as different from a natural object, ‘as closed, unified, complete or autonomous’, and moderates the effect of representations of physical suffering (1992: 176).¹⁴

Kleist’s dialogue rewrites what Schiller describes as the ‘unintentional in intentional movements’ not as the natural but the mechanical: the inhuman grace of the marionette. What Richter describes as the closed, autonomous artwork becomes the automaton. In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Paul de Man goes further than other critics in recognising Kleist’s target as the process of refinement outlined by Richter and Lyon: the capacity of art—and aesthetics—to sublimate pain and violence, or, in de Man’s darker reading, to take pleasure in violence and suffering ‘under the cover of aesthetic distance’ (1984: 280). Lloyd’s focus on race brings a contemporary urgency to these questions that, I argue, helps us to understand *Foe* and Coetzee’s reinvention of Friday as an enslaved African.

Read in this context, Coetzee’s insistence in his interview comments on the authority of the body, and the suffering body at that, puts him at odds with the eighteenth-century discourse of the aesthetic and of grace. Not only that: he insists in the interview that ‘in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body [...] for political reasons, for reasons of power’ (Coetzee 1992: 248). This is

¹⁴ See Richter account of the term *reizen*, ‘to cause someone or something to experience a sensation, whether painful or pleasant’ (1992: 96), in Herder, and *Anmut* (grace) in Goethe.

perhaps as close as Coetzee comes to conceding the legitimacy of the claims of the political on him as a writer—claims that surfaced forcefully in the public reception of *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe* in 1980s South Africa. Coetzee speaks from a specifically South African context ('Let me be blunt: in South Africa [...]'), but as the recent scholarship on slavery and aesthetics indicates, the stakes around the representation of Friday and Friday's body continue to reverberate in the South African context and far beyond. Coetzee's interview comment offers a reading of his own novel that confronts directly the system of exclusions through which the aesthetic emerged in the eighteenth century, not just as a refinement beyond the body and physical suffering but, in Simon Gikandi's terms, as 'a discourse predicated on the need or desire to quarantine one aspect of social life—the tasteful, the beautiful, and the civil—from a public domain saturated by diverse forms of commerce, including the sale of black bodies in the modern marketplace' (2017: 6–7). Given that Coetzee engages this history through Kleist in particular, we might also read his comments as a rejection of the position of de Man who, for all his alertness to the violence encoded in Kleist's dialogue, insists that 'one should avoid the pathos of an imagery of bodily mutilation and not forget that we are dealing with textual models, not with the historical and political systems that are their correlate' (1984: 289). Coetzee may be working with and in textual models, but they are inextricably bound up with historical and political systems.

The 'home' of Friday

Susan Barton's observation of Friday's dancing was the entry point for my discussion of Kleist and the inhuman grace of the puppet. Her description of Friday's trance-like state evoked the opposition between self-consciousness and grace, which through Kleist we can now read as a physical and aesthetic quality in Coetzee's work. But the formalisation of grace as an aesthetic concept in eighteenth-century philosophy sits uneasily with Coetzee's account of the body in his work and complicates any effort to recuperate Friday within the framework of grace.

The word *trance* also points to the final fate of Friday in Part IV of the novel. *Trance*, according to the OED, refers to an unconscious or insensible condition, but its etymology also suggests the passage from life to death. In an essay that examines the uncanny effect evoked by puppets, Martin Puchner reminds us that Freud begins his essay on the uncanny

with Ernst Jentsch's description of the uncanny as 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate' (Puchner 2016: 187; Jentsch quoted in Freud 2018: 22). Freud would build on this to develop his account of the uncanny [*unheimlich*, literally, unhomely] around the idea of 'unintended repetition' signalling a 'return of the repressed' (2018: 36, 42). All of which is highly suggestive, both for Barton's representation of Friday as dull, lifeless, in a trance-like state, and for the way in which repetition defines Coetzee's *Foe*, not least in his repetition of Daniel Defoe's Friday. The pattern of repetitions becomes most consequential in the uncanny 'home of Friday' with which the novel concludes, which itself proceeds through its own internal repetitions as the unnamed narrator twice approaches Friday's body.

When the unnamed narrator first reaches Friday, we are told that his feet are 'hard as wood', like a marionette, and he is wrapped in 'soft, heavy stuff' (Coetzee 1987: 154). Nonetheless, he shows signs of life: 'Though his skin is warm, I must search here and there before I find the pulse in his throat. It is faint, as if his heart beat in a far-off place. I tug lightly at his hair. It is indeed like lambswool' (Coetzee 1987: 154). Friday seems to be alive, but metaphorically he is described as a doll or a puppet ('hard as wood', 'like lambswool', emphasis added); the wrapping of his body invokes the mummy, a practice that Victoria Nelson (2022) associates with the pre-history of the puppet.

But in Part IV, all of the novel's characters resemble puppets. The first figure encountered by the unnamed narrator is 'a woman or a girl' whose legs are either 'drawn up under her dress' or 'unnaturally short'; she 'weighs no more than a sack of straw', her face wrapped, mummy-like, in a scarf that is 'endless' (Coetzee 1987: 153). We meet the same 'body, light as straw' on the stairs in the second section of Part IV (Coetzee 1987: 155). As the narrator progresses under water, into the shipwreck, the dead bodies of Susan Barton and the captain float lifeless, 'their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks', echoing the dead limbs of Kleist's marionettes (Coetzee 1987: 157). Now, for the second time, we encounter Friday, this time as a skeleton with a chain around his neck, recalling the newspaper photograph mentioned in the Notebook. His body 'turns and turns', echoing the spinning dance he performs before Barton. The combination of movement without life or agency in any straightforward sense reminds us of Kleist's marionettes; Friday, however, is not just lifeless, but dead.

If the chain seems like an impediment to his movement, we might think of de Man's description of Kleist's puppets who, 'caught in the power of gravity' are 'hanging and suspended like dead bodies' (1984: 287).

Coetzee's notebook comment about generating only 'puppetry' from anyone but himself is literalised in Part IV as the novel's characters appear lifeless and puppet-like, encouraging us to identify him as author with the unnamed narrator. But if the unnamed narrator is the puppet-master/*Maschinist*, they are not in full control. The narrator attempts to prise Friday's mouth open, at which point the 'slow stream' of the novel's concluding paragraph emerges:

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 1987: 157)

This passage is sometimes referred to by critics as Friday's *voice*, but it possesses none of the qualities that we associate with voice; rather the 'slow stream' emerges 'without breath'.¹⁵ Coming from 'inside' Friday, it gestures towards *interiority*, but only to frustrate our expectation that the novel is a form that grants privileged access to the interior life of its characters. Coetzee's Friday is *not* such a character. In the notebook he comments that 'Friday's "inside" is closed off' (Coetzee Papers 33.6: June 23, 1985). Indeed, Friday is not even the subject of these closing lines, at least grammatically, nor necessarily the agent of the stream that flows through his body. Friday's 'mouth opens'; *he* does not open it. Rather, the stream is the subject of the final lines: 'From inside him comes a slow stream [...] It flows [...] it beats'. So there is movement here, but apparently without life or agency.

Coetzee's careful sidestepping of Friday as agent suggests that the stream might be unwilling, or 'unintentional' to recall Schiller's terms, but emanating from the mouth of a chained, dead body it is hardly *free* or intentional as Schiller and the theorists of the aesthetic understood grace. Rather, the narrator's description of the *sensation* of the stream—'soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face'—returns us to the origin of the aesthetic in *aisthesis*, or sensory perception. As I have shown, however, aesthetic theory works towards

¹⁵ See, for example, Hayes (2010: 114).

delimiting the senses and objects of perception. Coetzee's description notably forecloses sight, the quintessential sense of the Enlightenment, in favour of touch, the sense dismissed by Schiller as a 'force to which we are subjected' (quoted in Lloyd 2018: 74). The embodied if unnamed narrator is therefore not the 'universal Subject of judgement' described by Lloyd. The rejection of sight, in particular, suggests there is no possibility of identification between the reader of Coetzee's novel and the narrator of these closing lines whose eyes are closed, driving a wedge between the aesthetic experience of the reader and the experience of the narrator, thus once more placing the reader firmly at a remove from Friday.

The novel's concluding paragraph went through several versions towards the end of the writing process until the deletion of two phrases brought the novel to a close: 'Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against the skin of my face *in a motion earlier than words, laying bare the origin of waves and currents*' (Coetzee Papers 12.4, *Foe* Full Draft 4, emphasis added).¹⁶ The first phrase ('in a motion earlier than words') points to the idea of movement as a substitute for language that runs through the novel. But I am particularly interested in the second phrase ('the origin of waves and currents'), or rather its deletion, not only as the novel's concluding words in this late phase of drafting, but because Coetzee briefly entertains 'The Origin of Currents' as a possible title for the novel (Coetzee Papers 33.6: July 29, 1985). The phrase reinforces the idea that the 'home of Friday' is under water. The stream that emerges from his mouth is defined by motion and the sensation of movement, which, in these drafts, we might think of as the rhythm of the waves and currents. If anything, the final drafting that removes this phrase does so in the service of the rhythm of the closing lines, replacing one kind of motion with another—tidal with stylistic patterning.

'The origin of waves and currents' also calls to mind the effect of gravity, the force first described by Isaac Newton in his *Principia* (1687) and discussed by Coetzee in a series of essays in the early 1980s focusing on the grammar of agency and the difficulty of thinking 'act [gravitational force] without agent' (1992: 145). Gravity is the force that Kleist's puppeteer must work with in order to render the marionettes '*antigrav*', the quality that gives them grace. Coetzee himself describes 'Dance as

¹⁶ The first draft of the end of Part IV, dated July 30, 1985, is reproduced in Attwell (2015: 159).

liberation from gravity' in the notebook (Coetzee Papers 33.6, April 19, 1985). We find a similar interplay of gravity and grace in the writings of Simone Weil, albeit with a distinctly Christian inflection: she describes the 'natural movements of the soul' as obeying laws analogous to gravity, counteracted only by the 'supernatural force of grace' (2003: 1; 2005: 91). All of this resonates with Coetzee's comments that 'The last pages of *Foe* have a certain power. They close the text by force, so to speak: they confront head-on the endlessness of its skepticism' (1992: 248). The end of *Foe* undoubtedly has a certain *aesthetic* power, but the nature of the force it describes is much harder to pin down. As I have shown, the force of the 'slow stream' that emanates from Friday's body subtly negates the terms of eighteenth-century aesthetics. And in deleting 'the origin of waves and currents' Coetzee erases another framework within which we could recuperate the 'slow stream' and give it meaning. Instead we are left with the narrator's experience of the embodied sensation of the force emanating from Friday's body.

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