

**A History of Confession:  
The Dialogue Between Cynicism and Grace  
in Selected Novels by J. M. Coetzee**

**THESIS**

Submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
**MASTER OF ARTS**  
in the Department of English  
at Rhodes University

by  
**Catherine Muriel Hornby**

Grahamstown  
March 2001

## Abstract

In introducing the four novels under discussion as a “History of Confession”, this study explores the resistance to the dominant discourse of ‘history’ offered by the sustained confessions of individuals. In examining Coetzee’s *oeuvre* it is possible to delineate the outline of a dialogue between cynicism and grace, and the effects of these on the process of confession in each of the works.

Chapter One, dealing with *Age of Iron*, draws on Levinas’ theory of ‘the Other’ in order to elucidate the role played by the interlocutor or confessor in the process of confession. The recognition of the passage of the self through the Other is integral to the attainment of a state of grace, without which confession cannot be brought to an end.

The countermanding claims of the writer’s will-to-write and duty to society are illuminated as a source of cynicism which overwhelms the intervention of grace. *The Master of Petersburg*, discussed in Chapter Two, is a confession of the guilt and despair faced by the writer who sacrifices his soul to answer the urge to write.

Chapter Three, which examines Coetzee’s excursion into autobiography, represents a continuation of the confessional trend. The distance between the narrator and protagonist of *Boyhood* illustrates the convolutions of self-deception in the process of confession.

The chapter which deals with *Disgrace* identifies a new trend in Coetzee’s writing: the concern with animals. Levinas’ theory, which identifies the encounter with the Other as necessary to precipitate an intervention of grace, is again useful in explaining how Coetzee has postulated the unassimilable otherness of animals as primary to human ethical development. This chapter also concludes that *Disgrace* represents a high point in the recovery of both grace and agency in Coetzee’s *oeuvre*.

The concluding chapter suggests that the accumulation of meanings to the term ‘grace’ enables its definition as a semi-religious abstraction. Coetzee suggests that belief in its existence has the power to affect interactions on the physical plane, especially those between the self and the Other.

# Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
 <b>Introduction</b> .....	 1
<b>Chapter One</b>	
<i>Age of Iron</i> .....	18
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
<i>The Master of Petersburg</i> .....	40
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
<i>Boyhood</i> .....	61
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<i>Disgrace</i> .....	86
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	116
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	122

## Acknowledgments

I acknowledge with gratitude the guidance, critical insight, and expertise of my supervisor, Dr Gareth Cornwell. Many of the ideas expressed in this thesis were inspired by discussions with him.

I am also grateful to the members of the Department of English who contributed their experience, knowledge, suggestions and encouragement, especially Dr Dan Wylie, Dr Margot Beard, Dr Wendy Jacobson, and Dr Ron Hall.

My thanks to my family and friends for their interest and support.

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.

## Introduction

The confessional mode is ideally suited to narratives which contain traces of their own production. Secularised confession is characterised by the subject's interrogation of his/her motives for 'truth-telling', and this characteristic, when applied to narratives as confessions, allows for the interrogation of the process of writing itself: what information is being proffered, what withheld; is the author's mode of expression designed to reveal or to obfuscate? Both creation and confession are enacted at the intersection of the artist's or subject's inner and outer worlds. The tension between the private and the public appears to be fundamental to all artistic production. It informs the questions: 'How do I communicate the truth of my experiences of myself and the outside world, to that world? Furthermore, in the telling of that truth is my allegiance to myself or to the world outside?' Coetzee distinguishes between these demands in considering the metaphysical or ethical construct, duty:

To me, duty can be of two kinds: it can be an obligation imposed on the writer by society, by the soul of society, by society in its hopes and dreams; or it can be something constitutional to the writer, what one might loosely call conscience but what I would tentatively prefer to call an imperative, a transcendental imperative. (*Doubling the Point* 340)

This in turn suggests two perspectives from which Coetzee's oeuvre can be approached: the social, the perspective of society and its official record, history; and the biographical, the personal perspective of the author. A third perspective, the ethical, is suggested by the work itself. The first of these, the historical, necessarily assumes that Coetzee accepts the responsibility placed on him by society, and locates his activity as a writer at the interface with history. Many critics who have criticised Coetzee's inability effectively to engage with the politics of the country, to respond in the way required of him by "by the soul of society, by society in its hopes and dreams", are guilty of the assumption that history is necessarily a

condition of writing, “a *force* for representation” (*Doubling the Point* 67). The belief that the South African author faces an ‘inevitable’ and ‘inescapable’ commingling of the political in the artistic has adherents on both sides of the argument over Coetzee’s social responsibility. Both his supporters and his detractors claim history as an *a priori* benchmark against which to measure Coetzee’s political commitment or lack thereof. That Coetzee has felt the onerous weight of society’s conception of ‘the writer’s duty’ is undeniable; that he has refused to accord it automatic priority is just as unquestionable. Coetzee’s expression of this demurral is typically unemphatic: “I would not want to favor the first definition [social obligation] over the second [transcendental imperative]” (*Doubling the Point* 340). It is an example of how Coetzee, in a theoretical context, uses understatement to hedge his bets, paradoxically preferring the mode of fiction (or, at least, narrative) for the expression of his most powerfully felt, or unequivocal, beliefs. The power of the writer’s ‘imperative’ contests the outright primacy of social/political/historical claims on literature. In a pivotal address in 1988, “The Novel Today”, and in subsequent interviews in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee has asserted his texts’ independence from, even rivalry with, history, seen as a monolithic fiction that engulfs alterities. Thus an examination of Coetzee’s more recent work – *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Boyhood* (1997), and *Disgrace* (1999) – with a view to demonstrating the transmogrifying effects on literature of the end of apartheid, is likely to be disappointed. Attempts to irradiate Coetzee’s work with the glow of democratic triumph are frustrated by the similarity between the themes of these novels and the concerns of those written during the previous dispensation. Discussing a passage in Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, Coetzee assesses Rosa Burger’s decision to leave South Africa, as a deferment of judgement (and a recognition of her complicity which undermines her authority to judge) to a time when “humanity will be restored across the face of society” (“Into the Dark Chamber” 368). The moral dilemma of the South African writer during the years of apartheid, when the choice was, according to Coetzee, “limited to *either* looking on in

horrified fascination . . . *or* turning one's eyes away" ("Into the Dark Chamber" 368), necessitated the envisioning of "a future destination, a new juncture, and a new literary model" (Head 160).

Recent commentators like Michael Marais ask whether, with the benefit of hindsight, we can be said to have reached that new destination, arrived at that other time and place in which judgement need no longer be deferred, and which will allow other, hitherto unimagined choices to shape a new literary form. Marais anticipates that "substantive changes in history should lead to shifts in emphasis in the preoccupations of politically engaged literature" ("Ethics, Engagement, and Change" 159). The corollary to this thesis is that Coetzee's 'transcendental imperative' which leads him to deny, and with his narratives, countermand the *a priori* status of historical discourse in relation to literature, should demonstrate little or no underlying shift in either emphasis or form. In 1989, Teresa Dovey pointed out that "at this time . . . Coetzee's self-deconstructive mode makes it very difficult to identify silences, spaces, effacements, absences not already figured in the novels themselves" ("Introduction" 10), and she looked forward to "a kind of 'second phase' criticism": "A criticism which articulates the ways in which Coetzee's novels are culturally and ideologically circumscribed will inevitably be produced, once the theoretical paradigms have shifted sufficiently for a kind of *aufhebung* to take place" (10). Thus the critical juncture provided by the 'end of Apartheid' and the beginning of the 'New' South Africa provides us with a pivotal moment in relation to which we might reflect back on Coetzee's work and assess its current trajectory. Because of its colossal significance this juncture is also an ideal point of reference in terms of which to test the validity of claims made about the works' independence from history. The historical milestone, although apparently ignored by the novels themselves, may nevertheless have produced a shift in consciousness enabling Dovey's "*aufhebung*" to take place.

To date, six book-length monographs on Coetzee's *oeuvre* have been produced. Their

authors have attempted to perform the kind of “‘second phase’ criticism” which situates the novels historically, with due regard to their “reception, and in conjunction with other contemporaneous discourses, in order to assess their effect at a particular historical juncture” (Dovey, “Introduction” 10). The studies of Attwell, Head, Jolly, Kossew, Penner, and Gallagher, all conclude with either *Age of Iron* (1990) or *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), the two novels which about the symbolic and literal changes which occurred from 1990 onwards. These studies, and especially the novels with which they conclude their analyses, suggest that a crossroads had been reached, and anticipate some kind of radical change. The present study picks up where the others leave off, with a necessary return to both *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*, as points of departure and comparison for the two novels which follow the changes which occurred in South Africa, *Boyhood* (1997),<sup>1</sup> and *Disgrace* (1999).

The legitimacy of claims to rival history must be tested by an interrogation of the form this rivalry takes. The novels are not allegories of “Class Conflict or . . . Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook” (“The Novel Today” 4), and their concerns are not obviously generalisable: rather they present themselves as the idiosyncratic and singular stories of individuals. The chosen mode of storytelling, then, is one which publishes and attests to the importance of privately held ‘truths’: the confession. All of Coetzee’s novels, and his memoir, are sustained confessions that foreground the thoughts and feelings of their protagonists, and the protagonists’ belief in the sanctity of their individuality and their privacy. The challenge made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to each individual in South Africa to examine his/her conscience, places the individual soul within the ambit of public judgement. Individual testimonies and confessions heard in public by the TRC, have illuminated the border between inner and outer, where the intrusive demands of society ‘to know all’, face resistance from the private inner realm. The act of

---

<sup>1</sup> The question of *Boyhood*’s fictional status is discussed in Chapter 3, below.



confession is an attempt to countermand the pressures exerted by history or society with the publication of what is held in private; the internal impetus to account for oneself is expressed as an opening up of self to public perusal.

In 1974, when Coetzee begins the first section of his first novel, *Dusklands*, with the words “My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that. Here goes” (1), we are introduced to the mode of confession or apologia which will leave its imprint on each of the works in Coetzee’s oeuvre. The fact that the second half of *Dusklands* is narrated by one Jacobus Coetzee introduces the idea of colonial ancestry and inheritance, in terms of which J. M. Coetzee seems to acknowledge and accept the burden of guilt for the crimes perpetrated by his colonial ancestors, giving voice to his sense of complicity in the violent and traumatic history of the country.<sup>2</sup> The underlying psychological premise is that Coetzee writes to assuage personal and historical guilt. The novels focus on the question of the moral authority of their narrators or protagonists and the degree to which this authority is undermined by a sense of complicity in corrupt and violent historical processes. Various of Coetzee’s works stage the morally compromised situation of protagonists (who seem, in varying degrees, to represent the author), who must come to acknowledge their complicity in evil, deal with their guilt, and seek a kind of redemption. They do this in the explicit or implied absence of both an objective point of vantage and any absolute ethical authority. Their attempts at ethical action are often portrayed via investigation into the nature of truth, truth-telling and writing/narrating/creating, and explore the potential of the last-mentioned to rival or subvert the authority over the individual of history itself.

But this process, tantamount to confession in the broadest sense, is often bedevilled by the self-doubt and cynicism that results from the interrogation of the motives for truth-telling. The preface to Jacobus Coetzee’s tale, Flaubert’s “What is important is the philosophy of

---

<sup>2</sup> In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee remarks that it would be “morally questionable to write something like the second part of *Dusklands* – a fiction, note – from a position that is not historically complicit” (343).

history”, could in fact be adapted to capture the essence of Coetzee’s initial creative practice, as subsequent novels illustrate: Magda’s narrative can be seen as a flailing against the prison walls of discourses bequeathed by history, while Michael K’s stone-like imperviousness to the dictates of history allows him to pass through its “digestive system” untouched. But increasingly, Coetzee’s narratives have begun to conform to the dictum: “What is important is the confession of history” – a concern with testimony to the roles played by individuals, who are subject to, and subjects within, history, and who either evade or perpetuate the theoretical superstructure that is history. Coetzee says about *Age of Iron*:

So a contest is staged, not only in the dramatic construction of the novel but also within Elizabeth’s – what shall I say? – soul, a contest about having a say. To me as a writer, as *the* writer in this case, the outcome of this contest . . . is irrelevant. What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position. . . .

What is of importance in what I have just said is the phrasing: the phrases *is staged, is heard*; not *should be staged, should be heard*. . . . As for me the book is written, nothing can stop it. The deed is done, what power was available to me is exercised. (*Doubling the Point* 250)

Readers of Coetzee’s novels are familiar with figures who inhabit a morally precarious position, figures whose ability to act, even to speak, is further undermined by an intense awareness of, and guilt about, their compromised situation. Coetzee adds a further dimension to this process of destabilisation by absenting himself, as author, from the text. That Coetzee refuses to stand behind, or support, his protagonist shows up the groundlessness of the protagonist’s own position.

The presence of an author is most strongly felt when the reliability of the narrator is called into question by textual incongruities. When a narrator’s powers of perception or interpretation appear to be faulty, this signals the opening up of a space in which the author is “tacitly communicating the correct interpretation to us behind the narrator’s back” (Cohn 73). Coetzee’s novels constantly call into question the reliability of their narrators, yet there is no sense in which Coetzee is standing by with an alternative interpretation, one which is obscured from the narrator’s view. In fact one’s primary sense, in reading a Coetzee novel, is

that the most precarious position of all is that of the author. The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee is a fictional autobiography, and Coetzee is the fictional translator of this ‘historical document’. He cannot be credited with “creative mastery and control over the fallibility of his narrator-character” (Cohn 73) when he has set himself up as a fiction. Thus the absent author, who refuses to provide the reader with an interpretation, who undermines the very act of interpretation, yet still calls the character and judgements of a protagonist into question, is guilty of a double betrayal – the reader can rely upon neither the narrator nor the author.

It is partly Coetzee’s insistence on contingency that has led to accusations of non-engagement being levelled at him. “Coetzee opts for a non-realistic, self-referential fiction that constantly highlights its own unreliability” writes Susan Van Zanten Gallagher (44), and it is this unreliability which prevents readers and critics from co-opting the novels to speak to or for their particular political cause or historical situation. Those who identify realism as “the unquestioned means of bearing witness to, and telling the truth about, South Africa” (Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 11) are suspicious of novels that parade the process of their own production and the artifice of their representations, through the use of intertextuality, self-reflexivity, and allegory. Such readings denigrate as ‘evasive’ Coetzee’s deliberate foregrounding of the novel as textual product rather than reflection of life, or tool for social reformation. Coetzee has insisted that “a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering” (“The Novel Today” 4), and in this way rejected at least a part of the social or historical pressure brought to bear on him as a (specifically South African) writer.

Coetzee’s riposte goes beyond an obvious distaste for ‘having to be accountable’ to literary critics with a political or historical agenda, and suggests, rather, that he is *unable* to be accountable. He proposes that on some level he is not in control of what he writes. It is a matter of desire, of “*want-to-write*” (*Doubling the Point* 208), in which the desire seems to belong as much to the story as to the writer: the story must want to be bodied forth through a particular writer, capable of telling it, and hence “one doesn’t write the books one doesn’t

want to write” (207). Coetzee is unable to write the book expected of him because it is not the book he “*wanted-to-write*, wanted enough to be able to bring it off, however much [he] might have wanted to have written it – that is to say, wanted to be the person who had successfully brought off the writing of it” (208). Coetzee seems to suggest that he cannot tell the stories that are not given him to tell, and even when he is telling his stories, stories that he can “bring off”, the process is still, in a sense, out of his hands:

The experience of writing a novel is above all lengthy. The novel becomes less a *thing* than a *place* where one goes every day for several hours a day for years on end. What happens in that place has less and less discernible relation to the daily life one lives or the lives people are living around one. Other forces, another dynamic, take over. . . . what I am doing when I am writing a novel either isn’t me or is me in a deeper sense than the words I am now speaking are me. (205)

Coetzee suggests that the impulse to write, whether it comes from above or inside, is never static, is experienced by the writer as ‘other’ than himself:

Behind the narrative subjects of each of the novels, behind Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, Magda, the Magistrate, the Medical Officer, Susan Barton, and Elizabeth Curren, lies an implied narrator who shifts stance with and against the play of forces in South African culture. . . . We might call this narrator the self-of-writing, or the “one-who-writes,” as Coetzee himself puts it. (Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 3)

This transforming and overpowering will-to-write is Coetzee’s “transcendental imperative”. It demands a respect and allegiance rivalled by the claims made by society and history (which are nevertheless powerless to access the ‘place’ from which Coetzee writes because they are “continuous with the rest of the daily life of a writer-academic” [*Doubling the Point* 205], rather than the “*place* where . . . other forces . . . take over” [205]). This does not mean that history is not a force for representation. History ‘inspires’ Coetzee in so far as he attempts to write around or rather beyond it – its very flatness, banality, nakedness, spur Coetzee to “imagin[e] the unimaginable” (*Doubling the Point* 68). History, as an “absolute limit to consciousness” (66), forces the writer to circumvent it (not by going around, but by going deeper, by delving into the unconscious), to imagine a form of address that “permits the play

of *writing* to start taking place” (68).

Coetzee’s emphasis on the writer’s responsibility to himself, to his own “transcendental imperative” (*Doubling the Point* 340), would suggest an alternative perspective from which to read his work – the personal or psychological. Such a reading might address the way in which the author’s psychological make-up and biography affect his conception of self, and of self-as-writer. This mode of analysis would mark as crucial the decision to write an autobiographical novel (*Boyhood*), and would mine such a work for the ‘clues’ it might contribute to an understanding of his fiction. Once again we come across the idea of confession, one which stresses the importance of Coetzee’s writing as an opportunity or outlet for the purgation of his own psyche or soul. In performing this act Coetzee would be paying a debt owed to himself rather than to society.

Coetzee himself refuses to privilege one kind of duty over the other, and in similar fashion it is difficult to subordinate either of these interpretative frameworks to the other. The most rewarding way to study Coetzee is to acknowledge the tensions and debates his work creates, and to see his work as an ongoing attempt to achieve reconciliation between the public and the private, or the individual and the community. Plato tries to resolve this conflict by addressing the question “Why is it in one’s interest to be just?” Plato’s solution is that we are born with an idea of justice, that it is innate, as is the recognition of our common humanity with others which is the wellspring of altruism and solidarity (Rorty, *Contingency* xiii). Hence the impetus for justice is motivated by individual compulsion as much as by a communal edict which motivates for ‘the good of the many’. But if ideas of ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ are compelled by individual or private interests, then they are also susceptible to corruption and distortion thereby. Coetzee ends his final interview in *Doubling the Point* with a restatement of this problem: “Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest?” (395). The answer he provides is equally Platonic: that we are born with the idea of truth. This formulation suggests that we share a conception of what

‘truth’ is, or for that matter ‘justice’ or ‘love’, that it somehow precedes our incarnation as individuals with separate identities.

The notion of ‘truth’ becomes complicated, however, when pressed by the crudity of our physical incarnation: “ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, are generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world” (“What is Realism?” 65). Coetzee’s early novels question the authority of what is spoken, or narrated, drawing attention to what Attwell calls “agency” (*Politics of Writing* 3), turning the spotlight squarely on to the forces which produce the text, or to be more accurate, the forces that produce the writer of the text, among which the process of writing can be numbered. Attwell’s study, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, published in 1993, necessarily concludes with *Age of Iron*. In identifying what he sees as the organising trend in Coetzee’s work – “the movement of agency” (3) – Attwell suggests that the first five novels are concerned with a destabilisation of that agency, combined with a critique of the “positionality” (3) of the writing self. However, in *Age of Iron*, he notes a qualified “recovery of agency” (3). This change necessitates a change of focus for the critical reader too, in that, after years of undermining the credibility of his narrators, Coetzee starts to collude with the speaker of the text, suggesting that the act of articulation has a certain power which, whether legitimately assumed or not, is nevertheless exercised.

This shift is of particular importance to this study, as it is my contention that the reassertion of a measure of agency, of volition, even of credibility, begun in *Age of Iron* (1990), is continued and elaborated in Coetzee’s subsequent works – *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Boyhood* (1997), and *Disgrace* (1999) – to the point that we may begin to focus on the manifest ‘content’ or concerns of the novels rather than the ruses and mechanics of their production. Previous readings of Coetzee’s oeuvre have sidelined the discussion of what the text *says* in favour of an examination of what the text *is*; they have identified the

‘self-of-writing’ not as an individual with a story to tell but as a self constituted by external and impersonal forces whose play is recorded in the text. I do not mean to imply that commentators are misreading the texts when they classify the novels as either “Lacanian allegories” (Dovey) or forays into postmodern intertextuality: as Attwell has pointed out, Coetzee does not pretend to any immunity from the Western European tradition and his work even seems to revel in the assimilation of literary and critical techniques and movements (*Politics of Writing* 4). While the earlier works (particularly *Dusklands* and *Foe*) encourage readings of this kind, increasingly in the later novels one senses Coetzee’s desire for us to “look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds” (*White Writing* 81). Coetzee insists that his novels be read primarily as stories, rather than supplements or study guides to modern history (“The Novel Today” 3), or illustrations of pre-existing theories (“games in the games handbook” [“The Novel Today” 4]). The enterprise of reading Coetzee’s novels as stories necessitates an examination of the storyteller (both the narrator, and the author, as storytellers), an enterprise which is facilitated by the type of novel Coetzee has written since 1990. In these works, narrators are no longer textual or lexical signs, cyphers, glyphs, or interstices, artful representations of powerlessness, complicity or the loss of authority,<sup>3</sup> but rather psychologically unique and interesting individuals who espouse particular points of view and make particular choices based on their “idea of the world” (*Disgrace* 146). One notes in these later novels that the enunciation of these highly individual and sometimes politically, morally and ethically precarious ‘ideas of the world’ is what Coetzee is anxious to effect. The degree of separation between the author and narrator, or protagonist (gauged by the extent to which s/he is treated with irony or has

---

<sup>3</sup> In *In the Heart of the Country*’s Magda as the “hole crying to be whole” (37); the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as the failed interpreter/translator of the foreign symbols inscribed on poplar slips; Friday’s mute and mutilated body in *Foe*.

his/her credibility undermined by the author, accepted as an indicator of the extent to which s/he is vested with the author's confidence) narrows in these later novels. This is not to say that these characters do not do reprehensible things or behave badly, that they remain impervious to a sense of guilt about their faults, or fail to realise their inadequacy to cope with the historical forces brought to bear on them. In fact it is exactly because they are flawed, and because they *suffer* in the knowledge that they each exist in a beautiful and broken world that it is important that their voices are not marginalised or obliterated, so that "even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced" (*Doubling the Point* 250).

Coetzee, as he manifests himself in his fictional and critical writing, fits the description of Richard Rorty's "liberal ironist":

liberals are the people who think cruelty is the worst thing we do. . . . [An] 'ironist'. . . the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. (Rorty, *Contingency* xv)

The recognition of the contingencies out of which his own position is constructed need not induce the liberal ironist to abandon all hope and desire, for example, the desire to end suffering. The admission by Coetzee that "these fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against . . . being overwhelmed [by the fact of suffering in the world]" (*Doubling the Point* 248) does not negate his desire, one might even say his need, to create imaginative instances which interrogate cruelty, humiliation, "the failure of love" ("Jerusalem Prize" 97). In his role as storyteller Coetzee contributes to the "endless conversation" in which "the text or thing we are discussing . . . [is] forever up for grabs, forever to be reimagined and redescribed" (Rorty, "H.-G. Gadamer" 25). In another respect, Coetzee as storyteller is involved in one of the major projects in the realisation of a 'liberal utopia' – he allows us to see other, unfamiliar people as fellow sufferers, by "increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people . . . [and



by giving] us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of . . . thereby [letting] us redescribe ourselves” (Rorty, *Contingency* xvi). It is by this means that idealism can have repercussions outside the realm of abstractions or language, as is demonstrated by Coetzee's wistful formulation: “if all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace” (*Doubling the Point* 377). Coetzee expresses an innate revulsion for violence in this way: “I can only say that violence and death, my own death, are to me, intuitively, the same thing. Violence, as soon as I sense its presence within me, becomes introverted as violence against myself: I cannot project it outward” (*Doubling the Point* 337). The sentiment appears to be echoed in Lucy Lurie's belief, in *Disgrace*, that she ought somehow to contain within herself the violence and outrage of her rape; she shows that she too cannot conceive of “a liberating violence” (*Doubling the Point* 337) in neither setting the police on the trail of her attackers, nor aborting the child that is the fruit of the rape.

In Coetzee's work the ‘idealism’ of his narrators and protagonists advances beyond the idea that “mind and spiritual values are fundamental in the world as a whole” (*Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 110), and verges at times on suggesting that nothing we apprehend has any real existence outside of the mental act of perception (producing, at least in the majority of Coetzee's protagonists, a state of eternal scepticism, and self-doubt).<sup>4</sup> Stephen Watson's meditation on the emergence of a certain religious consciousness in Coetzee's later work can, without hesitation, be applied to all four of the works under examination here:

There are times in [Coetzee's] recent fiction . . . when it really does seem as if the spiritual needs of human beings are not simply the alienated form of their longing for justice and fraternity; when these emerge, clearly, as an expression of ineradicable psychic drives as well as the consequence of facts about our human situation which no amount of social engineering can hope to change.

---

<sup>4</sup> “In certain particularly dubious moods I wonder whether we know at all how the universe ‘really’ behaves: is our image, our representation of what happens in the universe perhaps not of the same order of privacy as our mathematics?”

Is this idealism? Probably. It is certainly skepticism.” (*Doubling the Point* 146)

(60-61)

If idealism produces scepticism, then Coetzee tempers his sense of irony with a belief in the existence of justice and truth, by which “the debate . . . between cynicism and grace”

(*Doubling the Point* 392) can be resolved. Michael Marais sees this play of forces as the staging in Coetzee's work of the dialectic between politics and ethics, portraying “the possibility of a society in which the very basis of sociality is being altered and which is therefore always in the process of becoming an ethical community” (“Ethics, Engagement, and Change” 173). Marais isolates Levinas’ concept of “personal alterity . . . *Autrui* . . . the human Other” (165) as pertinent to the kind of ethical challenge that Coetzee’s work makes.

This encounter is ethical, Levinas explains, because

the Other makes me realise that I share the world, that it is not my unique possession . . . . The Other puts me into question by revealing to me that my powers and freedom are limited. . . . the Other gives my freedom meaning because I am confronted with real choices between responsibility and obligation towards the Other, or hatred and violent repudiation. The Other invests me with genuine freedom, and will be the beneficiary or victim of how I decide to exercise it. (Davis 48-49)

In *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Boyhood*, and Coetzee’s latest novel, *Disgrace*, it is possible to discern a modulation in tone from his earlier novels’ exploration of the ‘philosophy of history’. In *confessing* history Coetzee employs a more insistent, less tentative voice. There is more of a sense that Coetzee is standing behind his novels and his protagonists as an author, rather than trying to perform some sleight of hand, to create some kind of postmodern absence or hole into which he disappears. His project is no longer to obfuscate and destabilise but rather to assert, to speak and be heard, to assert his responsibility for the Other: Coetzee’s novels are his “Here I Am”.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Marais paraphrases Levinas’ argument usefully:

Inspired by the other’s otherness, the subject responds with the “saying” Here I Am.” The subject is the “author” of this “saying,” which is both the ethical “command” to be for the Other *and* the obedient response to this command (*Otherwise* 144-50). For this reason, Levinas refers to the “Here I Am” as the command which “sound[s] in the mouth of the one that obeys” (*Otherwise* 147). . . . the response “Here I Am”

What is discernable then, in the form of trajectory through Coetzee's *oeuvre*, is an attenuation of scepticism or "cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values" (*Doubling the Point* 392). Coetzee does not assert the contradictory claim that there *is* any ultimate basis for values. Rather he voices the predicament of liberal ironists who, "like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, look out wistfully through the bars at the enticing world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of *realism* but that we stubbornly can't help thinking of as the *real*" (*Doubling the Point* 63). Coetzee's work is interrogative, but increasingly one senses the expectation that solutions must be hoped for and envisioned, even if they are ephemeral and provisional, even if they are not found. In short, Coetzee believes in grace; he is drawn, like one of his characters, Susan Moebius, to the mystery of the divine in the human ("What is Realism" 77). Coetzee is religious, not because he subscribes to a myth which claims exclusive and controlling access to true understanding, in the way that the discourses of history, science, and metaphysics do, but because he believes in things like grace, things for which there is no basis other than faith in their existence.

Coetzee's conception of grace is explained by Levinas' "decoupling of responsibility from reciprocity" (Davis 51). Levinas advocates that the encounter with the Other gives rise to an unequal relationship:

It would be a mistake for me to respect the Other because I expect anything in return: my obligation and responsibility are not mirrored by the Other's reciprocal responsibility towards me. . . . to insist on symmetry or reciprocity would be to imply that I was empowered to speak for the Other . . . the ethical relationship entails an obligation which is incumbent on me alone; no power *forces* me to act in moral ways. Morality is not moral if it is maintained either because I have no choice in the matter or if I expect to get something in return. (Davis 51-52)

Thus, the encounter with the unassimilable heterogeneity of the Other must be met and

---

implies a giving or sacrifice of self to the Other. (Marais, "Ethics, Engagement, and Change" 167)

answered with charity – “the way in which grace allegorises itself in the world” (*Doubling the Point* 249) – an act of generosity which truly embodies the concept of ‘graciousness’.

Human alterity is not the only form of Otherness which must be encountered by the narrators and protagonists of *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Boyhood*, and *Disgrace*. Each novel stages in varying degrees the encounter with death. In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren is forced by the diagnosis of cancer and the evidence of a rapidly failing body, to confront her own incipient death. *The Master of Petersburg*’s Fyodor feels the proximity of death through his stepson’s suicide, while for the young protagonist of *Boyhood*, death is visited on old people, like his Aunt Annie, whilst he thinks to himself: “nothing can touch you” (*Boyhood* 113). David Lurie, in *Disgrace*, must face the fear of death when he and his daughter are attacked on her smallholding, and he must learn to dispense death with humanity in the euthanasing of animals at the Animal Welfare Clinic.

In each of these texts the challenge posed to the protagonists by otherness must be faced, be it in the form of human otherness or the absolute alterity of death. *Age of Iron*’s Mrs Curren, in the face of the challenge extended to her identity by the presence of Vercueil, is able to undergo an ethical transformation in which she and her narrative are simultaneously written into being. Chapter One of this study concentrates on Vercueil as a figure of otherness capable of disorienting Mrs Curren to the extent that she is open to alteration through the encounter. The changes produced by this encounter with alterity are not limited to Mrs Curren as an individual: they affect her relationships with the people around her, and the extension into the social or public sphere ensures the eruption of heterogeneity, signalling the interruption of the political by the ethical. It is her narrative, her confession, which exceeds (and hence supersedes) both forces which threaten to annihilate her subjectivity: history and death.

Chapter Two explores how Fyodor’s ethical choice differs from that of Mrs Curren. His narrative records the conflict between an author’s personal imperative, his will-to-write,

and his obligation to society. In *The Master of Petersburg*, Fyodor's anguish at his stepson's death destroys all feeling of responsibility to others. Even when he has trespassed in the realm in which "*everything is permitted*" (114), and knows his soul to be damned, his greatest bitterness is knowledge of the fact that he is set apart and cast out from the comfort of fraternity with other human beings. Writing is here seen to be an instrument of damnation rather than transcendence.

*Boyhood* manifests the all-consuming desire on the part of the young protagonist to conform to social norms in the face of a secret belief in his own difference. The longing for sameness is countermanded by a sense of pride in his difference, that which sets him apart from and, he believes, elevates him above his peers. The chapter on *Boyhood* treats Coetzee's excursion into autobiographical narrative as a departure from the narrative mode of the other three texts. The book is nevertheless seen as continuous with the confessional trend in the novels, and testifies to the first stirring of the author's "transcendental imperative". The conclusion of *Boyhood* articulates the protagonist's awareness of the burden of responsibility for the safeguarding and retelling of stories which is also felt by Fyodor in *The Master of Petersburg*. The comments which conclude *Boyhood* are treated as an anticipation of Coetzee's literary career. The oblique comparison with Fyodor invites a retrospective assessment of how Coetzee's oeuvre testifies to the competing demands of the writer's "transcendental imperative" and his duty to society.

The suggestive title of *Disgrace* foregrounds the debate between cynicism and grace which is at the epicentre of all four works. David Lurie's life is marred by public and private disgrace. He repudiates the University Committee's exhortation to publicly repent of the affair which he has with a student, and privately remains remorseless for what, it becomes obvious, is a failure to recognise the independence and integrity of the girl as an other. Lurie makes the same mistake when his daughter is raped: he cannot reconcile himself to her reaction to the attack, failing to countenance motivations and rationale which are so different

to his own. His disgrace is constituted by his failure to respond to those around him with generosity and charity. It is only after his work with animals in the Welfare Clinic that Lurie is awakened to the unimpeachable and unfathomable nature of the Other. His final and radical act of generosity, the sacrifice of the lame dog, breaks this pattern, symbolically restoring a measure of grace to the world.

The individual confessions postulated in Coetzee's writing provide a riposte to history. *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* suggest that Coetzee in some sense anticipated the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and was already involved in offering a challenge to pretensions to reveal the 'truth' and resolve the multiplicity of individual confessions into a single monolithic national 'history'. *Boyhood* and *Disgrace* "[interrupt] history by imparting to the reader a sense of the personal alterity of *Autrui*" (Marais, "Ethics, Engagement, and Change 174), offering continued resistance in postulating a history of individual confession against the totalising gesture of national history.

## Chapter One

### *Age of Iron*

This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses.

*Age of Iron*, 1990

Mrs Curren articulates the issue at the heart of the novel when she says: “To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is, it seems to me, nothing” (*Age of Iron* 148). This perceived political inconsequentiality has implications not only for her narrative, but for Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* too. The challenge afforded by *Age of Iron* is commensurate with the ethical vision and independence, the right to speak, which Mrs Curren’s narrative asserts in the face of history. Mrs Curren’s monologue, a letter addressed to her daughter who lives in self-imposed exile in Canada, manifests her battle, in the face of terminal cancer and political turmoil, to assert that the narrative of the individual soul has a legitimacy different from but equal to that of history. Her narrative makes a plea for the preservation of “pity” (*Doubling the Point* 250) in an age of iron-hard resolve and “decrees like hammer blows” dispensing “death, death, death” (*Age of Iron* 26).

Mrs Curren is right when she says that her opinions have no “weight” (148), that they influence no one, and that those involved in the struggle are completely indifferent to what she thinks. In order to offer an ethical challenge to the discourse of history it is essential that Mrs Curren’s opinions be independent of history. She becomes acutely aware of this when, upon witnessing the scenes of destruction and wanton violence in a Cape Town township, she is asked to respond to it by her domestic worker’s brother, Mr Thabane. He expects her to “name” the “crime” (90) that she sees before her; she is urged to offer a condemnation which has a particular political relevance. Her response is that the words she has access to, the words she is being pressed to say, would be other people’s words: “When one speaks under duress

. . . one rarely speaks the truth” (91), and she finally admits defeat, saying “To speak of this

... you would need the tongue of a god” (91).<sup>1</sup> It is not only she but also language which is under duress, and which cannot deliver up the ‘truth’.

At one point Mrs Curren does consider action of the kind required by Mr Thabane and Florence, but again she is undone by the emptiness of language which cannot accurately signify the act. Through public immolation outside the government buildings, she wishes to strike a blow against the state, but she is betrayed by the inability of language to elevate her act to a symbolic level. Her accusation would remain obscure, and hence irrelevant:

These public shows, these manifestations – this is the point of the story – how can one ever be sure what they stand for? An old woman sets herself on fire, for instance. Why? Because she has been driven mad? Because she is in despair? Because she has cancer? I thought of painting a letter on the car to explain. But what? A? B? C? What is the right letter for my case? And why explain anyway? Whose business is it but my own? (105)

She arrives back finally at the fact that her fate is private, and that any action she takes must be personally relevant in order to be valid. The other battle she wages is an act of private resistance – against death itself. Her planned political statement would break the trail of words by which she holds death at bay, and both battles would be lost. While language is ineffectual to make a political statement, words are powerful in her private capacity. In a sense her narrative justifies her existence: while the words continue she is still alive, and while she is still alive the words will continue to spill out of her. Through the narrative Mrs Curren answers the challenge made to her right to speak, her authority to articulate opinions and ideas which do not affect anyone else.

Politically, Mrs Curren is triply marginalised. She is old, a white, and a woman. She is

---

<sup>1</sup> In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate who is repulsed by the public torture and humiliation of a group of ‘barbarian’ ‘prisoners of war’ in the town’s square, can managed only monosyllabic and ultimately futile utterances in protest:

‘No!’ I hear the first word from my throat, rusty, not loud enough. Then again: ‘No!’ This time the word rings like a bell from my chest. . . . ‘No! No! No!’ . . . I point a finger at [Joll]. ‘You!’ I shout. . . . ‘You!’ My arm points at him like a gun. . . .

‘Not with that!’ I shout. The hammer lies cradled in the Colonel’s folded arms. . . . ‘Look!’ I shout. I point to the four prisoners . . . . ‘How –!’ Words fail me. ‘Look at these men!’ I recommence. ‘Men!’ (116-17)



dismissed as obsolete both by the state and its enforcers, the police and army, and by the militant youth who struggle against the state. It is this confluence of circumstances which causes her to be singularly without political allegiances or interests. The political situation of the novel ensures that Mrs Curren does not speak from within, or on behalf of, any community. According to David Attwell,

complicity is a result of having a constituency, of speaking (wittingly or not) on behalf of a group of dominant actors in the conflict. Within such conditions, speaking without authorization, or with an authority few are willing to take seriously in a society in which the “line” is a carefully managed mechanism for conducting the war rhetorically, could be one way in which ethical judgement can be partially restored. (Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 122)

Mrs Curren’s opinions, which “touch no one”, are untainted by a desire to serve anyone. Her narrative, and the ideas it contains, belong purely to the ethical realm.

Differently stated, the ethical imperative of the novel is to negotiate the space of the private within the public, to embody neither inside nor outside, to exclude neither self nor other, but to encompass all voices. Death is “an end to private life” (27). Mrs Curren laments that after death she may not be allowed to watch over Vercueil: “there may not even be secrets allowed, secret watching. There may be no way of keeping a space in the heart private for you or anyone else” (172). Mrs Curren suggests that death annihilates the private by wiping out all consciousness, all memory, all individuality. Writing finds a way once again to thwart death – *Age of Iron*’s accomplishment is to make this obscure death public,

to stage, or to have performed, a certain consciousness which the society would ordinarily choose to ignore or to deride. Through the apparent unreality of its aesthetic code, the novel gives consideration to those things for which in a revolutionary situation there is literally no time: “I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul” (119), says Mrs Curren. (Attwell, “‘Dialogue’ and ‘Fulfilment’” 175)

The only other person on whose behalf Mrs Curren speaks is Vercueil. He is a tramp whose isolation is similar to Mrs Curren’s. When Florence’s son and his friend abuse Vercueil, and Florence herself calls him worthless, “a rubbish person” (44), Mrs Curren leaps to his defence. Yet she does not understand the motivation for her attitude and her developing

relationship with this stranger whom she takes into her home, or rather, who deposits himself at the centre of her world. While the sense of self she develops in encounters with other, political subjects, like Bheki, John, Florence, and Mr Thabane, leads to a growing appreciation of her irrelevance as a political subject, a body, Vercueil is central to the process by which Mrs Curren comes to understand herself as a soul.

Her testimony to this process takes the form of a letter written to an absent daughter: an outpouring of the soul, an undisguised confession. The confession is a negotiation of the public and private spheres in so far as it is a speech act performed for the benefit of the speaker, for private ends, but one which, of necessity, imagines an interlocutor, who is looked to for forgiveness or pardon, even if that other cannot be an instrument of grace. The letter to her daughter is meant to be a private communication: “These are private papers, private letters. They are my daughter’s inheritance. . . . I don’t want them opened and read by anyone else” (28). But there must be a third person involved in the process in order for her daughter to receive the letter: Vercueil. Vercueil is recognised as a messenger by Mrs Curren, but it is not primarily the delivery of the letter which leads to this appellation. In the course of the narrative it becomes established in the mythologising mind of the retired classics scholar that Vercueil has come to conduct her soul to the ‘other side’. Not only is Vercueil pivotal as Mrs Curren’s interlocutor, her confessor, but his position as Other is most important for Mrs Curren and for the transformative power of the narrative itself.

Mrs Curren believes her incipient death has been caused by the repressive political system of “pot-bellied, heavy-jowled men” (26) “issuing decrees like hammer-blows” (26). Without the reinvigoration and re-invention enabled by engagement with otherness, the political and moral systems fall into a “stupor: insensibility, apathy, torpor of mind. . . . A gradient from *stupid* to *stunned* to *astonished*, to be turned to stone. The message: that the message never changes. A message that turns people to stone” (26). The effect then is death, not only moral and metaphorical death, but literal death, as Mrs Curren witnesses in the

townships, and in her own backyard. But those opposed to the political system are guilty of similarly exclusionary attitudes; they have “resorted to a hardened rhetoric of absolutes, sacrificing their youth to the all-encompassing demands of the struggle” (Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 120). Mrs Curren says that the comradeship in which these children of iron are banded together to fight apartheid is “nothing but a mystique of death, of killing and dying . . . another of those icy, exclusive, death-driven male constructions” (137). But Mrs Curren is not herself entirely immune to this accusation. The liberal humanist maxims that she advocates, the very language she uses, is weighed down with the power to exclude and silence. She pleads for ethical regeneration of the political state, and she attempts to effect a rebirth of language itself, and in this way to override death with life. She tries to explain this to the young ‘guerilla’, John:

‘You say, “What is the point of consuming yourself in shame and loathing? I don’t want to listen to the story of how you feel, it is just another story, why don’t you *do* something?” And when you say that, I say, “Yes.” I say, “Yes.” I say, “Yes.”’

‘There is nothing I can reply but “Yes” when you put that question to me. But let me tell you what it is like to utter that “Yes.” It is like being on trial for your life and being allowed only two words, Yes and No. Whenever you take a breath to speak out, you are warned by the judges: “Yes or No: no speeches.” “Yes,” you say. Yet all the time you feel other words stirring inside you like life in the womb. Not like a child kicking, not yet, but like the very beginnings, like the deep-down stirring of knowledge a woman has when she is pregnant.’ (132-33)

It is precisely this ‘story’, these life-giving words born of herself, that Mrs Curren will assert as a rival to history, seen as a chronicle of things that are *done*.

Coetzee’s 1986 novel, *Foe*, a work which (in terms of his fictional oeuvre) immediately precedes *Age of Iron*, privileges the authority of the suffering body, whose power Coetzee has labelled “undeniable” (*Doubling the Point* 248). In *Age of Iron*, the protagonist, Elizabeth Curren, is plagued not only by cancer, but also by an entrenched marginality that she believes has resulted in an atrophy of moral authority which her suffering body cannot reverse. She attributes her cancer to an introversion of shame at her complicity

in a morally corrupt state, and hence rather than experiencing the power of the suffering body to restore her authority to speak, she feels further undermined by the frailty of her failing body, and incapacitated by both the pain and the drugs which take her ‘out of herself’ with either numbness or nightmarish hallucinations. Thus the authority to speak, which Mrs Curren claims, is conferred not by the body, but by the soul. She feels that, as a white, she has no claim to the body’s power. This power is generally accorded to the ‘voiceless’ figure, for example, Friday in *Foe*.<sup>2</sup>

Although in *Age of Iron* the dispossessed have highly articulate speakers, in Florence and Mr Thabane, and even Bheki and John, their bodies still claim a certain authority which is denied to white people whose bodies (and “opinions” [148]) carry no weight, “growing rather dry and light . . . rather papery, rather airy” (114). The bodies of dead black people sink into the ground and remain there “bobbing just under the surface. . . . waiting for [her] feet to pass, waiting for [her] to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig-iron [float] under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return” (114-15).<sup>3</sup> Even when Mrs Curren describes her narrative in bodily terms she is forced to admit: “How thin . . . my bleeding on to the paper here. The issue of a shrunken heart” (125) – making an unmistakable and disparaging contrast with John’s blood, “so dark, so thick, so heavy. What a heart he must have . . . to pump that blood and go on pumping!” (57). Thus the opposition places the dispossessed, often voiceless, ‘other’, in the realm of physical or material authority, while Mrs Curren can appeal only to the realm of words and ideas which – like the

---

<sup>2</sup> “Friday is mute. But Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. . . . Whatever else the body is, it is not ‘that which is not,’ and the proof that it *is* is the pain that it feels” (*Doubling the Point* 248).

<sup>3</sup> Here Coetzee’s figure recalls the body in Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* which keeps resurfacing to claim ownership of the land. Both refer to the Adamastor myth in which the spirit of Africa, the sleeping giant which is Table Mountain, will at the appointed hour arise to wreak vengeance for the blood of her people spilt by Africa’s conquerors. Coetzee’s figurative use of the Adamastor myth turns South Africa into a surreal landscape in which Mrs Curren feels as if she is “walking upon black faces” (115). The stylistic and aesthetic difference between Gordimer and Coetzee (often described as Realist versus Allegorical) is apparent in their varying use of the Adamastor trope. In Gordimer’s realist text, *The Conservationist*, a literal black body is unearthed by a flooding river.

soul – is intangible and insubstantial, composed of spirit, ether, air. Yet Mrs Curren attempts to assert the ‘reality’ and hence power of words even though she knows that language is ideologically burdened and debased by its rhetorical use in the occlusion of less powerful groups. Mrs Curren resurrects the power of language by making it serve a private and ethical cause. Against the forces of destruction and death is ranged an army of words: “Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death” (106). Mrs Curren holds death at bay with words, and they are her weapon not only against her own death, but the death of others too. She tries to talk John out of his ‘cause’:

‘You do not believe in words. You think only blows are real, blows and bullets. But listen to me; can’t you hear that the words I speak are real? Listen! They may be only air, but they come from my heart, my womb. They are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled.’  
(133)

Elizabeth Curren hopes to use an ‘embodied’ word as a weapon against the police who are hunting John. She threatens the police with a word from her body, “Cancer”, in the same way that Vercueil shocked her with “the thing itself . . . spat not upon me but before me where I could see it, inspect it, think about it. His word, his kind of word, from his own mouth, warm at the instant when it left him. A word, undeniable, from a language before language” (7).<sup>4</sup> This word is not an appeal to the minds or hearts of her enemies, but, like Vercueil’s word, comes from the body, and invokes the primal fear of the hidden enemy, the threat from within, the body’s treasonous turning on itself. In this instance her suffering is transformed

---

<sup>4</sup> It has the desired effect: “What a pleasure to fling the word at them! It stopped them in their tracks like a knife” (142). Apart from this singular incident, Mrs Curren elsewhere expresses an abhorrence of violence. Through an analogy with the Chinese mothers whose newborn girls are smothered, Mrs Curren establishes the feminine potential of language, as opposed to “icy, exclusive, death-driven male constructions” (137), which come to fruition in ‘blows and bullets’. Extending this idea she calls her daughter her “third word” (127), and in bequeathing to her daughter this ‘letter’, “the text takes on significance as the progeny of the woman writer, forming an umbilical ‘rope of words’ linking generations of mothers and daughters” (Kossew, “Women’s Words” 175), and stretching back as far as mother earth herself:

If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we come from, then that is my story. . . . It is there that I come from, it is there that I begin.  
. . . A year ago, or a month ago. . . [a] desire, perhaps the deepest desire I am capable of, would have flowed from me to that one spot of earth, guiding me. *This is my mother*, I would have said, kneeling there: *this is what gives life to me*. (*Age of Iron* 110-11)

from debilitation into power.

Mrs Curren speaks from a position of paradox: “the soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant” (170) eagerly anticipating its transcendence to the next ‘stage’ of its journey, is held back by the body, which despite “all the glooms and despairs and rages” (12) is “hungry with love of this world” (16). It is from this liminality<sup>5</sup> that, in the face of Bheki’s and John’s innocence, she can speak with the authority of one who knows what it is like to face “the jaws of death” (*Doubling the Point* 340). Mrs Curren’s encounter with death is not one-on-one, but is triangulated or mediated in some sense, by the presence of Vercueil, who ‘coincidentally’ arrives along with the news of her imminent death. “Vercueil’s role,” says David Attwell, “is to serve as an Archimedean point of reference outside of the dimensions of what is recognizably real, and outside of Mrs Curren’s world, and thus to enable her to speak from within her consciousness of impending death” (Attwell, “‘Dialogue’ and ‘Fulfilment’” 174). Derek Attridge defines the other “– insofar as we can apprehend it at all – [a]s the familiar, strangely lit, refracted, self-distanced” (“Literary Form” 203). Although to some extent Mrs Curren credits Vercueil with ‘otherworldliness’ rather than ‘otherness’, she recognises the necessity of ‘otherness’ to her literary enterprise: “Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written” (8). Without the ‘other’, her writing would only be a self-absorbed, self-indulgent “kind of moaning, now high, now low” (8). Without Vercueil to act as a sounding board her voice would be a sound with no reverberation, no context, like opinions aired “in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one” (148). While Mrs Curren’s daughter in Canada is her implied interlocutor it is Vercueil who is her confessor. As a tramp Vercueil’s otherness provides the

---

<sup>5</sup> Fiona Probyn deconstructs Coetzee’s metaphoric use of Elizabeth Curren’s cancer as producing Mrs Curren’s liminality. In the sense that cancer is a parasite, living off its host, it fits J. Hillis Miller’s description of “a thing in ‘para’ . . . not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line, but inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself” (quoted in Probyn 219). Mrs Curren’s discourse is similarly one which baulks at binaries, one that wishes to encompass rather than to exclude: “Yes-no. There is such a word, but it has never been allowed into the dictionaries. Yes-no: every woman knows what it means as it defeats every man” (*Age of Iron* 106).

impetus for her confession, but not the ability to pardon; Mrs Curren transforms him into an angel, thereby investing him with grace, and the power to redeem.

I agree with Attwell that “Vercueil is not a historical being, or if he is that – as a recognisable tramp surviving in the crannies of the suburbs – he is so only in part” (Attwell, “‘Dialogue’ and ‘Fulfilment’” 174). As a tramp Vercueil is representative of a group which is outside of civil society: homeless, vagrant, disowned on all sides, “good-for-nothing” (44). Vercueil, who exists on the periphery of society, is identified as ‘other’ by Bheki, John and Florence, as well as by Mrs Curren. While the boys try to beat and drive him off like an old unwanted dog, Mrs Curren removes him literally from a marginalised, peripheral position, and brings him into her house, and as her illness progresses she will draw him closer and closer to her, until he becomes the centre of her consciousness. Vercueil, as a visitation of otherness on Mrs Curren, through the force of his wordless imposition of himself on her, prompts Derek Attridge’s argument that the novel represents the way that otherness succeeds in “interrupting or disturbing the discursive patterns in which we are at home” (“Literary Form” 204). Mrs Curren responds to Vercueil’s otherness by bringing him physically into the context in which she is at home, her home. Although “his estranging otherness remains undiminished – one might even say it is heightened by the[ir] increasing physical intimacy” (Attridge, “Literary Form” 206-7), his presence does to some extent become naturalised, and a dialogue does develop between Vercueil and Mrs Curren.<sup>6</sup> It must be said, though, that Mrs Curren’s treatment of him is not straightforwardly humanitarian; while she defends him against accusations of ‘worthlessness’, her treatment of him is also partially based on the idea that his dereliction is a disguise. She suspects Vercueil of having a ‘true identity’, a certain divinity, hidden by the guise of the mortal, the derelict, the degraded. This suspicion is

---

<sup>6</sup> This dialogue necessitates a Levinasian ‘face to face’ encounter with Vercueil, a confrontation which “does not establish a cosy intimacy between myself and the Other; it shows me the existence of a whole world outside myself” (Davis 52). Hence Vercueil’s otherness, while not reconcilable, opens Mrs Curren’s eyes to “the potential presence of innumerable others [and] . . . . On the basis of this revelation, the ethical relation may turn into a concern for social justice” (Davis 52).

founded initially on his enigmatic reticence and the strange allusiveness of his name, “Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil” (34),<sup>7</sup> and is fuelled by Mrs Curren’s belief that the truth is found in the most unlikely places,<sup>8</sup> that his disguise is all the more complete because it is in complete contrast to his ‘true identity’; his designation, derelict, is suggestive of desertion, neglect and emptiness,<sup>9</sup> the perfect foil for one who comes unannounced and in disguise.

For her, the power of Vercueil’s otherness is transmogrified and in some measure diminished by its translation into the particular discourse of classical mythology which is part of Mrs Curren’s identity. From the confluence of Vercueil’s arrival with the news of her terminal status, Mrs Curren divines Vercueil’s hidden quality, and throughout the novel his character is accorded mythic status. She casts him in the role of various Greco-Roman mythological characters. Her description of him to Florence, as her “messenger” (44), suggests he is Mercury, messenger to the gods, but also conductor of souls to the underworld. Mrs Curren figures him as Charon when she says to him: “All the days you have known me I have been standing on the river-bank awaiting my turn. I am waiting for someone to show me the way across” (164). He is a Dog-man to her Circe: cat-woman. Vercueil is also a figure from fable – the fairy godmother who comes disguised as an old crone to test the hero/ine’s

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘Verskuil’ is the Afrikaans word for hidden’, and ‘verkul’ means hoodwinked or deceived. Vercueil, as the Other, exists as a mystery, an enigma rather than a phenomenon, and as such he is part of Levinas’ “philosophy of darkness in which the Other is never fully seen, known or possessed” (Davis 32).

<sup>8</sup> Fyodor Mikhailovich who, in *The Master of Petersburg*, shares with Elizabeth Curren the proximity to death and despair (his stepson has died), suffers from a similar type of twisted logic. Death has rendered the world nonsensical, and the old rules no longer apply and paradox holds sway, so he tells himself when hearing a dog howling in the night:

Because it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call.  
 . . . As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come.  
 Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect. (80)

<sup>9</sup> In the same way as the description of the house and its surroundings echoes the speaker’s state of mind in Tennyson’s “Mariana”, Mrs Curren’s description of her house (*Age of Iron* 13), as tired and decrepit, echoes the description of her body only a page earlier, which is singular in its treatment of itself as an alien thing (the hands are “hooks” [11] and the legs “clumsy ugly stilts” [11] that need to be packed in under the sheets). The implied analogy between herself and a derelict building, unkempt (and soon to be deserted) emphasises her similarity to Vercueil, despite his perceived difference from herself.



virtue;<sup>10</sup> he is likened to the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (173), and “half-mythical creatures” (177) like the Yeti or Bigfoot. However, his most obvious role is that of the biblical Angel of Death. When Vercueil rescues her from under the flyover she wonders: “Will this be how the story ends: with being carried with strong arms across the sands, through the shallows, past the breakers, into the darker depths? . . . When would the time come when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders?” (146).

According to Levinas, the Other “bears on his/her face the trace of the ‘*Il*’ of Illeity, that is, the “pronoun” or trace of God. Since ‘God’ is conceived of here not in ontotheological terms but as an empty place, a neutral absence, it follows that the Other carries the trace of that which belongs to the order of the enigma rather than the order of the phenomenon” (Marais, “Ethics, Engagement, and Change” 166). This accounts for the incommensurable and unassimilable nature of Otherness. As Mrs Curren herself begins to manifest the trace of an otherness or “*Il* . . . the absence that cannot be reduced to an object and thereby be made present” (166) – death – she and Vercueil grow closer, and a dialogue begins between them.<sup>11</sup> It also accounts for Vercueil being figured as the Angel of Death, and the final words of the narrative which describe a simultaneous merging with Vercueil, and, it is presumed from the cessation of the trail of words, with Death.

Vercueil is suspended between mortality and divinity: he is like Mrs Curren, a liminal creature, a metamorphosing insect who hasn’t been able to transcend the pupal stage, a creature whose evolution is incomplete.<sup>12</sup> The contrast is figured in terms of air and water, or

---

<sup>10</sup> In *Boyhood*, the narrator draws an analogy between the race groups in South Africa and the fairytale of the three brothers who are tested by trials disguised as everyday kindnesses. The eldest and middle brother fail, but the younger unwittingly proves himself to be kind and honest and is crowned prince (65).

<sup>11</sup> This is not incommensurate with Levinas’ conception of the Other, as he says in *Totality and Infinity* that “the face [of the Other] does not annihilate the self; on the contrary, it is the condition of its separateness. It instigates dialogue, teaching, and hence reason, society and ethics” (Davis 49).

<sup>12</sup> Mrs Curren describes herself as “from the belly of the whale disgorged. . . . Not properly born: a liminal creature, unable to breathe in water, that lacks the courage to leave the sea behind and become a dweller on land” (126-27).

dryness and liquid (most prominently represented by the ocean); hence the opposition of flying and swimming. His inability to swim is a reference to his failure as a sailor, his previous occupation. While Vercueil keeps his feet “out of water for fear of falling: falling into depths where he cannot breathe” (173), the “land-explorers, the colonists” (116)<sup>13</sup> are undergoing reverse evolution as they “prepare to return to the deep” (116). When looking at a photograph of her grandsons in Canada, Mrs Curren comments that their water-wings are preventing them from truly living, that life must be lived on the edge of death, that “life is drowning. Falling through water, to the floor” (179). In this respect, Vercueil has passed beyond the merely human or mortal, to become a creature of the air, but his transcendence is incomplete. He has become like one of the “locust-fairies in Shakespeare” (176) who are swallowed by the sea, and whose wings settle on the ocean floor, fodder for the crabs (177). He is not yet divine either: he “does not yet know how to fly” (181). Mrs Curren’s concern for his well-being once she is no longer around to look after him echoes her maternal solicitude for Bheki and John, but also reveals that all along her maternal instinct has been a desire to minister to, and nourish, their souls.

Although she has already received from Dr Syfret the news of her terminal illness, it is the arrival of Vercueil, the Angel of Death, that Mrs Curren reads as a sign, a confirmation: “Two things then in the space of an hour: the news, long dreaded, and this reconnaissance, this other annunciation” (4). It is a parody of the biblical Annunciation, in which the Angel Gabriel’s visitation brings Mary news of her impending motherhood, and the first suggestion that Mrs Curren’s illness will be borne like a pregnancy: “To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, to be unable to bear them” (59). This parasitic foetus, this “crab” (103) will be

---

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, against these colonisers, by whom the land is “taken by force, used, despoiled, abandoned in its late years. Loved, too, perhaps by its ravishers, but loved only in the bloomtime of its youth, and therefore, in the verdict of history, not loved enough” (*Age of Iron* 23), Mrs Curren, or indeed ‘history’, levels the same accusation as Coetzee does in his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”: “their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent” (*Doubling the Point* 97).

nourished by her body, and will grow inside her even as it consumes her: “I have a child inside that I cannot give birth to. Cannot because it will not be born. Because it cannot live outside me” (75). Like Mary, Elizabeth conceives her ‘child’ on her own (without the help of a man), but in nature it is the opposite of ‘immaculate’, it is a conception born out of shame: “That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (132). The figuring of her cancer as a pregnancy suggests that disease and death have struck a blow against Elizabeth not only in her private capacity, but in her public capacity too. In so far as Elizabeth allies her ability to ‘mother’ with her desire to nourish, and to care, her public or social role is symbolically debilitated by the disease which “eats [her] out from the inside” (103), leaving her “hollow . . . a shell” (103). Her ability to mother is allied with her capacity for charity, an urge which takes her beyond the private sphere. In the absence of her daughter, her blood relation, her motherhood is extended to Bheki, John, and even Vercueil, through the act of giving, or charity, by “which grace allegorizes itself in the world” (*Doubling the Point* 249):

Why do I give this man food? For the same reason I would feed his dog, stolen I am sure, if it came begging. For the same reason I gave you my breast. To be full enough to give, and to give from one’s fullness; what deeper urge is there? Out of their withered bodies, even the old try to squeeze one last drop. A stubborn will to give, to nourish. Shrewd was death’s aim when he chose my breast for his first shaft. (*Age of Iron* 7)

Death’s shaft, which targets her breast, stems not only the ability to succour but also levels the verdict of societal derision at her liberal humanist impulse: she is ‘too full of the milk of human kindness’. By the soldiers and police she is labelled a mad old sympathiser, whose brain has gone soft along with her heart, and to those involved in the ‘cause’ her ‘kindness’ is just as contemptible, tempting the ‘children of iron’ into ineffectual softness, weakness.

Her attempts to mother John are thwarted on all sides: by the boy’s own iron hardness; by her lack of agency: “a woman, therefore negligible . . . an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all . . . a white” (72); and ultimately by the brute power and violence of the state. John is untouched by Elizabeth’s desire to minister to him, he remains

closed to her words. Yet Elizabeth realises this is the way to her salvation: “Easy to give alms to the orphaned, the destitute, the hungry. Harder to give alms to the bitter-hearted” (119). The lesson Elizabeth must learn is that true charity, like forgiveness, is an act of grace because it is an act of unselfish generosity, giving without the hope of anything in return. When she lectures Vercueil, saying, “the spirit of charity has perished in this country. . . . those who accept charity despise it” (19), she is also guilty of mistaking soup or money for charity;<sup>14</sup> yet, in spite of herself, and despite the fact that he is unlovable, she doesn’t hesitate to cradle John in her arms as his life blood flows out from the gash in his forehead. Later, too, when he is discharged from hospital, and comes to her hungry and weak, she cannot suppress the urge to change him from a warrior back into a child, to dissuade him from the false allure of comradeship. While doing this she is awake to the tenuousness of her position: “Who is he to me that I should nag him? I held closed his open flesh, staunched the flow of his blood. How persistent the impulse to mother!” (130). She acts because she feels duty-bound, bound by a duty to her own “idea of the world” (*Disgrace* 146), in which the blood represents their humanity “held in common, in trust, to be preserved” (58). Her impulse to mother him is not directed at him as an individual, “there is no ache in me towards him . . . My heart does not accept him as mine” (124), but to the necessity of mothering, to discharge a duty held in trust, to impart to this child the lessons which he has missed because it is a time when there are “no more mothers and fathers” (36). She laments that Bheki and John are too young to have relinquished the carefree joys of childhood in the name of “comradeship . . . a mystique of death, of killing and dying, masquerading as . . . a bond” (137). Her mission is to teach them the lessons of love, and as such motherhood is extended into the social realm, it becomes a public duty: the induction of these children into love in all its manifestations – to nourish, to

---

<sup>14</sup> The allusion to the literary allegory “The Ancient Mariner”, on page 117, suggests the epic nature of Elizabeth’s own narrative: she will have to pass through the ‘dark night of the soul’ before she can learn the lesson her trials are intended to teach. It also reminds us that although the nature of allegory is to make a story universally accessible and applicable, Mrs Curren, like the Mariner, is the only one who can provide the key to unlock the curse, thereby making the lesson learned highly individual.

protect, to teach, to restore to them childhood, “the growing time of the soul” (6). With Bheki and John she fails. Although she gives John food and shelter when he is discharged from hospital, his soul is nourished by neither her charity nor her lessons, it is like “rain falling on barren soil” (120), and when the police have John holed up in Florence’s room her attempts to protect him are cast aside with as little effort as she is physically moved aside. Yet even those who are no longer children are in need of this care. She attempts to move the soldier “boy with pimples playing [a] self-important, murderous game” (7) in the insurgent township, and warns the police, who invade her house in pursuit of John, against drinking from the “cup of bitterness” (42). She finds that Vercueil alone remains the (unexpected) object of her maternal impulse. Soon after Vercueil arrives she defends him against Florence saying: “He is not a rubbish person. . . . There are no rubbish people. We are all people together” (44). This liberal humanist platitude is transformed in the course of the novel into the concern of a mother for a lost child. She enjoins Vercueil to take a wife:

‘Even that woman you brought here, as long as there is feeling for her in your heart.’  
He shook his head.  
‘Never mind. It is not marriage I am talking about but something else. I would promise to watch over you except that I have no firm idea of what is possible after death.’ (172)

It is clear, even though she calls herself Vercueil’s wife (they share the same bed), that her attitude towards him is not sexual, but matronly: “He needs the help only a woman can give a man. Not a seduction but an induction. He does not know how to love. I speak not of the motions of the soul but of something simpler. He does not know how to love as a boy does not know how to love” (180).

There is more than enough evidence that Vercueil’s role is symbolic and facilitative, but we are met by another of Coetzee’s paradoxes near the end of Mrs Curren’s narrative: the suggestion that Vercueil, while fulfilling this symbolic role, is all too human, certainly “[n]o Odysseus, no Hermes, perhaps not even a messenger. A circler-around. A ditherer” (128); or perhaps not even human, “an insect, rather, emerging from behind the skirting-boards when

the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs” (12).<sup>15</sup> Vercueil asks her one of his leading questions: “What do you want to see?”, and she replies

‘I want to see you as you really are.’  
Diffidently he shrugged. ‘Who am I?’  
‘Just a man. A man who came without being invited. More I can’t say yet.  
Can you?’  
He shook his head. ‘No.’ (165)

Mrs Curren tries to elicit a disclosure from Vercueil by suggesting that she is already aware of his ‘real’ celestial identity, but her “hints pass him by. He is not hiding anything. His ignorance is real. His ignorance, his innocence” (177). She is disillusioned enough to ask: “Is it possible that the dog is the one sent, and not he?” (177). Mrs Curren struggles increasingly with the incommensurability of Vercueil’s ‘specialness’ (his extraordinary strength when he carries her from under the flyover) and his human fallibility (his claw-like hand is explained by a story from his seafaring days which, further, provides him with an ordinary human history).

Mrs Curren only undergoes a real transformation when she gives up the idea of Vercueil as a messenger, a conductor of souls, an Angel of Death:

The day I first saw you behind the garage was the day I had the bad news about myself. . . . I wondered whether you were not, if you will excuse the word, an angel come to show me the way. Of course you were not, are not, cannot be – I see that. But that is only half the story, isn’t it? We half perceive, but we also half create. (153)

Mrs Curren here suggests that Vercueil became for her what she was seeking – an angel to show her the way – and that her perception of him as a tramp was transformed into a disguise for the ‘angel’ which she so desperately desired and hence created. For Mrs Curren Vercueil represents what Coetzee has called elsewhere “the mystery of the divine in the human”

---

<sup>15</sup> This description, which is suggestive of a cockroach, as well as a “circler-around”, recalls Mrs Curren’s first reaction to Vercueil as “the first of the carrion birds . . . the scavengers” (4).

(“What is Realism?” 77).<sup>16</sup> The “mystery of the divine in the human” is inseparable from “the idea we have of ourselves, of humankind” (128). It is our belief in our own divinity which suffers degradation if man ceases “trying to catch up with that moving shadow, to inhabit the image of his hope” (155). This divinity, in the form of grace, comes into being when Mrs Curren accepts responsibility for Vercueil without the expectation of his accepting responsibility for delivering her letter or conducting her into death. In her final injunction to her daughter before she passes beyond life, in the arms of Vercueil, Mrs Curren demonstrates an awareness of the obligation which she owes to Vercueil: “There is no need to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet know how to fly” (181).

Levinas’ concept of the statement “Here I Am” (Marais 167) is a simultaneous offer: “Here I Am for you” (the other). The subject becomes

the “author” of this “saying,” which is both the ethical “command” to be for the Other *and* the obedient response to this command. . . . Affected or inspired by the Other’s otherness, the subject *gives* the other authority. What determines the unequal nature of this relationship, then, is the subject’s radical generosity rather than the Other’s mastery. . . . It is the very event of the subject’s assumption of responsibility for the Other to the point of substitution. (Marais 167)

This substitution occurs when Mrs Curren becomes, if only for a brief period, a derelict like Vercueil. When John is shot Mrs Curren leaves her home and wanders the streets in her nightgown, sleeping under a flyover. She is rescued by Vercueil, who picks her up in his arms and bears her to safety, and she, in a Levinasian act of “radical generosity” gives herself over

---

<sup>16</sup> The passage is worth quoting in full. David Costello is accompanying his mother Elizabeth Costello (whose initials, occupation, and physical decrepitude recall Elizabeth Curren’s own) to a conference. He becomes involved with a woman who, he realises, is partly interested in him for what he can reveal about his mother, a world-renowned author and scholar. He confronts her about this impulse after they have spent the night together:

‘I’ll tell you what I really think. I think you are drawn, even if you won’t acknowledge it, by the mystery of the divine in the human. You know there is something special in my mother, yet when you meet her, she turns out to be just an ordinary old woman. You can’t square the two. You want an explanation. You want a clue, a sign, if not from her then from me.’ (“What is Realism?” 77)

to his protection: she relinquishes whatever paltry power she may have, and gives him authority over her. The irreducibility of the Other's alterity does not preclude the establishment of mutuality and reciprocity, it simply undermines these as the *basis* or reason for responsibility for the Other: "the ethical relationship entails an obligation which is incumbent on me alone; no power *forces* me to act in moral ways" (Davis 52). In Coetzee's conception of this encounter, it is not only the subject, Mrs Curren, but also the Other, Vercueil, who is transformed by this gift of authority, for if Vercueil is Mrs Curren's Other, then she is his. Coetzee also lends to this process an overtone of spirituality in portraying Mrs Curren's transformation as the intervention of grace: a revelation of the true meaning of charity, and love, offered generously and unconditionally.<sup>17</sup>

Attridge suggests that when Coetzee sets out to rival history with a novel such as *Age of Iron*, in figuring the essentially unknowable nature of Vercueil his challenge to the dominant discourse of history succeeds:

if the literary text is an act of signification (which is to say human signification), the demands it makes – to respect its otherness, to respond to its uniqueness, to avoid reducing it to the familiar and the utilitarian even while attempting to understand it – may be ethical in a fundamental, nonmetaphorical sense. (Attridge, "Literary Form" 203)

Stories, says Coetzee, challenge history in a particular way. By being primarily ethical – in the sense proposed by Michael Marais, when he says "the text projects an image of a society . . . in which the ethical relation that transcends history, and may never become a part of history, nevertheless constantly interrupts and so mediates those contestatory relations extant in history" (Marais, "Ethics, Engagement, and Change" 173) – rather than political, the novel *is* a rival rather than a supplement to history.

There is a sense in which all confession is a desire publicly to account for the 'way

---

<sup>17</sup> I disagree with Graham Huggan who says that "As the relationship between Vercueil and Mrs Curren develops, it assumes the proportions of a destructive dependency" (202). Huggan admits though, that (in the words of Mrs Curren) "is only half the story, isn't it?" (*Age of Iron* 153): "in another sense the two need each other in order to save each other: as Mrs Curren's grudging confidant, Vercueil grants her the opportunity to tell the story of atonement which might save her" (Huggan 203).



things are'. Mrs Curren's confession may finally be only an admission of the insuperable forces set in motion by history, against which she reacts. She attempts what Coetzee has called "rivalry" ("The Novel Today" 3) with history by revealing the mythic status of history (history as a story we agree to tell ourselves and others) through the presentation of other powerful narratives. Set against the forces of history that she sees around her, Mrs Curren posits the discourse of private meaning- and myth-making, personal loss and death. The individuality of her private life, her private death is undercut by the parallel between her private fate and that of the country – the trope of cancer suggesting the parallel between the treason of Mrs Curren's body and the insurgency in the body politic. Coetzee calls Mrs Curren "a herald looking and speaking back" (*Doubling the Point* 340). It seems however that what she is looking and speaking back to, the target of her rivalry – history – nevertheless succeeds in establishing its authority, by being not only an *a priori* condition for Mrs Curren's narrative, but actually its *raison d'être*. The challenge she is able to mount may in the end only *support* the authority of 'history' by positing a narrative which is a reaction to history, which fails to imagine itself out of history and to posit other imagined existences. In the end, Mrs Curren's narrative (and indeed all writing) may amount only to a temporary respite from the indomitable discourse of history, a way of negotiating a furlough, so to speak, from our imprisonment in history.

Michael Marais has suggested that Mrs Curren indeed produces a literature which supplements history by "reproducing those oppositions related to class, race and gender conflict" ("Places of Pigs" 87) according to the rules of the "games handbook" ("The Novel Today" 4). However, it is important to remember that Mrs Curren's narrative also reproduces an encounter with otherness whose transformative power upon her is illustrated in the text. If her assault on history is not entirely successful, there is still another limit her narrative speaks against, far more powerfully. *Age of Iron* is, according to Attwell, Coetzee's idea of the

kind of discourse [that] emerges from a narrative subject who has not made peace, exactly, with the historical Other, but for whom there is *another kind of*

*limit* against which to speak . . . From the point of view of the subject, after all, the “final horizon” cannot be the broadly historical . . . (*Politics of Writing* 121)

The private and individual limit which Mrs Curren faces is death. Mrs Curren’s death is not conceived of as communal, in the sense that it is common to mankind, but as the highly individual encounter with absence (which is also Other): “when the world [she has] passed [her] life in manifests itself to [her] and [she is] not of it” (23). It is not the ‘historical’ death met by John and Bheki, death as a political end, but death as a personal limit, whose negotiation involves a consideration of the soul and its possibilities for transcendence. Thus the novel stages a “conflict of limits” (Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 121) in which the ethical is posited against the historical. Death, like grace and truth, comes from beyond, and is not contained “under the spacious roof of the great historical myths” (“The Novel Today” 3).

It is death, and not history, which finally brings Mrs Curren’s narrative to an end, but not before she has fashioned a powerful renunciation of those forces that threaten to constrain her speech act, her narrative. It is clear that the ability of Mrs Curren’s narrative to *live* is contingent on the reader’s breathing new life into the words, her salvation is “the product of an achieved narrative brought to fruition by a receptive readership” (Dovey, “Writing in the Middle Voice” 26). Mrs Curren is aware of the contingency of her narrative as she writes:

If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them. . . . A certain body of truth will never take on flesh: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place. (119)

These papers, these words that either you read *now* or else will never read. Will they reach you? Have they reached you? Two ways of asking the same question, a question to which I will never know the answer, never. To me this letter will forever be words committed to the waves: a message in a bottle . . . (28)

In one sense the answer to these questions is “No,” the person to whom the letter is addressed is not in possession of it, because, I, the reader, have somehow intercepted it. But in another sense the answer is “Yes”, because in the reading of the letter, I become the addressee, I become Mrs Curren’s daughter, the “you” of whom the text asks, “Have they reached you?”

The latent potential of the words is not invalidated by our reading them:

This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page As you read these words draw breath and live again. These words as you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on. (120)

The moth is simply what will brush your cheek ever so lightly as you put down the last page of this letter, before it flutters off on its next journey. It is not my soul that will remain with you, but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold. (119)

Even though this passage makes reference to the specifics of her daughter's life, it is 'my' fingers which hold the page on which these words are written. It is the unspecified and unanticipated reader to whom Mrs Curren has bequeathed her legacy. The words, which exceed Mrs Curren's expiration, await inspiration by another. They are Mrs Curren's "Here I Am", an ethical command and answer, needing the Other of the reader to breath new life into them, but reciprocating the reader's act of generosity by inspiring and effecting a transformation in him or her. In this way the narrative mimics and hence performs Mrs Curren's own encounter with Otherness.

Death brings Mrs Curren's narrative to an end, but it cannot overwhelm or erase it. The narrative lives because it exceeds the moment of Mrs Curren's death. It *survives* Mrs Curren's physical end,<sup>18</sup> and the erasure of individuality and privacy that she anticipates, by incorporating its own end, her death. It is written up to and beyond the point of expiration. It records the coming into being, the making present, of the ultimate other, Death, and in this way conquers it. Earlier, Mrs Curren watched the destruction and violence in the squatter camp and said: "I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth" (91). This narrative is her denunciation of the

---

<sup>18</sup> The narrative survives Mrs Curren as a child, who is a repository for the parents' genes and memories, would (Mrs Curren's own daughter has grown too remote to fulfil this role effectively). It is, in a sense, the antidote to the terminal growths which she carries inside her like children. To some extent it alleviates her worry of a death without succession, which is "so unnatural. For peace of mind, for peace of soul, we need to know who comes after us, whose presence fills the rooms we were once at home in" (22).

limits imposed by history, and by death, in her own words. Therefore it is “the truth”, and the realisation of its successful rivalry with death comes to us when we read her words.

Mrs Curren’s encounter with the otherness of both Vercueil and Death sufficiently disrupts and destabilises her sense of self to open her up to the transforming potential of reciprocity:

Th[e] approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it. (Levinas, “Time and the Other” 43)

She is transformed from an old white woman, whose opinions have no weight, to an envoy of grace in the dystopia of South African society in the final years of apartheid. In so far as her confession is public, it offers an ethical challenge to the forces of death on the historical plane. In its private capacity, as a record of her personal transformation and her war with the ‘idea’ of Death, in which she must contemplate her own extinguishment, the text charts the metamorphosis of Vercueil as well as herself, attesting to the unforced and unexpected mutuality of their exchange. Mrs Curren’s missive itself achieves the status of an intervention of grace in the world.

## Chapter Two

### *The Master of Petersburg*

A life without honour; treachery without limit; confession without end.

*The Master of Petersburg*, 1994

Death is what brings Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky,<sup>1</sup> the ‘Master’ of the title, to Petersburg. Fyodor encounters death from a different perspective to Mrs Curren. Unlike Mrs Curren, he does not encounter his own death, but that of his stepson, Pavel, who, it is rumoured, has committed suicide. Both *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* deal with the evocation of the spirit of a dead person, but in opposite directions, so to speak. Mrs Curren writes forward to a time when her words, spoken in the privacy of another mind, will resurrect the shadow of her spirit; Fyodor writes backwards to revive the ghost of his dead son, to catch and preserve the hovering spirit of one who has already passed out of life. Or conversely, if Mrs Curren is a “backward herald” (*Doubling the Point* 340) as Coetzee suggests, then Fyodor writes forward to the resurrection of Pavel’s spirit.

Mrs Curren imagines her spirit as a breath of air which will linger as the last page of her letter is turned. She also writes with the hope that new life will be breathed into her writing: that her imagination, her hopes and ideas, her fears and thoughts, once captured in writing, will be able to live again by being recreated in the reader. In *The Master of Petersburg* Fyodor hopes that his stepson’s spirit can be approached through physical interaction with the dead one’s belongings: things Pavel touched or wore while alive, smells which the passage of time has not erased. He attempts a literal inspiration of Pavel’s spirit: “He presses his forehead to [the white cotton suit]. Faintly the smell of his son comes to him. He breathes in deeply, again and again, thinking: his ghost, entering me” (3-4). He realises though that such physical traces have a limited life, as do memories: “With every day that

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as Fyodor. The ‘real-life’ Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky upon whom Coetzee has based the novel is referred to as Dostoevsky.

passes, memories of [Pavel] that may still be floating in the air like autumn leaves are being trodden into the mud or caught by the wind and borne up into the blinding heavens” (14). Thus Fyodor becomes obsessed with Pavel’s papers, stories of and by him preserved in writing. He lingers in Petersburg avoiding his creditors, lying to the police that he is Isaev, Pavel’s real father, and risking his soul with the temptation posed by his landlady’s girl-child. Fyodor turns his desire to redeem the papers confiscated by the police into a kind of crusade, perhaps to compensate for the fact that Pavel’s body has already been identified and buried by strangers.

While this process drags on, ostensibly because Pavel’s papers contain politically sensitive information linking him to a revolutionary band, Fyodor becomes embroiled in a tug of war between the Tsarist police and the revolutionary nihilists, each side accusing the other of engineering Pavel’s death. Fyodor, who has an affair with Pavel’s landlady, guiltily covets Pavel’s youth and attractiveness (and the place held by Pavel in the lives of the landlady and her daughter) and is increasingly repulsed by the depths of his own depravity (in his desire to violate the girl’s innocence). His encounters with the nihilist, Nechaev, only serve to deepen his sense of the loss of meaning and order which Pavel’s death initiated. Overwhelmed by the despair he feels at the severing of the ties which bound him to Pavel, he recognises no bonds, either moral or filial. He gives himself over to his dark impulse to write a book “in which every excess would be represented and no bounds respected” (134), thereby achieving the corruption of the young girl which his imagination has anticipated, and sealing his despair in perpetuity.

*Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren’s confession, written from the jaws of death, introduces the idea of a life which gains meaning in the shadow of death. Although Mrs Curren writes against death, in order to defeat death, she acknowledges, in her comments about her daughter’s children, that one is only truly alive in the face of death. Mrs Curren laments that in Canada, a land of lakes, her grandchildren will never drown. Her daughter’s children are

insulated from the illumination of life lived in the shadow of death, and will die “at seventy-five, or eighty-five, as stupid as the day they were born” (*Age of Iron* 179). They are “in any event already dead” (179) because they are insulated from life, not death, by the plastic life-jackets they wear: “Life is dust between the toes. Life is dust between the teeth. Life is biting the dust. Or: life is drowning. Falling through water, to the floor” (179). Pavel falls to his death from the top of a shot tower on the quay. His death is a falling through air, not water, but his fall is conceived of as an expansion of time, and his fall is slowed, as if it takes place through a more viscous medium than air, like water. Fyodor is conducted by Nechaev to the exact spot from which Pavel fell: “He grips the railing, stares down *there* into the plummeting darkness. Between *here* and *there* an eternity of time, so much time that it is impossible for the mind to grasp it. Between *here* and *there* Pavel was alive, more alive than ever before. We live most intensely while we are falling – a truth that wrings the heart” (121).

Fyodor shares Mrs Curren’s belief in the invigorating potential of death, but he has the opposite impulse, wishing to protect Pavel from the illumination that Mrs Curren wishes on her grandsons. As in *Age of Iron*, death is conceived of as a final limit, the last roll of the dice. The self is only fully known in the face of death. The self is defined by death, and the closer one is to death, the more complete one’s self-knowledge. Fyodor is transfixed, not by the moment of death (because death itself is an end to privacy, an extinguishment), but by the moment just before, a moment of perfect knowledge, a moment into which he inserts himself, to prevent the agonising realisation of finality from blighting Pavel’s final thought. The moment of Pavel’s death is suspended: he is kept from knowing that he is dead by an act of his father’s imagination or will:

As long as I live, he thinks, let me be the one who knows! . . . He thinks of himself as the Triton on the Piazza Barberini in Rome, holding to his lips a conch from which jets a constant crystal fountain. All day and all night he breathes life into the water. The tendons of his neck, caught in bronze, are taut with effort. (21)

Fyodor turns his son into a liminal creature, stalled on the threshold between life and death.

The effort with which Pavel is pulled back from the brink, is not repeated in Fyodor's own life. He treats his own 'fall' as inevitable. He says that he was born with the 'falling sickness', and is familiar with the vertigo which signals the onset of his epileptic fits, a sensation which later will be applied to the experience of giving in to the 'self-of-writing'. He allows the opportunity for his own redemption to pass him by:

A terrible hopelessness comes over him . . . whose core is a growing certainty . . . that an opportunity for leaving himself as he is behind and becoming what he might yet be has passed. I am I, he thinks despairingly, manacled to myself till the day I die. Whatever it was that wavered toward me, I was unworthy of it, and now it has withdrawn. (82)<sup>2</sup>

What wavers towards Fyodor, what gives him the momentary hope of escaping his imprisonment in himself, is Coetzee's 'grace'. Coetzee's analysis of Dostoevsky's novels renders the opinion that "Dostoevsky's critique of confession is clearly bringing us to the brink of a conception of truth-telling as close to grace" ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 287). Coetzee, though "not a Christian, or not yet" (*Doubling the Point* 250), seems to share Dostoevsky's religious logic in designating 'grace' as the only solution to the "sterile monologue of the self . . . the dialogue of the self with its own self-doubt" ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 291). Coetzee places Fyodor within the Christian paradigm of sin, confession, and forgiveness. However in Fyodor's world, God has been called off his throne, and in being placed "on the same footing" (190) as man, has lost the power of absolution. In Fyodor's apocalyptic vision, God does not exist, or is at the very least silent, but Hell is still a threatening 'reality'. Nechaev tells the story that during the final judgement the mother of God will descend into Hell and return only when all the suffering souls have been redeemed. The end of *The Master of Petersburg* suggests that in Coetzee's post-Nietzschean world there is no such hope. Fyodor suffers from the consciousness of his eternal damnation without

---

<sup>2</sup> In an interview entitled "Retrospect", Coetzee conceives of his own ability to change in much the same terms: "I see [in the essay "Confession and Double Thoughts"] a submerged dialogue between two persons. One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am" (*Doubling the Point* 392).



reprieve. He exists in a hell on earth.

Proximity to death does not only illuminate the value of life, but also the value of truth. Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, says “Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth” (*Age of Iron* 23). Fyodor also attests to the fact that Death is the only incontrovertible certainty, which cannot be distanced or averted: “Metaphors – what nonsense! There is death, only death. Death is a metaphor for nothing. Death is death” (118). But death *is* a metaphor for “nothing”, that is, the inconceivable, the unimaginable, the lack of consciousness, the absence of imagination. *The Master of Petersburg* does not testify to an absolute equivalence between death and truth.<sup>3</sup> For Fyodor, his epileptic fits are brushes with death. He describes the fit as an excursion outside of time, from which he is reborn into the world in a state of helpless vulnerability:

As for him, he hears nothing, he is gone, there is no longer time. When he wakes it is into darkness so dense that he can feel it pressing upon his eyeballs. He has no idea where he is, no idea who he is. He is a wakefulness, a consciousness, that is all. As if he has been born a minute ago, born into a world of unrelieved night. . . . [These fits] are not visitations. Far from it: they are nothing – mouthfuls of his life sucked out of him as if by a whirlwind that leaves behind not even a memory of darkness. (68-69)

This affliction is in itself a curse, but it is also a distinguishing mark; it is the sign, or perhaps the price, of a gift, the gift of genius, artistry, writing. While not offering any illumination in or of itself, in its approximation of death, the blight of epilepsy enables a sense of what it would be to exist without time. In a paradoxical expression typical of the illogicality of the dystopia in which Fyodor exists, these fits confer complete knowledge in their descent into nothingness: “The epileptic knows it all: the approach to the edge, the glance downward, the lurch of the soul, the thinking that thinks itself crazily over and over like a bell pealing in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee implies in “Confession and Double Thoughts” that Dostoevsky is sceptical about Ippolit’s claim, in *The Idiot*, to an elevated vantage point conferred on him by his terminal condition. Ippolit suggests that a confession made under these circumstances ensures one’s clarity of vision, untroubled by self-interest or an interrogation of one’s motives. Confession, in the face of death, is motivated by a pure will to truth.

head: *Time shall have an end, there shall be no death*" (118). It is significant that the only verbal expression of the sensation Fyodor has is a line from the Book of Revelations, the book which predicts the apocalypse and the judgement of souls.<sup>4</sup> The only way that Fyodor can recreate this sense of being out of time is in writing: "Somewhere he stands and watches while he and God circle each other. And time stands still and watches too. Time is suspended, everything is suspended before the fall" (249). Fyodor succeeds in bringing about the prophesy in Revelations: "Time shall have an end".

Michael Marais contends that in this novel, as in *Age of Iron*, the torsions of power pervade and infect every aspect of life. Thus, Marais continues, the book Fyodor begins at the end of *The Master of Petersburg* simply mimics and thus reinforces the exclusive binary oppositions utilised by the discourse of history ("Places of Pigs" 86-88). On the contrary, the suggestion at the end of *The Master of Petersburg* is that writing is more powerful than history, that the writing which is spawned by the author's bitterness and despair is capable of infecting and corrupting the social body, beginning with one child. Several references to the idea of the world of Petersburg and all its characters as existing inside 'the Master' suggest that it does not exist separately from him or outside his writing of it. The dystopia of Petersburg mirrors the anarchy threatening to break loose in Fyodor's mind, and as the novel progresses becomes a mental rather than a physical landscape, the backdrop for the harrowing of Fyodor's soul. This process too has its culmination in the act of writing:

If to anyone it is prescribed to live through the madness of our times, he told Anna Sergeyevna, it is to him. Not to emerge from the fall unscathed, but to achieve what his son did not: to wrestle with the whistling darkness, to absorb it, to make it his medium; to turn the falling into a flying, even if a flying as slow and old and clumsy as a turtle's. . . . To live in Russia and hear the voices of Russia murmuring within him. To hold it all within him: Russia, Pavel,

---

<sup>4</sup> Another fit overtakes Fyodor while he is confronting the Finn and Nechaev (disguised as a woman) in their lodgings: "A fit is certainly on its way: there is nothing he can do to hold it back. He savours the last of the stillness. What a pity the stillness cannot last forever! From far away comes a scream that must be his own. *There will be a gnashing of teeth* – the words flash before him; then there is an end" (97). This description also employs a biblical phrase connected with the final judgement, anticipating the despair of those souls condemned to hell, among whom Fyodor will number himself.

death. (235)

Fyodor does not suggest that he is a representative man, but rather that his life and fate are emblematic: he is the individual to whom the task of containment falls.<sup>5</sup> He says to Nechaev: “You are only part of Russia, part of Russia’s madness. . . . I am the one who carries the madness. My fate, my burden, not yours. You are too much of a child to begin to bear the weight” (202). It is clear that this burden and the strength to endure it are his because he is a writer. Nechaev is the primary exponent of the kind of power and corruption that Marais refers to as stunting every aspect of life, including art (“Places of Pigs” 86).<sup>6</sup> Yet by the novel’s close, even he is subordinated to Fyodor’s will to write, and he is subject to being used, sold, in Fyodor’s stories. Fyodor describes Nechaev as being possessed by a spirit. The ‘creature’ that is born of Fyodor’s all-consuming desire for authorship, is a more powerful demon than that which moves in Nechaev:

the phantasm opposite him whose attention is no less implacable than his own, whom it has been given to him to bring into being [is] not Nechaev – he knows that now. Greater than Nechaev. Not Pavel either. Perhaps Pavel as he might have been one day, grown wholly beyond boyhood to become the kind of cold-faced, handsome man whom no love can touch. (240)

Nechaev the host of, or metonym for, the destructive force at work in Russian society, is not Fyodor’s primary opponent or enemy. Rather it is the death of Pavel that thrusts him into despair, despair that even the anguish and loss he feels at the death of his son will become material for his writing, that even in death his son is not safe from being sold into the service

---

<sup>5</sup> Although “Mrs Curren effectively converts herself into the sacrificial emblem of a ‘degenerate age’” (Huggan 200), this fact does not detract from the highly individual and personal nature of her suffering. Fyodor’s fate, too, is extreme rather than typical.

<sup>6</sup> The opposition of Fyodor and Nechaev, the writer and the revolutionary, dramatises the opposition between the public and the private: “Where Dostoevsky had pathologised Nechaev,” in *The Possessed*, says Margaret Scanlan, “Coetzee restores [Nechaev’s] connections to the Russian people and suggests the social and not primarily private sources of his politics” (466). Fyodor challenges Nechaev’s universalising pretensions when he asks: “in your utopia . . . will I be allowed only one name, one address, one age, one parentage?” (*The Master of Petersburg* 185), alluding to the necessity of creating a plurality of personas in the act of writing stories. Nechaev’s proposed universe puts a ban on the creative act in which Fyodor becomes someone else: “He is, to a degree, Pavel Isaev, though Pavel Isaev is not the name he is going to give himself” (242).

of his inexorable will-to-write. The novel suggests that in the realm of imagination and writing all is permitted. The story that Fyodor writes is an extreme example of the subordination of the duty to society to the unconquerable imperative to write felt by the author. Fyodor is possessed by writing, by a voice which speaks from within him, through him. In authoring the story he begins at the close of *The Master of Petersburg*, he betrays the memory of his dead son and in the process compromises his own soul. This inexorable compulsion to author is described in the novel as a type of 'falling' (in the same way that Fyodor tumbles headlong into the gaping blackness of his epileptic fits), or as a type of demon 'possession'. His writing is a descent into darkness, a fall from 'grace'. Both analogies suggest that in writing, far from finding release, Fyodor becomes one of the damned. His confession does not anticipate the intervention of grace and forgiveness, only the consciousness of his fallen nature. The blasphemy of this abuse of his son's memory is hinted at in the first dream Fyodor has of his son. He dreams that he is a ponderous old turtle swimming towards the submerged body of his son, and ends with his pressing his lips to Pavel's face in what he can't distinguish as either a kiss or a bite. The dream reflects his guilt at his slow but intentional usurpation of Pavel's place in the lodgings, and in the lives of Anna Sergeyevna and her daughter. This rivalry with his dead son, symbolised in Fyodor's dream, introduces the "old matter of fathers and sons" (45), the "war of the old upon the young" (*Age of Iron* 149).

Even this perverted system of making sense of the world is threatened by Nechaev: "Revolution is the end of everything old, including fathers and sons . . . There are no bounds to what can be done" (189-90). Nechaev's political anarchy reaches beyond the realm of history and threatens to overturn even God's power. Nechaev is a pretender to the role of "the Christ of the Old Testament, the Christ who scourged the userers out of the temple" (103), or else he is "a devil who shrugs off curses like water" (119). God, too, is the demanding, implacable, and vengeful God of the Old Testament, and Fyodor, who is no "Moses" (69),

receives no answer to his cry: “Why am I accursed?” (69). Fyodor feels intensely the destabilisation of a religion whose tenets seem obsolete in the age of secular revolution, but whose paradigmatic oppositions of good and evil, God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell, he still uses to navigate the increasingly strange world of Petersburg. *Age of Iron* postulates that in the “absence of . . . a shared basis for judgement, the novel performs an ethical consciousness in the place where it has been vitiated, simply because there is no alternative to doing so – ethics, in this sense, is what we turn to because we lack secure foundations for conduct” (Attwell, “‘Dialogue’ and ‘Fulfilment’” 176). In *The Master of Petersburg*, Fyodor faces the erosion of all ways of making sense of the world. The destabilisation of systems which generate meaning, whether they are moral or not, means that Fyodor is forced to invoke a private sense of ethics. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren too feels the confusion when the religious realm can no longer be appealed to for guidance: “I [am] a dog in the maze, scurrying up and down the branches and tunnels, scratching and whining at the same old places, tiring, tired. Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze” (*Age of Iron* 126). Coetzee uses the same image in *The Master of Petersburg*. Mrs Curren’s description of God as a dog, presumably whining and scratching in the tunnels of his own maze, recalls the whining of the dog in the middle of the night, for which Fyodor must search in the maze of streets and alleys. Fyodor responds to the dog’s howls as to the calling of his dead son. Indeed his peculiar logical bent insists that he respond to the dog in this way, as the unexpected one, the thief in the night. His son’s unannounced second coming has biblical overtones: he hopes for a Christ-like resurrection of his ‘prodigal son’. Fyodor says “Let his death not be taken from him and turned into the occasion of his father’s reformation” (81). Fyodor desires the redemption that only Pavel’s forgiveness can bring, and this is denied as long as Pavel remains dead.

Fyodor is the gambler who in the next turn of the card expects to find his redemption, “the one bet” which will seal his fate. Coetzee weaves the biographical fact of Dostoevsky’s

gambling and debts, into a motif of paradox, of simultaneous hope and despair: the gambler hinges all his hope on chance, on the expectation that the dare he issues to fate will be answered, but he also knows that it is the instrument of his destruction and the loss of all hope. More importantly, gambling is the means of depraving others, like the wife who sells her ring, and finally prostitutes herself to make the money for her husband's final gamble, "the bet that will redeem all" (85).<sup>7</sup> Gambling is introduced early in the novel, when Fyodor visits Pavel's grave and shuts his eyes against the numbers on the cross-shaped stake, numbers which symbolise the finality of Pavel's death, and which he will never again be able to bet on:

From the boy who still lives in his memory to the name on the death certificate to the number on the stake he is not yet prepared to accept the train of fatality. *Provisional*, he thinks: there are no final numbers, all are provisional, otherwise the play would come to an end. In a while the wheel will roll, the numbers will start moving, and all will be well again. (8)

Besides the obvious allusion to roulette, and the potentially fatal 'game' of "Russian roulette", the wheel is also reminiscent of the medieval Wheel of Fortune, by which one's fate is determined by one's position on the wheel, a fate which could be changed by a turn of the wheel. Gambling becomes the rationale Fyodor uses to navigate the increasingly bewildering landscape of Petersburg. When Fyodor, overwhelmed by a sense of fatality, rejects opportunities to change the course of his life, to allow grace to enter, for example by rescuing the dog whom he confuses with Pavel, the wheel turns again, and again, creating never-ending convolutions of self-doubt:

Yet even in the instant of closing the door upon himself he is aware there is still a chance to return to the alley, unchain the dog, bring it to the entryway to

---

<sup>7</sup> In making gambling a metaphor for writing it is particularly pertinent that this description holds an intertextual echo of one of Dostoevsky's novels, *Crime and Punishment*, in which a daughter, Sonya (a Sonya is also referred to in the text) prostitutes herself to feed the family which her father's gambling debts has impoverished. *Crime and Punishment* is the novel cited as inspirational by Nechaev, while Anna Sergeyevna's late husband numbered *Poor Folk* among his favourites. Many other episodes in *The Master of Petersburg* make reference to moments in Dostoevsky's novels, such as the moment when, in Councillor Maximov's waiting room, Fyodor, nagged by the smell of fresh paint, and the desire to escape by feigning a fainting fit, feels the surfacing of a "shadow of a memory: surely he has been here before" (31). These moments suggest a conflation of the author's experiences and those of his protagonists, in this instance, Raskolnikov.

No. 63, and make some kind of bed for it at the foot of the stairs – though, he knows, once he has brought it so far it will insist on following him further, and, if he chains it again, will whine and bark till the whole building is roused. (82)

Fyodor seems to be prevented from bringing the dog into his home by the expectation of complete sacrifice which it entails. More will always be required of him. There will always be more that he can do, more than he is prepared to do: “Pavel will not be saved until he has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought *the least thing*, the beggarman and the beggarwoman too, and much else he does not yet know of; and even then there will be no certainty” (82).<sup>8</sup> Here Fyodor’s sentiment recalls that of the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. After protesting against the degrading and inhumane treatment of the barbarian prisoners the magistrate falls short of uttering the word ‘Justice’ for fear of invoking its equivalent, retribution: “*Justice*: once that word is uttered where will it all end? Easier to shout *No!* . . . Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped” (118).<sup>9</sup> Even though Fyodor invites the beggarman Ivanov into his lodgings, and gives him a bed, his act of charity does not “go from heart to heart” (*Age of Iron* 20). This gesture does not have the same transformative effect as Mrs Curren’s bringing Vercueil into her house, and finally into her bed, because it is not an act of true generosity, but rather an attempt by Fyodor to hedge his bets: “bet on everyone, every beggar, every mangy dog . . . . Betting on all the numbers – is that still gambling?” (84). This is an act which violates the laws of gambling and charity: “Without the risk, without subjecting oneself to the voice speaking from elsewhere in the fall

---

<sup>8</sup> The sacrifice required is that of Christ, or his disciples. In following Christ’s lesson: “Raise up that least thing and cherish it” (81), Fyodor is required to open up his heart to the shared divinity in all consciousness, man and beast. The martyrdom of Christ “overwhelms him” (240) however; instead Fyodor is associated with the human weakness and guilt of Judas.

<sup>9</sup> The consanguinity of justice and vengeance is explored in several of Coetzee’s novels (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 122; *The Master of Petersburg* 112).

of the dice, what is left that is divine?" (84).<sup>10</sup>

Fyodor suggests that in gambling there is a trace of the divine, that it has a kinship with faith. This is certainly his implication when he suggests to Matryosha that Pavel gambled with his life: he issued a challenge to God ("He said to God: If you love me, save me. . . . I know you are there, I know you hear me" [75]), but God was unmoved, and so Pavel died. Fyodor evokes the banality of tragedy in suggesting that Pavel's death was caused because God is very old and thus "does not hear very well" (75). Yet there is also in this description the echo of the tempting of Christ by the devil, which resounds more strongly in Fyodor's own issuing of a challenge to God in leaving his reworking of the story of Pavel and Maria Lebyatkin where Matryosha will read it: "It is an assault upon the innocence of a child. With it he has crossed the threshold. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness. Now God must speak, now God dare no longer remain silent. To corrupt a child is to force God. The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap, a trap to catch God" (249). He is prepared to pay with his soul to prove to himself that God exists, to force God to intervene, even if it is to punish him.

Thus Fyodor turns to writing in order to resurrect Pavel. Nechaev is reminded by his comrade who runs the printing press that "Writers have their own rules" (198). "Writing is a secular maze – distinct from the maze in which God might be found" (Head 143) – and in *The Master of Petersburg* writing exists on a plane that is even more strongly distinct from, even opposed to, the realm presided over by God: it becomes something devilish, demonically inspired, a betrayal of the lives and values held to be precious in a Christian world.<sup>11</sup> Even

---

<sup>10</sup> Fyodor is wrongheaded in attempting to 'beat the odds', which Levinas has called "'the possibility of an event', that is the possibility that something might occur which is not always already intended and known by the transcendental Ego or assumed within the relationship with Being" (Davis 32). Fyodor's logic thinks that he can cheat the inscrutability of death or circumvent the mystery of fate: "If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come" (*The Master of Petersburg* 80).

<sup>11</sup> David Attridge describes the challenge of ethics to morality and politics thus:  
We might say morality, as commonly understood, is based on the familiar – known and thoroughly internalised codes, expectations, and goals, enforced by a variety of



though Fyodor issues a challenge to systematic morality (rather than colludes in its maintenance), he cannot be credited with being ethical. Fyodor's corruption of the child, Matryosha, is an immoral act. He conforms to the description in Bakunin's "Catechism of a Revolutionary" (although the ideas, Fyodor concludes, are Nechaev's): "The revolutionary is a doomed man . . . . He has no interests, no feelings, no attachments, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed in a single and total passion . . . . In the depths he has cut all links with the civil order, with law and morality" (60-61). Fyodor is guilty of privileging his will-to-write over his duty to society. Initially he resists the temptation to write, holding himself back from the brink of submission to the voice which speaks from within him, or through him, a voice which may be "anything but benign; it may even be that of the Devil himself" (Watson, "The Writer and the Devil" 56). It is this voice which releases the power of Fyodor's creative genius, which turns his falling into a flying: "to wrestle with the whistling darkness, to absorb it, to make it his medium" (235). The one-who-writes is and is not himself, and hence he knows that surrendering to this inner voice means relinquishing the ability to mediate or censor that which issues from his pen:

At any moment he is capable of picking up the pen and forming letters on the paper. But the writing, he fears, would be that of a madman – vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, untameable. He thinks of the madness as running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen and so to the page. . . . What flows on to the paper is neither blood nor ink but an acid, black, with an unpleasing green sheen when the light glances off it. (18)

The description is reminiscent of Mrs Curren's Diconal-induced madness: "Once I came to myself facing the wall. In my hand was a pencil, its point broken. All over the wall were sprawling, sliding characters, meaningless, coming from me, or someone inside me" (*Age of Iron* 167). Neither Mrs Curren nor Fyodor have any control over what is written. Mrs

---

institutions – and that politics, insofar as it is a moral enterprise, is equally within this domain. But the demands of otherness, of an ethics that exceeds all moral codes and unsettles all institutions, require a politics that constantly reinvents itself, alert at every moment to the exclusions that its programs and pronouncements necessarily entail. ("Literary Form" 208)

Curren's episode is described as occurring when she is absent; since she is not present to herself she cannot own the writing. Coetzee talks about his own writing as a 'place' apart from everyday life which is not "continuous with [him]" (*Doubling the Point* 205).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Fyodor's final act of writing by which he achieves the corruption of a child is figured as a psychic breach<sup>13</sup> out of which an alternative self – the self of writing – is fathered, growing and congealing until it is recognisable as something external to himself. This doppelganger begins as nothing more than "a sense of someone in the room besides himself . . . a stick-figure, a scarecrow" (236), and develops into something ill-proportioned, "excessive" (238) until it has grown beyond Pavel, Nechaev, and Fyodor himself, into a creature of "stone" (240): monolithic, inhuman, unlovable. The act of writing becomes an encounter with the Other. But Fyodor's encounter with alterity does not lead to the intervention of grace because it is not 'ethical', in the sense formulated by Levinas, in that Fyodor enters into a relationship with this demonic Other with the expectation that Pavel will be resurrected and he will accord Fyodor the forgiveness he craves. The encounter fails to confer grace upon Fyodor; rather the challenge to his identity posed by the Other leads him to actions which are at once unethical and immoral: "'I am ready to die for the other' is a moral statement; 'He should be ready to die for me' is, blatantly, not" (Bauman, cited in Davis 52). In Fyodor's case he expects that "Pavel should be ready to live for me". By "follow[ing] the

---

<sup>12</sup> Rachel Lawlan is here describing the Underground Man from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, but the description may be intertextually applied to Fyodor (no doubt a comparison intended by Coetzee):

[He] is plagued by abstraction and intention: his attempts at confession reveal to us . . . that even in his most persuasive moments he is simply "talking like a book". . . . He is a prime example of a man who, to use Bakhtin's phrase, "has ceased to coincide with himself" . . . he cannot reason straightforwardly or act naturally, for he is self-conscious to such a degree that he is continually aware of dubious or fraudulent motives behind whatever he does or thinks or says. (138)

Bakhtin's phrase is also interestingly similar to Coetzee's description of the process of creativity, eliding the processes of writing and confession once again.

<sup>13</sup> Fyodor refers to himself throughout the narrative as a cracked bell ("There is a crack running through me. What can one do with a cracked bell? A cracked bell cannot be mended" [141]). Wholeness and wellness are often equated, especially in psychological terms, and here it seems that under intense pressure the crack widens into a fissure out of which emanates this other being.

dance of the pen” (236) he believes he will be able to resurrect Pavel, to become Pavel.<sup>14</sup> He turns Pavel’s falling into flying, an act which simultaneously transcends and invokes death: “Ultimately it will not be given him to bring the dead boy back to life. Ultimately, if he wants to meet him, he will have to meet him in death” (237-38). Possession by the demon voice means the extinguishment of his moral self. Pavel’s death induces a despair in Fyodor which undoes his ties with humanity and his sense of social obligation: “His world has contracted; his world is within his breast” (22). Within this world he no longer feels as strongly the ties which impose on him a duty to society.<sup>15</sup> In the writing of the stories he indulges his personal categorical imperative at the expense of the innocence of a child. In attempting to use writing to resurrect Pavel, and hence receive the forgiveness he craves, he damns himself.

Coetzee seems to be suggesting that true ethical awareness involves a negotiation of the contradictory forces of the writer’s duty to society and his duty to his own “transcendental imperative”. In wanting to overturn the entrenched political system, Nechaev’s proposed revolution is equally unethical. Nechaev, possessed by the spirit of nihilism, is bent on achieving “the end of everything old . . . the end of successions and dynasties. And it keeps renewing itself, if it is true revolution. With each generation the old revolution is overturned and history starts again” (189). This is the revolutionary logic that Coetzee – like Conrad and Dostoevsky before him – so abhors: “The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 26). Instead, what *The Master of Petersburg* seems to suggest by illustrating the apocalyptic repercussions of single-mindedness, is that the imperative constituted by the writer’s duty to himself is in no simple or automatic sense “transcendental”. To obey it is crucial to the writer’s telling the “truth” (in

---

<sup>14</sup> “And he is not himself any longer, not a man in the forty-ninth year of his life. Instead he is young again, with all the arrogant strength of youth. He is wearing a white suit perfectly tailored. He is, to a degree, Pavel Isaev, though Pavel Isaev is not the name he is going to give himself” (242).

<sup>15</sup> Mrs Curren whose “true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body” (*Age of Iron* 36), is forced to look outside herself by her encounter with Vercueil’s otherness. For Fyodor, there is no such intervention.

Fyodor's case, to restore meaning to the world), but that "truth" may be at odds with his social or moral duty. There is no *a priori* solution to this dilemma, which must be wrestled with in every act of creation.

It is Pavel's death that initiates the dissolution of meaning in Fyodor's world, and it is to Pavel that Fyodor attributes the ability to restore meaning: "there is a measure to all things now, including the truth, and that measure is Pavel" (167); more specifically the resurgence of meaning and order is linked to Pavel's resurrection. Fyodor looks to Anna Sergeyevna, Pavel's landlady, to conduct Pavel from the underworld back into life. In a sense she does perform this function by showing Fyodor the way to restore Pavel to life: "You have it in your power. . . . You can bring him back. . . . You are an artist, a master . . . . It is for you not for me, to bring him back to life" (140).<sup>16</sup> Fyodor finally becomes Pavel's progenitor through writing. Fyodor resurrects Pavel when, in re-imagining the moment of Pavel's death, his fall is transformed into flying. But this is also the moment in which he pays the price, sacrificing himself by internalising the darkness and the fall, by carrying it within his soul: "He sits with the pen in his hand, holding himself back from a descent into representations that have no place in the world, on the point of toppling, enclosed within a moment in which all creation lies open at his feet, the moment before he loosens his grip and begins to fall" (241).<sup>17</sup>

The internalisation of Pavel's fall, the containment and concentration of the darkness

---

<sup>16</sup> Mrs Curren figured her cancerous growths as children feeding off her body, growing in her womb. Although the difference in sex (*Age of Iron* is about a mother and her daughter, *The Master of Petersburg* is a matter of fathers and sons) makes the pregnancy trope inappropriate to *The Master of Petersburg*, the issue of succession is just as fraught as in *Age of Iron*. Fyodor does however begin to manifest a similar perversion of the idea of succession. He thinks of Pavel as a baby in a metal box which he carries around with him: "Wherever he goes he bears Pavel with him, like a baby blue with cold ('Who will save the blue baby?' he seems to hear within him, plaintive words that come from he does not know where, in a peasant's singsong voice)" (81). Mrs Curren's letter is her bequest to her daughter, but also her way of living on in another. Fyodor has a more difficult problem in that Pavel is not of his blood, he is his step-father. It seems that the child he has with Anya Snitkina does not enter into the equation by which he calculates that Pavel's death has left him without a successor.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee expresses the same reserve about immersing himself in writing: "I think I knew what beginning would be like, and balked at it. I knew that once I had truly begun, I would have to go through with the thing to the end. Like an execution: one cannot walk away, leaving the victim dangling at the end of a rope, kicking and choking, still alive. One has to go all the way" (19).

within himself which has produced a contraction of the world to the space within his breast, is compounded by an “abrogation of agency” that reveals human beings as “the creatures of discourse and other forces hidden from their own consciousness” (Cornwell, “Realism, Rape, and *Disgrace*” 7). Fyodor experiences a vertigo inspired by “the collapse of all structures of understanding including language itself, flashing intimations that the very self that speaks has no real existence” (“Borge’s Dark Mirror” 81).<sup>18</sup> Fyodor articulates this sensation when he jeers at himself: “I am behaving like a character in a book” (27).

His description of the betrayal involved in writing (he describes himself as a trader in lives, selling anyone and everyone) resorts to the same idiom that Coetzee uses to describe the economy of confession: those things worth confessing are shameful, therefore shame confers a kind of value, makes of shameful secrets a confessable currency, to be spent or withheld in the transaction of confession (*Doubling the Point* 272). Fyodor talks about his life as a ‘price’ or ‘currency’ upon which he trades. He sells the people in his life (he turns them into stories, into commodities to be bought by others), he also sells them out (he betrays and perverts them in his stories) in the vein of Judas, or the police spy, Ivanov. But he also pays, pays for this betrayal, this trade in lives, with his own life, or more accurately, with his soul, “a great price to pay” (250), until he becomes a “life without honour; treachery without limit; confession without end” (222).<sup>19</sup> On the surface the word confession would seem to be anomalous here, in that confession would ostensibly be the telling of truth and a means of redemption – “absolution . . . is the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 252) – a way to forgiveness. Stephen Watson designates this purgatory compulsion to tell the truth as a form of autobiography:

---

<sup>18</sup> This idea suggested itself as a result of reading Gareth Cornwell’s essay “Realism, Rape, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”.

<sup>19</sup> Mrs Curren also uses this idiom in contemplating whether the public sacrifice of a “life that isn’t worth much anymore” (104) will be enough to secure her salvation: “I am trying to work out what I can get for it. . . . I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but am full of confusion about how to do it” (104, 107). Later she rejects this option saying: “The truth is, there was always something false about that impulse, deeply false, no matter to what rage or despair it answered” (129).

In charting the harrowing of Dostoyevsky's soul, condemned as it is to tell the truth about itself, especially its more intolerable aspects, the novel becomes a latterday form of spiritual autobiography, an involuntary confession. With its central protagonist's ceaseless drive to reveal the truth about himself, the disturbing traces of struggles, victories, wounds, dominations, enslavements, humiliations, the novel remains tied at the deepest level to the Christian tradition and the 'obligation of truth' which is central to that tradition. (Watson, "The Writer and the Devil" 59)

Dostoevsky himself interrogates this tradition in *The Possessed*, the novel which Fyodor begins writing at the end of *The Master of Petersburg*. Coetzee entitles the last chapter of his novel "Stavrogin", the name of the protagonist and transgressor in Dostoevsky's novel. Stavrogin alleges that he has committed a sexual crime against a child, and ultimately caused her death, and wishes to make his confession public. His confessor, the priest Tikhon, interrogates Stavrogin's motives for wanting to publicise his crime, and at last comes to the conclusion that Stavrogin wishes to claim greatness in equivalent measure to his transgression. He wishes to count himself among those who have committed such a heinous crime that neither explanation nor remorse will compensate, and no forgiveness will be brokered. He wishes to claim the fame of the notorious and despised. In the chapter entitled "Stavrogin", Fyodor accomplishes the corruption of Matryona, both opening a window of intertextuality onto *The Possessed*, and making a veiled suggestion that the author of *The Possessed* and the protagonist of *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky, was himself guilty of a similar crime. In suggesting that Fyodor imagines and desires the corruption of an innocent child, and then writes a book in which the protagonist, Stavrogin, is represented as violating a child, Coetzee queries the degree of separation between an author and his work.<sup>20</sup> Coetzee's intertextuality calls into question *his* character's motives within the context and logic of *his* novel, *The Master of Petersburg*. We are forced to assess the impurity or honesty of Fyodor's motives in the light of Tikhon's illumination of the convolutions of Stavrogin's desire to confess. Through his writing, Fyodor trespasses in the realm in which "*everything is*

---

<sup>20</sup> This point has a certain resonance in the discussion of Coetzee's 1999 novel, *Disgrace*, in which the protagonist, David Lurie, demonstrates a number of material similarities to the author.

*permitted*" (114) in order to win the title of greatness, the appellation "Master", and the fame which accrue to him as the result of the genius of his novels. Fyodor's dereliction of his moral duty to preserve and protect the innocence of the girl-child results in both his own corruption and that of the child. Most importantly, though, the encounter between Tikhon and Stavrogin reveals confession as a "game of deception and self-deception, a game of limited truth" ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 289).<sup>21</sup> Fyodor's genius, his mastery of writing, is what sets him apart from the mass of humanity. His fame and talent distinguish him, but at the same time the transgression which makes this particular distinction possible also damns him and sets him apart from those who are saved. Assessing Pavel's private papers, Maximov says: "Here's a curious case . . . A story . . . What shall we say of a story, a work of fiction? Is a story a private matter, would you say?" (39). Fyodor's reply – "A private matter, an utterly private matter, private to the writer, *till it is given to the world*" (40 emphasis added) – confirms that when he leaves the pages of his story on the desk where Matroysha will find them, he submits his story, and its effects upon the child, for judgement in the public sphere. The story is a kind of confession, a publication of that which was private, for the purpose of being judged and punished. *The Master of Petersburg* destroys the "fond hope that writers will be exonerated for the imperfection of their lives through the perfection of their works" (Watson, "The Writer and the Devil" 55).

The major difference between the act of confession and writing is that writing does not desire its own end. Mrs Curren, speaking about her planned symbolic suicide tells her daughter: "For as long as the trail of words continues, you know with certainty that I have not gone through with it" (*Age of Iron* 106). Writing, then, is a way of endlessly deferring the end, which is why it is Death's antagonist; but this also makes writing the antagonist of absolution, which is resolution. Fyodor's writing is a conscious twisting and perversion of the

---

<sup>21</sup> On one level Coetzee appears to avoid the questions of limits to self-knowledge and truth-telling in *Boyhood* by distancing himself from the protagonist 'John Coetzee'. Coetzee achieves this with a number of techniques, which finally amount to an acknowledgement of the insurmountability of these very problems. They are discussed in Chapter Three of the present study.

truth, and his “confession [is] without end”; he is condemned to the endless regression of self-interrogation and self-doubt, with no hope of the intervention of the ‘grace’ which would bring closure and redemption. Stavrogin’s confession is ended by Tikhon, who intervenes and ends the ‘game’, but for Fyodor confession is the rope with which the soul hangs itself, twisting interminably in the wind. Yet the fatalism of his plight is another kind of end, and this is what, in the absence of absolution, brings the narrative to a close: “The book cannot, literally, progress beyond a knowledge of damnation. . . . It culminates, in other words, in a pessimism which at times seems very much a foregone conclusion, a fatalism which has the dead resonance of the preordained” (Watson, “The Writer and the Devil” 60).

This predestination is hinted at very early in the novel in the establishment of a tension between fatality and provisionality, that is, in the trope of gambling. It is finally demonstrated that gambling is a delay to and a precipitation of the end of hope. Nechaev tells the story of the mother of God who descends from heaven and humbles herself until all the souls in hell have been redeemed. The end of *The Master of Petersburg* suggests that in Fyodor’s post-Nietzschean world there is no such hope. Writing is both gambling and dying. It involves the perversion and betrayal of other’s lives producing a bitterness, like acid, which eats away at the soul of its host. If Fyodor has given up his soul in an act of martyrdom, a generous sacrifice, the bitterness would be like vinegar (250). Instead Fyodor tastes only his own bitterness, gall.<sup>22</sup>

The world of Petersburg which Fyodor inhabits, and to some extent fathers, is singularly without grace. *The Master of Petersburg* illustrates a world in which religious and ethical cynicism requires that men fall back on their own private conception of morality, a morality which is corrupted by the very cynicism that assures Fyodor that he is a flawed and fallen being. Fyodor’s capacity to do evil grows proportionately with his despair. He gambles on the power which accrues to him as a writer with a God-like ability to ‘make things live’,

---

<sup>22</sup> Vinegar was given to Christ on the cross and hence is associated here with self-sacrifice while gall, the bitterness produced by one’s body, is associated with betrayal.



and instead of the recovery of grace, the “bet that will redeem all” (85), he loses his soul, banishing grace from his world.

The end of hope is another kind of limit to imagination. But, it is suggested, limits and absolutes are also necessary for Fyodor’s idea of the world. Rachel Lawlan suggests that Fyodor’s tempting God is actually a “longing for grace, for transcendence over contingency and eternal confession, is finally a longing for authority” (153).<sup>23</sup> Grace, which brings an end to confession, and hence to narratives of confession, must be endlessly deferred by the suspicion and censure of cynicism, which nevertheless resists the “tyrannies of monologic closure – an end to debate, death to thought itself” (Lawlan 153). Cynicism is what precludes the intervention of grace in both confession and writing, but it is also, Lawlan suggests, the ethical imperative of writing, “that actually to reach grace is betrayal and closure, that the longing for grace must remain a desire, something [for Fyodor, and Coetzee] to *feel his way towards*” (154).

---

<sup>23</sup> Fyodor does not want to believe in a world in which he will not be damned for his actions. His damnation is at least one answer, then, to this longing for authority or judgement.

## Chapter Three

### *Boyhood*

Beauty is innocence; innocence is ignorance; ignorance is ignorance of pleasure; pleasure is guilty; he is guilty.  
*Boyhood*, 1997

Despite Coetzee's assertion that "All autobiography is storytelling. All writing is autobiography" (*Doubling the Point* 391), there is a significant difference between the reception of historical or autobiographical texts and the reception of so-called 'fiction'. This difference hinges on the question of veridicality. The major expectation created by the use of the autobiographical form has been formulated by Francis R. Hart: "Truth is a definitive but elusive autobiographical intention" (222).

Hart's essay, "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography", which informs Coetzee's own thoughts on autobiography,<sup>1</sup> outlines two approaches to the tension between autobiographical form and intention. The first approach seeks to classify autobiography as a type of writing in which the author consciously shapes the material with a particular end in mind. The unfolding of the life story contained in this type of autobiography conforms to the preordained pattern which will eventuate in the culmination of the informing purpose of that life, making form and intention reciprocal. Autobiographical writing presents the present self as integrated with and foreshadowed by past selves. The second approach offers a protean philosophy of form, in which the experimental and unorganised nature of the material, the lack of an organising principle, is proof of the writer's developing sense of self. This writing purports to be a process of self-discovery ending in previously unanticipated self-knowledge. The chaotic form is seen as proof of an unexpected and hence 'genuinely' revelatory end.

Coetzee's *Boyhood* does not subscribe to an overriding purpose around which the rest of the narrative coheres. Nor does it purport to lack the hindsight and perspective of the present self that marks the "journey of self-discovery". Its form is neither chaotic (a chaos out

---

<sup>1</sup> Coetzee cites Hart in his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" in *Doubling the Point* (252).

of which answers will arise unbidden), nor formally organised around a predetermined scheme which exposes the author's entire life as a preparation for a particular outcome, despite Coetzee's belief that "the child is father to the man" (*Doubling the Point* 29).

However Coetzee is not exempted from fulfilling an "intention" in this work. He articulates his intention as a desire not "to wallow in comfortable wonderment at our past. We must see what the child, still befuddled from his travels, still trailing his clouds of glory, could not see. We – or at least some of us, enough of us – must look at the past with a cruel enough eye to see what it was that made that joy and innocence possible" (*Doubling the Point* 29). The suggestion here is that Coetzee regards it as a duty, in which his personal needs *and* the good of humankind are commingled, to explore, with clear-sightedness, the truth about oneself.

Confession, the desire to "communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self" (Hart 227), results in testimony to the lack of a unified sense of self in the young Coetzee. The young narrator of *Boyhood* purports to recognise the difference between the self he presents to the world, and the self in his secret heart, although this may be the adult narrator's retrospective imposition. It is impossible at times to distinguish the layer of interpretation provided by the mature author. He portrays himself as Girard's modern man, conforming to the pronouncement: "What modern man is not [Dostoevsky's] Dolgorouki, the prince, to the Others, and Dolgorouki, the bastard, to himself?" (Girard 57). Whether the young Coetzee was indeed capable of describing himself as 'divided', or whether this is too sophisticated a judgement to be made by a ten-year-old (who can feel but not explain the nagging discrepancy between his thoughts and actions), is spurious. The rendering of the immature protagonist's fears and proclivities is so tightly welded to the mode of articulation of the mature narrator that we have no recourse other than to accept the young 'John Coetzee's' thoughts as they are presented to us. This device undermines the assumption that the narrator's past and present selves exist on a continuum allowing the narrator uncomplicated access to the thoughts and feelings of his younger self. Coetzee does not attempt to realistically portray the mind of his former self in its half-formed and childish

state. This does not mean that he does not present his young self as foolish or self-deluded, but rather that he refuses to attempt a realistic representation of how the young boy's thoughts appeared to himself at the age of ten. The language and register are those of the reflective, circumspect and mature artist. The reader receives through the narrative a rendering or *translation* of childhood emotions, experiences, and faulty childish logic. Shaun de Waal's review suggests that: "the boy is named only once, and indirectly; otherwise he is 'he' only, yet so tight is Coetzee's focus that no confusion [as to the fact that the boy is himself] is possible" (1). André Viola is more hesitant in his review, preferring to "focus on the specificity of the boy's mental life" (96) to avoid "consider[ing] the whole book as a bona fide document" (96). It is clear from Coetzee's decision to name the protagonist with the name "John Coetzee"<sup>2</sup> that he is signalling his "autobiographical intentionality" (Cohn 59); the language and present tense narration ensure that "the distance between the writing self and the source of the feelings it writes about is abolished . . . for the source is always here and now" ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 268).

Yet Coetzee has made clear in the interview which concludes his collection of critical writing, *Doubling the Point*, that he perceives his earlier self as a distinct and autonomous individual. Thus the representation of the young John Coetzee in the third person may hint at a radical discontinuity between Coetzee's past and present selves which he is not here prepared to resolve. In the manner of simultaneous revelation and retraction, already established as thematically significant in this text, the immediacy of the present tense narration is countermanded by the distancing effect of the third person narratorial stance. While establishing, through the style of the narration, that his source will be himself, Coetzee immediately undermines this 'authenticity' by placing the protagonist at a remove, so that

---

<sup>2</sup> The boy can be identified only by piecing together disparate references. The first reference to his surname is a reference to the Coetzee clan, proprietors of Voëlfontein: "The Karoo is Freek's country, his home; the Coetzee's, drinking tea and gossiping on the farmhouse stoep, are like swallows, seasonal" (87). The boy's first name is revealed only later: "There is one more difficult moment to get through, the moment when his father says, 'Where's John?'" (*Boyhood* 103).

while he undertakes to reveal himself, he at the same time withdraws the promise of privileged access by locating these revelations outside of himself. The author acknowledges, in his attempt to present the truth of himself, that this process is one of re-imagining himself: the insertion of himself into the past, the reanimation of the ghost of a past self with the experienced mind of his present self, a process which is neither seamless nor unproblematic. Coetzee uses the formal signal of third person narration to indicate this distance between his past and present selves, while at the same time acknowledging that through this process the young John Coetzee is being made to ‘live again’, hence the use of present tense narration.

The young protagonist experiences the “fear of being led on to say too much” (Gide 212):

Whatever he wants, whatever he likes, has sooner or later to be turned into a secret. He begins to think of himself as one of those spiders that live in a hole in the ground with a trapdoor. Always the spider has to be scuttling back into its hole, closing the trapdoor behind it, shutting out the world, hiding.  
(*Boyhood* 28)

The narrator does not appear to share a similar inhibition and hence the autobiography does not appear to suffer from an embargo on exposure. The narrator is, in retrospect, aware of the mask or fictional self he presented to the world: “By living this double life he has created for himself a burden of imposture” (13). In articulating what it is that he hides from others, in articulating the fear of revelation, the narrator appears to ignore the lesson learnt by the young boy: “Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more” (29), and appears, in the very revelation of the fear of revelation, to come clean and negate the need to conceal. This would appear to be one of the purposes of writing an autobiography – to expunge secret shame by making it public.

Hart delineates three forms, or modes, of autobiography which suggest different authorial intentions: “‘Confession’ as an intention or impulse places the self relative to nature, reality; ‘apology’ places the self relative to social and/or moral law; ‘memoir’ places the self relative to time, history, cultural pattern and change” (227). Every autobiography contains a combination of these intentions in different proportions. On the surface *Boyhood* is

primarily apology, an attempt to explain to the world how a unique configuration of historical, social and familial conditions shaped the personal characteristics of the protagonist, and by extrapolation, to indicate which of his idiosyncrasies are not attributable to any circumstance other than the subject's uniqueness. It is an apology which relies on the very specific moral and social climate of South Africa in the 1950s, a climate which oppresses the protagonist, and which, once overcome, vindicates his sense of morality and integrity. Childhood is portrayed as a time of learning to "hate [his] own nature" (*Disgrace* 90), and hating the shameful secret of an inner self which is different from the obsequious outer self he presents to the world. The fact that young Coetzee feels oppressed and shamed by a narrowly conformist and often violent society exonerates him from the charge of complicity (by virtue of sharing the culture, language and race of the oppressors)<sup>3</sup> in that society.

While Coetzee does not explicitly reflect on the naiveté of his young subject, he signals the unreliability of the young Coetzee's world view by allowing him moments which the reader is more than capable of perceiving as mistaken childish faith: "The baby is, after all, formed in the stomach. So it makes sense for the baby to come out of the backside. . . . He is quietly convinced he is right. It is part of the trust between his mother and himself" (*Boyhood* 58). Where the young Coetzee is most ignorant, the narrator, in representing that blindness, is most knowing. In *Boyhood*, Coetzee never gives us the sense that he is caught unawares by any revelation of previously unknown or unrecognised traits or motives in his younger self: the text does not record a journey of self-discovery. Nor is there, strictly speaking, an organising principle, or end towards which Coetzee is steering the narrative. What the text does reveal, though this revelation is not acknowledged in the narrative itself, is a series of simultaneous gestures of concealment and exposure which have as much relevance

---

<sup>3</sup> Many of Coetzee's protagonists suffer from an inability to shrug off the burden of belonging to the class of oppressors. Their complicity cannot be undone even by openly opposing the group to which they belong. The magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a prime example.

in the “dramatic present” as in the “narrated past” (Hart 226). This tension between revelation and camouflage is typical of the endless regression of self-doubt produced by self-scrutiny, and turns this text into a confession of the mature narrator, focalised through the young John Coetzee.

*Boyhood* appears artless, openly parading the very things that the young Coetzee is pathologically anxious to hide, to protect from the gaze of outsiders: his “ugly, black, crying, babyish core” (112), the “contemptible secret” that his heart is “old . . . dark and hard” (123). The narrator reveals his mechanisms of defence, his equivocation, his lying, his creation of stories around himself. This technique is very disarming: to confess to some faults immediately is one way of attracting attention away from the rawest point, that flaw of which one is most ashamed. The young Coetzee’s sense of shame seems to attach itself to one of three preoccupations: family, sexuality, and physical violence. These three are intimately bound together into a triangular structure of fear. He notices in the beating of Rob Hart that there is an affinity between sex and beating; he suspects that the signs of physical exertion, Rob Hart’s flushes and Miss Oosthuizen’s heaving breast, are signs for something other than the act of violence. He admits to going “rigid with fear when the beating starts” (13), but this fear does not seem to be provoked by the imagined pain of the beating or even the physical violation, but rather the fear that he will not be able to come out from behind his desk and accept such a beating. This is a fear of double exposure: firstly he fears being singled out and made the object of general scrutiny while he is “made to bend and [be] . . . beaten on [his] backside” (7); secondly he fears that he will be so incapacitated by fear and shame that he will bring down more disapprobation and ignominy on his head by refusing to go up and receive his caning. The beatings in class are like the test faced at the wicket, “a test he sees no way of passing, yet does not know how to dodge” (54), where “the secret that he manages to cover up elsewhere is relentlessly probed and exposed” (54). At the same time he knows that beating would be an initiation into ‘normality’; he wishes his father would “beat him and turn him into a normal boy” (13), and believes that if he could somehow get through this rite of

passage he would come out 'normal' on the other side. He experiences shame at the idea that his family is unusual, that he occupies an unnatural and despotic place in the household. The persona he creates for public life, primarily spent at school, is the exact opposite "a lamb, meek and mild" (13) who makes himself as inoffensive and obscure as possible. Both his fear of the spectacle of being beaten and his sense of difference for never having been beaten give rise to his duplicity, and in his imposture there is further cause for shame, and further fear of exposure, in a never-ending regression.

Guilt over the nature of his sexual thoughts is another cause for shame and concealment. 'His' sexual thoughts are almost fetishistic: "He prefers tight shorts to loose shorts . . . He likes to gaze at slim smooth brown legs in tight shorts. Best of all he loves the honey-tan legs of boys with blond hair" (56); "He is wearing pants so short that they sit tightly across his neat buttocks and leave his slim clay-brown thighs almost naked. . . . There are hundreds of boys like him . . . girls too in short frocks that show off their slim legs" (60); "Being with [Agnes] is different from being with his school friends. It has something to do with her softness, her readiness to listen, but also with her slim brown legs, her bare feet" (94). It is not only the legs themselves that cause him to feel unexplainable and uncomfortable desires, but the gracefulness of their movement, the way Agnes "dances from stone to stone" (94), or the way the coloured children "float across the earth . . . barely touching it" (60). His shame centres on the unaccountability, the unsuitability of his *desire*: "What is there that can be done with legs beyond devouring them with one's eyes? What is desire for?" (56); and on the inexplicability of *beauty*: "It is a matter of shape, of perfection of shape. . . . When he sees that perfection manifested in white marble something thrills inside him; a gulf opens up; he is on the edge of falling" (56-57).

The convolutions of conscience or consciousness are most intricately explained in relation to this sexual shame. He imagines the coloured children, with their perfectly formed bodies, and lack of parental control, coming together in a "feast of sexual delight" (60). He then accuses himself of having a "dark and guilty soul" (60) for imagining what these



children do not:

That is how the questioning always works. At first it may wander here and there; but in the end, unfailingly, it turns and gathers itself and points a finger at himself. Always it is he who sets the train of thinking in motion; always it is the thinking that slips out of his control and returns to accuse him. (60)

The young protagonist manifests the predicament of the Modern age in which man, instead of God, is responsible for the examination of his conscience. This phenomenon is explained by René Girard as the moment at which

each individual discovers in the solitude of his consciousness that the promise [that God is dead and Man has taken his place] is false but no one is able to universalize his experience. The promise remains true for Others . . . Original sin is no longer the truth about all men as in a religious universe. . . . Everyone thinks that he alone is condemned to hell, and that is what makes it hell. (Girard 57)

The young Coetzee calls it the worst of all his secrets: “Among all these boys he is the only one in whom this dark erotic current runs; among all this innocence and normality, he is the only one who desires” (*Boyhood* 57).<sup>4</sup> The ‘death of God’ transforms confession into a secular activity, wherein the end to confession (absolution) must be brought about by means other than an intervention of divine grace.<sup>5</sup> When the protagonist’s particular sexual shame is examined as part of the secular “economy of confession” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 272) as opposed to the religious ‘sacrament of confession’, then consciousness of the perversion of his thoughts is translated into “confessable currency. . . . A shameful desire is a valuable desire. Conversely for a desire to have value it must have a secret, shameful component” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 272). Therefore, from the desire to confess to the shamefulness of one’s desires, springs yet another doubt about the motive for confession and the capacity to be forgiven. By confessing those things which are shameful,

---

<sup>4</sup> Once again he is set apart, like Fyodor and Raskolnikoff, by being plagued by emotions and thoughts which (he believes) ordinary human beings, in their carefree unthinkingness, do not experience or contemplate.

<sup>5</sup> Dostoevsky also famously said: “If God is dead, everything is permitted”. Fyodor is damned in *The Master of Petersburg* by writing a book in which “everything is permitted” and thus the challenge facing the Raskolnikoff’s, Fyodor’s, and John’s of the post-Nietzschean world is to resist the will-to-excess which is typical of those “to whom sensation does not come by natural means” (*The Master of Petersburg* 114).

one keeps in reserve deeper, and more shameful truths about one's self-serving perversion of the very act of confession.

Tellingly, Coetzee isolates in Rousseau's *Confessions* the paradoxical sense of shame that accompanies one's specific predilections, which, at the same time, signals one's uniqueness and hence value:

What strikes me about Rousseau's account of buying is the *nakedness* of the transaction, a nakedness from which Rousseau shies away - though what I call nakedness, people without Rousseau's "peculiarity" might call merely openness or legitimacy. By going to a shop and proffering money and saying, "I want that cake," Rousseau would be consenting to participate in a mode of treating his own desire, his own "I want," as if it were not unique but were the same as the desire of every Tom, Dick and Harry who wants a cake. ("Truth in Autobiography" 2)

The way in which Coetzee formulates the first sentence in this passage is important. He does not group himself with those who do not appreciate Rousseau's proclivity, but, by

implication, aligns himself with Rousseau, so that the sentence might be rendered thus:

"though what I call nakedness, people without Rousseau's [and my] 'peculiarity' might call merely openness or legitimacy". *Boyhood* relates a number of instances which show that Coetzee intimately understands Rousseau's particular squeamishness. The assertion of his difference from others is repeated and emphatic. It is also accompanied by the experience of a most frightful sense of division within himself, of discomfort in his own skin. He creates an alternative persona to mask his true self, which is too shameful, too deviant, too demanding, too pathetic to be displayed openly. He sometimes feels hatred for his mother because she is a witness to the existence of this other self, and hence, also, to his shame about himself. Shaun de Waal notices this propensity in the young John Coetzee, and comments,

He is different, and knows it, an outsider separated from others by what he feels keenly – sometimes simply guilt, shame, embarrassment. Yet he doesn't want to be "normal", to give up the undefined sense of his own specialness, any more than he wants to relinquish his position at the top of the class. (de Waal 3)

The narrator, by subtly betraying a feeling of pride in the fact that the young protagonist is distinguished by his sense of shame, reveals the juxtaposition of "two temporal

planes” in *Boyhood*, “the narrative past and the dramatic present” (Shumaker, cited in Hart 226). The narrative changes from an *apologia* about a past self into a *confession* by a present self. Unlike Frederick Douglass’s moment of supreme autobiographical reflexivity: “My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (*Narrative* 43), the narrator of *Boyhood* is only visible through a stylistic and linguistic dissection of the narrative. Contributing to this lack of reflexivity is the present tense narration. With the use of the present tense one senses that Coetzee is not after “authenticity”, achieved through “the immediacy of the language”, as “a guarantee of the truth of the past it recounts. . . . a naive language that reveals the confessant in the moment of confession in the same instant that it reveals the past he confesses – a past necessarily become uncertain” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 268). Coetzee presents this younger self to us with the same immediacy that “he” appears to the narrator at the present moment, as a subject which can be described and contextualised but not challenged. This would account for the perception that Coetzee “examines his young self with the dispassionate curiosity of an explorer rediscovering his own early footprints” (dust jacket summary); it also accounts for the sense of the narrator’s invulnerability either to surprising revelations about or misrepresentation of that former self. An example is provided by the episode in which he returns home from school one day to find their maid, Celia, and her younger, and more attractive, sister drinking tea in the kitchen. The young boy’s claim that “there is something in [the sister’s] smile which confuses him; he does not know where to look and retires to his room” (151) is represented by the narrator in such a way that what remains mysterious for the young Coetzee is perfectly obvious to us, as well as the mature narrator, as a moment of sexual awareness.

The language of an autobiography can turn a historical document, in which the subject is dominated by the language of the historian, into a document which does not reproduce “a reality; [but] instead . . . demands that language manifest its ‘own truth’” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 268). In *Boyhood* the narrator vents a desire to publicise his shame while

keeping its true meaning a secret. “The only sure truth in autobiography,” writes Coetzee, “is that one’s self-interest will be located at one’s blind spot” (*Doubling the Point* 392).

Coetzee’s blind spot is located at the point at which he appears most candid about the sense of shame he feels. ‘Shame’ is actually a mask for ‘pride’ which is itself a source of shame, something which cannot be admitted. The shame imposed on the young Coetzee by others, by his sense of difference from them, is in the course of his life vindicated and transmogrified into pride. History exposes these others as crude, cruel, prejudiced, narrow, and insensitive, and he is at last exonerated ethically by his difference from ‘them’. It is his estimation of his uniqueness, specialness, and superiority, which is the real root cause of the shame and which is masked by this ‘false’ sense of shame. Like the figure of Raskolnikoff, in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, “he” vacillates between the desire to expose himself and the mortal fear of discovery. Raskolnikoff is partially exposed by an article he writes attesting to a division of humanity into two classes:

the first an inferior one, comprising ordinary men, the kind of material whose function it is to reproduce specimens like themselves; the other, a superior one, comprising men who have the gift or power to make a new word, thought, or deed felt. . . . To the first belong, in a general way, conservatives, men for order, who live in a state of obedience and love. . . . The next class however consists exclusively of men who break the law. . . . And if, in the execution of their idea, they should be obliged to shed blood, step over corpses, they can conscientiously do both in the interest of their idea. (Dostoevsky 195)

That Coetzee secretly believes himself to be of the second order is cause for shame, and is, as in the case of Raskolnikoff, a dangerous admission. His true nature, though expressed figuratively and enigmatically, credits him with the same destructive power which Fyodor, in *The Master of Petersburg*, exploits in writing in which “*everything is permitted*” (*The Master of Petersburg* 114). The young boy tells himself:

Nothing can touch you. There is nothing you are not capable of. Those are the two things about him, two things that are really one thing, the thing that is right about him and the thing that is wrong about him at the same time. This thing that is two things means that he will not die, no matter what; but does it not also mean that he will not live?

He is a baby. His mother picks him up, face forward, gripping him under the arms. His legs hang, his head sags, he is naked; but his mother holds him

up before her, advancing into the world. She has no need to see where she is going, she need only follow. Before him, as she advances, everything turns to stone and shatters. He is just a baby with a big belly and a lolling head, but he possesses this power. (*Boyhood* 113)

Members of this superior class are not without sensitivities or suffering. Raskolnikoff in fact tells us that being highly intelligent they are more likely to be afflicted by guilt and anguish, yet are nonetheless in possession of the right to overstep certain bounds. The crushing of his brother's fingers in the millie-grinding machine – “the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding” (119) – is evidence of a macabre testing of the limits of his own power. He admits to his tendency to traverse bounds when he describes his poking around the lodger's room: “[Trevelyn] kept his room, which was anyhow out of bounds, locked; but there was nothing interesting in it except an electric shaver made in America” (73). Neither the ban nor the lock keep him from knowing what was in the room.<sup>6</sup> In *The Master of Petersburg*, Fyodor makes a similar admission: “As a child he used to spy on visitors to the household and trespass surreptitiously on their privacy. It is a weakness that he has associated till now with a refusal to accept limits to what he is permitted to know, with the reading of forbidden books, and thus with his vocation” (71). Both Raskolnikoff and Fyodor link this sense of unboundedness with membership of an elect. For Fyodor it is his literary genius that sets him apart: “I am the one

. . . I am the one who carries the madness. My fate, my burden, not yours” (*The Master of Petersburg* 202), he tells Nechaev. But membership in this group is plagued by a propensity to indulge a belief in one's unlimited powers without the mediation of a sense of duty to other human beings. ‘John’ displays his vulnerability to this will-to-excess in writing: “What he would write, if he could, if it were not Mr Wheelan reading it, would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of

---

<sup>6</sup> He suggests that the lock was unnecessary because the room was in any event protected from trespass by a parental ban, yet in the same sentence does an about-turn by revealing that his desire is circumscribed by neither.

control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightening crackling across the sky” (*Boyhood* 140). The affinity with Fyodor’s surrender to the demonic allure of the power of writing is undeniable: “What flows on to the paper is neither blood nor ink but an acid, black, with an unpleasing green when the light glances off it. On the page it does not dry: if one were to pass a finger over it, one would experience a sensation both liquid and electric. A writing that even the blind could read” (*The Master of Petersburg* 18). Significantly, the young Coetzee feels the censoring gaze of an outsider, Mr Wheelan, suggesting that he is still to some degree bound by allegiance to the social body and codes of acceptable behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

The only incontrovertible allegiance held by the boy is not to his family or society, however, but to the farm, Voëlfontein. The farm is described as idyllic to the point of being mythical. It is a place where “there is no decay” (83), water chills itself, meat does not rot, and pumpkins do not shrivel in the heat. Anything that can survive in the arid conditions of the Karoo is a miracle, and the farm, an oasis of plenty in the desert, is “thereby blessed” (90). The farm exists outside of space and time. Even when presented with evidence of the finite nature of the farm – a boundary fence separating Voëlfontein from a neighbouring farm – the boy, Coetzee, asserts the ascendancy of the mythical farm: “In his imagination Voëlfontein is a kingdom in its own right. There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein” (91); and when the seasonal sheep shearing is over, his belief that “It will never end; there is no reason why it should ever end, as long as there are years” (95) is as much about the farm which gives rise to these cycles, as it is about the activities themselves. The farm is a magically protected place for the young boy. He attempts to overcome his fear of water by sailing on the dam because “This is the farm: no ill can happen here” (83). Textually, this section on the farm performs its status as a capsule: the description of life on the farm is contained within a single (and coincidentally the longest) chapter, and is situated

---

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the self he presents to the world is overly anxious not to transgress the convoluted rules of social engagement, even when these remain obscure.

centrally in the scheme of the narrative, like an oasis in the desert of lovelessness and disruption that characterise the rest of John's life. On the farm he wants to be "a creature of the desert . . . like a lizard" (83), quick, lithe, sinewy and tough enough to withstand the harsh desert conditions. This desired incarnation can be compared with the animals he images himself as in other parts of the novel: "the spider . . . scuttling back into its hole, closing the trapdoor behind it, shutting out the world, hiding" (28); "a crab, pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene" (151); "a tortoise inside its shell" (162), animals that survive by cheating, by protecting the pulpy, soft interior of their bodies with a barrier, a façade. The 'farm' is one place where he can cast off his 'mask', yet the farm's existence positively reinforces his difference from his friends who do not come from families with farms: "through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance" (22). This is another instance in which an acute awareness of difference from others is converted into pride in his superiority: the distinction that comes from having "two farms behind him" (22).

At Voëlfontein John's sense of being embattled, of having to present a front to the world, fades, and he is able to make the first, and only, real connection with another human being recorded in the narrative. His relationship with his cousin, Agnes, is markedly different from all others in that it hints at genuine mutuality and reciprocity. Whereas with his school friends John has already learned to hide and to obfuscate – "Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more" (29) – with Agnes he talks about "things that the grown-ups would shake their heads over: whether the universe had a beginning; what lies beyond Pluto, the dark planet; where God is, if he exists" (95). She is the only person in relation to whom he mentions the word 'love': "Is this love – this easy generosity, this sense of being understood at last, of not having to pretend?" (95).

There are three other people for whom John manifests emotions suggestive of love, which would *be* love, if only he did not feel his difference from them so keenly. The very terms used to describe John's attitudes to Uncle Son, on the one hand, and Ros and Freek, on the other – admiration, respect, fascination – suggest the unequalness of the relationships.

Each of these people are admired for their essential difference from him – all three are privy to a knowledge about the farm and the way it works from which he is excluded, all three have a connection with the farm: Uncle Son has a dynastic or proprietorial claim, and Freek and Ros have a connection with the land that pre-dates even Grandfather Coetzee. He feels Uncle Son implicitly rejects his ‘unnatural’ claim on him by building a barrier of formality, of words: “If Son really liked him, he would be . . . free and offhand . . . . Instead, Son is careful always to speak English to him, even though he speaks Afrikaans back. It has become a point of honour with both of them; they do not know how to get out of the trap” (100). With Ros and Freek too, it is language and its formulations that signal difference, the lack of community: “even with them he has to speak torturously constructed sentences to avoid calling them *jy* when they call him *kleinbaas*” (86). There is perhaps no better articulation of the lack of mutuality and reciprocity than the embarrassment he feels at not knowing how to answer Tryn, the maidservant and Ros’s wife, “when she speaks to him in the third person, calling him ‘*die kleinbaas*’ as if he were not present” (86).

The farm is presented as a haven, a place that he loves, a love that is nevertheless “edge[d with] pain” (79). This pain is deeply interwoven with his sense of identity: “The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is belong. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*”(96). But secretly he formulates an even more emphatic assertion, “*I belong to the farm*” (96). Whereas the first formulation suggests a level of comfort, of fittingness in his being on the farm, the second is less conditional; to suggest that he belongs to the farm is to assert his status as an integral part of the farm, to assert that the farm has some kind of claim on him, owns him in some respect. He expands upon this tension later when he speaks of the destabilisation of his mother’s influence over him while he is on the farm as the “[clash of] two servitudes” (96). However, it is during the climax in this section dedicated to the farm that the status of the farm as ‘fiction’ is exposed. Not only does the articulation of the sophisticated linguistic difference in the two prepositions following the word ‘belong’ make us aware of the controlling consciousness of the mature



Coetzee, but the prevalence of archetypal and symbolic descriptions transform Voëlfontein into a palimpsest ‘South African farm’ whose ilk can be recognised in almost any farm novel or ‘plaasroman’. This farm is born of the longing for the past age of his grandfather, the gentleman farmer, the patriarch of the Coetzee’s: “[his uncles and aunts] like to be nostalgic about the past, but none of them want to go back to it. He does. He wants everything to be as it was in the past” (82). For young John, and for the reader familiar with South African literature, the farm is a mythical place:

One dream topography that the South African pastoral projects is . . . of a network of boundaries crisscrossing the surface of the land, marking off thousands of farms, each a separate kingdom ruled over by a benign patriarch with, beneath him, a pyramid of contented and industrious children, grandchildren, and serfs. But there is a rival dream topography as well: of South Africa as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty and unchanged long after man has passed from its face. (*White Writing* 6-7)

*Boyhood* articulates both these pastoral conceptions without any apparent sense of contradiction. The former is clearly linked to the ability to imagine a peopled landscape:

if he stands at the kitchen door he can hear . . . the low stream of talk that he loves to eavesdrop on: a soft white web of gossip spun over past and present, a web being spun at the same moment in other kitchens too, the Van Rensburg kitchen, the Alberts kitchen, the Nigrini kitchen, the various Botes kitchens. (85)

The landscape is populated and inscribed not by cultivation or fences, but by words, “soft, comforting” (85) women’s words, figuratively clothing the landscape with human histories. But this vision is undermined and eroded by the divisions which creep in between master and servant, by the embarrassment of having servants in the kitchen, by Ros’s unalienable right of succession on the farm, by the claim to the land heard in the hum of silence which reverberates over the graves of the coloured “servants and hirelings” (97).

In *White Writing*, Coetzee sees as emerging from the tradition of the pastoral novel in South Africa a debate about the receptiveness of the African landscape to colonization. The first position holds that “landscape is humanised when inscribed by hand and plough” (*White Writing* 7), but to those espousing the alternative position “it is by no means clear that the

ploughshare is enough to break the resistance of Africa” (*White Writing* 7). In *Boyhood*, the image of an empty landscape, one which is harsh, alien, impenetrable (*White Writing* 7), which will reclaim the farm once the swallow-like settlers have moved on, emerges in patches where the pastoral myth has been eroded:

in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be here. (96)

Novels embodying this second “dream topography” of the landscape are, in some sense, anti-pastoral, in that even when they accord the landscape the status of ‘mother’, “it is more often than not as a harsh, dry mother without curves or hollows, infertile, unwilling to welcome her children back even when they ask to be buried in her, or as a mother cowed by the blows of the cruel sun-father” (*White Writing* 9). The presence of both ‘dream topographies’ or pastoral myths in the descriptions of Voëlfontein suggests that *Boyhood* is another site on which this debate is staged.

It is significant that the image of the farm as a harmonious idyll is interrupted most frequently by tensions that arise out of the master-servant relationship. The ban which rules the farm encapsulated in the word “*mustn’t* . . . [which he hears] more often on the farm than anywhere else” (91), is a representation of the coloniser’s inability to form a relationship with the land because of his inability to love a peopled landscape, a failure of love which results in “the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa . . . [because it has] consistently been directed towards *the land*, that is toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers” (“Jerusalem Prize” 97). The young Coetzee is guilty of this tendency, but he also manifests a curiosity about the lives of the people whose right to the land predates and supersedes that of the Coetzees, and whose pre-eminence he is prevented from acknowledging: “He would hero-worship Freek if it were permitted” (87). The young John Coetzee is figured as the “lone poet in empty space . . . in the words he throws out to the landscape, in the echoes he listens for, he is seeking a dialogue

with Africa, a reciprocity with Africa, that will allow him an identity better than that of visitor, stranger, transient” (*White Writing* 8): he laments that on the farm he “will never be more than a guest, an uneasy guest” (*Boyhood* 79); yet alone, out on the veld he nevertheless seeks this reciprocity in “breath[ing] the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*” (95-96).

Despite his ritual of washing his hands in the desert sand, the land remains unreceptive, even antagonistic. He visits the site of the original farmhouse, reclaimed by the land; the fountain has dried up, the orchard and garden have been erased, and in a lone palm tree is a nest of “fierce little black bees” (97):

He would like the bees to recognise that he, when he visits, comes with clean hands, not to steal from them but to greet them, to pay his respects. But as he nears the palm-tree they begin to buzz angrily; outriders swoop on him, warning him away; once he has even to flee, running ignominiously across the veld with the swarm behind him, zigzagging and waving his arms . . . (98)

This is symbolic of the danger he faces at the hands of the land’s original inhabitants, those, like Eddie, to whom a debt of love is owed: “he knows that Eddie is thinking of him. In the dark Eddie’s eyes are two yellow slits. One thing he knows for sure: Eddie will have no pity on him” (77). The paranoia spawned by this “failure of love” (“Jerusalem Prize” 97) is part of a self-perpetuating cycle in which the master is trapped as surely as is the servant: “‘You mustn’t ask them to touch guns,’ [uncle Son] says. ‘They know they mustn’t’” (*Boyhood* 90). In this section devoted to the farm, Coetzee reverts to *apologia*, articulating the place ‘the farm’ has in the formation of his identity as white South African. In the expression of his awareness of, and embarrassment at, the unacknowledged issues of race and entitlement to the land on the farm, complicated by his own sense of disenfranchisement, he attempts to exonerate himself ethically.

In the description of the farm, Voëlfontein, is an expression of his desire for insulation from the world, an escape from the pressures brought to bear on him “by the soul of society, by society in its hopes and dreams” (*Doubling the Point* 340). As a result of his original choice of a career in mathematics, Coetzee concludes about this ‘he’ who is his former self, that “he does not engage with his situation at a philosophical level . . . he is trying to find a

capsule in which he can live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world” (*Doubling the Point* 392-93). For ‘him’, engagement means exposing himself to pollution by the sordid and fallen nature of the world as he sees it – involvement means getting his hands dirty. If science and mathematics are insulating, then writing, which ‘he’ does “surreptitiously” (392), is engaging, which is why, at first, ‘he’ repudiates it. Writing offers the young Coetzee the opportunity to emerge, Phoenix-like, from the pettiness of his lies and fears; but writing, the mature Coetzee realises, is also a gamble: he runs the risk of ‘falling’, in the way that Fyodor falls: “from being a body plunging into darkness he shall become a body within whose core a plunge into darkness is taking place, a body which contains its own falling and its own darkness” (*The Master of Petersburg* 234). For the South African writer, the urge to succumb to the “descent into representations that have no place in the world” (*The Master of Petersburg* 241), is intensified by

the crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. . . . In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination. (“Jerusalem Prize” 99)

Coetzee here suggests a synonymy between ‘the world’, ‘reality’, and ‘truth’. Yet ‘truth’ has a second set of associations which are juxtaposed with these. Art is both an escape from truth,<sup>8</sup> in the sense of faithfulness to history, or devotion to fact, and an approximation of “a ‘higher’ truth” (*Doubling the Point* 17), a notion allied with art, the imagination, and a Platonic realm of ideal abstractions like ‘justice’ and ‘freedom’. Coetzee formulates these opposing conceptions of ‘truth’ as a debate, which he sees as operating in his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts”, between “Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values” and “Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness” (*Doubling the Point* 392). Paradoxically, though, to achieve this ideal state of grace he has to

---

<sup>8</sup> In his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” Coetzee remarks: “We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth” (*Doubling the Point* 99).

become engaged, he has to get his hands dirty, in the way that David Lurie, to recuperate “his idea of the world” (*Disgrace* 146), handles the dogs which are to be exterminated.

In the interview which concludes *Doubling the Point*, published five years before *Boyhood*, Coetzee reflects on the nature of autobiography as well as providing a kind of mini-autobiography of what he calls “Part One” (395), or the first stage of his life. This synopsis contains, in abbreviated form, much of the information that is found in *Boyhood*. The major difference is that in this interview Coetzee’s vantage point is clear: he is speaking at “a reflective distance from [him]self” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 268), entrenching the difference between his present and his former selves, whereas in *Boyhood* “everything takes place, in effect, in a present so pure that the past itself is relived as present feeling” (Starobinski, cited in Hart 248). Although one of the first points he makes about autobiography in this interview is that it is a type of biography, “of storytelling in which you select material from a lived past and fashion it into a narrative that leads into a living present in a more or less seamless way” (*Doubling the Point* 391), in both this interview and in *Boyhood*, Coetzee finds it impossible to invoke this kind of seamless continuity in talking about himself. In the interview he draws special attention to the distance between his present and past selves by speaking of himself in the third person as both “the speaker [of this story]” (*Doubling the Point* 392), and as “a teenager, this person, this subject, the subject of this story, this I” (392). This introduction to the protagonist serves both to illustrate the author’s alienation from his ‘subject’ (a somewhat dispassionate term when applied to oneself) and to enact the atrophy of “authority” in refusing to claim responsibility for, or own, his own former incarnations.

Coetzee’s concluding remarks gesture towards continuity but do not effect it, due to the continued insistence on a division between ‘him’ and ‘me’: “The discipline within which he (and *he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography) had trained himself/myself to think brought illuminations that I can’t imagine him or me reaching by any other route” (394). Yet here we see the dissonance between ‘him’ and ‘me’ not as the

opposition between self and other, but as a divided self, as when earlier in the interview Coetzee says that he sees his essay, “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” as “a submerged dialogue between two persons. One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am” (*Doubling the Point* 392). Couched in the kind of conditional terms that it is, it is a situation most accurately described as the parallel existence of two selves contained within the same man. The “more shadowy” self is the one about whom Coetzee feels no need to prevaricate:

The second person [shadowy self] takes up the position I have sketched above [in the dialogue between cynicism and grace], but in a more extreme version: there is no ultimate truth about oneself, there is no point in trying to reach it, what we call the truth is only a shifting reappraisal whose function is to make one feel good. (392)

Coetzee, it seems, doubts his ability “to *set down the truth*, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 293). Thus even in the interview, Coetzee images his life as two sections of a book: “I find the story I tell about myself has a certain definiteness of outline up to the time of that essay; after that it becomes hazier, lays itself open to harder questioning from the future” (392); and he concludes the interview by saying: “That is Part One, as I see it today, in the light of all that has passed between us. I’ll stop there” (395).

That it is the “more shadowy” self, who is unequivocally the protagonist of Part One of Coetzee’s story, the part “spoken in a wavering voice, for the speaker is not only blind, but . . . disabled, disqualified” (392), suggests that he is ‘shadowy’ not in the sense of being undefined, but rather that he is a darker, less idealistic self. About the other, alternative self, we learn no more than that he is the “person [Coetzee] desired to be” and that he argues for ‘grace’ as opposed to ‘cynicism’. The bipartite structure of Coetzee’s story suggests that ‘Part Two’ would be materially different from ‘Part One’, but whether that difference centres on the coming into being of the “person [Coetzee] was feeling his way toward” (392) remains unconfirmed.

*Boyhood* manifests this desire for metamorphosis on at least two occasions. The first follows on the heels of his realisation that his fear of exposure leaves him isolated and with no support. He says: “It is up to him to somehow get beyond childhood, beyond family and school, to a new life where he will not need to pretend anymore. . . . Nothing he experiences in Worcester, at home or at school, leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring” (13-14). Once the family has moved back to Cape Town and the young Coetzee is attending St Joseph’s, the pathos of his situation is again articulated:

Cape Town is not making him cleverer, it is making him stupider. The realisation causes panic to well up in him. Whoever he truly is, whoever the true ‘I’ is who ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood is not being allowed to be born, is being kept puny and stunted.

He has this feeling most despairingly in Mr Whelan’s classes. There is a great deal more that he can write than Mr Whelan will ever allow. Writing for Mr Whelan is not like stretching his wings; on the contrary, it is like huddling in a ball, making himself as small and inoffensive as he can. (139-40)

At St Joseph’s the tyranny of cruelty is replaced by the tyranny of boredom, of conformity. The young Coetzee expresses an impatience with his “ugly, black, crying, babyish core” (112), and creates an anticipation of some change or growth which will transform him. This does not take place within the time frame of the narrative, but nevertheless creates in the reader an expectation of such a transformation, a transformation which is bound up with maturity and, more importantly, with writing.

The narrator of *Boyhood* suggests that “the first prerequisite is to *be oneself*” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 268), that contrary to the expectation created by the genre of autobiography, “one is in danger of not being oneself when one lives at a reflective distance from oneself” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 268). Consequently, the narrator is constrained, as is the protagonist, by the predicament of subjectivity: “The sky opens, he sees the world as it is, then the sky closes and he is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself” (*Boyhood* 161). The narrator is, however, sufficiently self-aware to maintain, in the presentation of this younger self, the mask of ‘shame’. While the majority of the narrative appears concerned with attesting his divided nature, the ‘blame’ for his

existing as different personas is laid at the feet of those who cause him to feel shameful and unacceptable. His secret 'true' self – the cruel and arrogant despot, the pervert – would appear to be most in need of justification and explanation, but Coetzee manages to invest this 'true' self with pathos, and, because it is the oppressed self, evoke pity on its behalf. This implicates the narrator in the act of secular confession, embroiled in a struggle with the impasse of self-doubt and self-deception which refuses to bring resolution and absolution. Confession and writing (as portrayed in *The Master of Petersburg*) are both conceived of as perversions of the truth. While the sacrament of confession offers the intervention of grace which enables forgiveness and hence absolution, the narrative, the trail of words, resists the onset of closure. *Boyhood* ends, not with the anticipation of the intervention of grace, but rather with the expectation of the continuation of writing: "He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?" (166). The narrative records that at this point in the past, and in the narrative, the burden of responsibility, the writer's "transcendental imperative", begins to assert itself, and continues to be felt, to the last word of the text, and beyond.

One attempt to intervene in the spiralling infinitude of self-scrutiny and self-chastisement is to "break the rules" in a "game of limited truth". The phrase comes from Coetzee's description of how Tikhon's intervenes in Stavrogin's confession<sup>9</sup> by illuminating the self-consciousness and banality of the evil to which Stavrogin confesses ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 289). A strange altercation between Coetzee and an interviewer (Rian Malan) comes to mind:

Malan asked him what he thought his flaws were and Coetzee writing down the question answered, "How many would you like?"

Malan decided to leaven the silence with an anecdote of how when he was filming in Soweto he asked the mortuary attendant if he could bring out some corpses for the cameras. "How many would you like?" the mortuary attendant asked.

Coetzee looked up sharply, apparently rather startled. He put a line through

---

<sup>9</sup> This confession is portrayed in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*.



the question, muttering that his flaws would not be aired in the Sunday press.  
(cited in Sampson 5)

Coetzee appears to be taken aback by the likening of his flaws to dead bodies, and more specifically to the bodies of those who, as in *Age of Iron*, sacrificed themselves in the struggle against apartheid. Perhaps for Coetzee, the comparison shows up the paltry and self-conscious nature of his own transgressions, making him cognizant of the self-serving nature of confessions in which grace and self-forgiveness are excluded. The particular conflation of dead bodies and confessed sins is taken up by Clamence, the protagonist in Albert Camus’

*The Fall*:

I have ceased to like anything but confessions, and authors of confessions write especially to avoid confessing, to tell nothing of what they know. When they claim to get to the painful admissions, you have to watch out, for they are about to dress the corpse. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about. (cited in Lawlan 148)

This reinforces the suggestion that the moments of exposure in *Boyhood* are actually moments of concealment, and that it is precisely this deceit, dressed up as candour, of which the mature narrator is most ashamed, the ‘currency’ which he refuses to ‘spend’ in confession. *Disgrace*, the novel which follows *Boyhood*, stages the recovery of grace which is precarious in *Age of Iron*, and which is entirely missing in the world presented in *The Master of Petersburg*. The ascendancy of cynicism in *The Master of Petersburg* is not overturned in *Boyhood*, in which the young Coetzee has yet to weigh the competing demands of the writer's duty to society and to his will-to-write.

In *Boyhood*, the commitment of the narrator to uncover the truth about his former self, results in an exposure similar to the rawness felt by Fyodor in *The Master of Petersburg*: “It is as if the skin has been flayed from his face, as if, despite himself, he is continually thrusting upon the [mother and daughter] a hideous bleeding mask” (13-14). But what saves the protagonist of *Boyhood* is Coetzee’s belief that “we should not be too strict with our child selves, we should have the grace to forgive them for setting us on the paths that led us to become the people we are. . . . Forgiveness but also unflinchingness: that is the mixture I

have in mind, if it is attainable. First the unflinchingness, then the forgiveness” (*Doubling the Point* 29).

## Chapter Four

### *Disgrace*

‘Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go.’  
*Disgrace*, 1999.

Few novels present us with as enticing a prospect for comparison between an author and a fictional character as *Disgrace* does; it is difficult to resist the urge to extrapolate from the fictional to the factual, to make the connection between protagonist David Lurie and the “white South African” of the “latter half of the twentieth century”, a “disabled, disqualified . . . man-who-writes” (Coetzee’s self-description, *Doubling the Point* 392). Perhaps a comparison of this kind need not be spurious; that is to say, that in portraying the situation of a South African academic, David Lurie, Coetzee elucidates the difficulties faced by a category of people known as intellectuals, a category to which he belongs as a Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town, and by virtue of his being “the most bookish of all authors in South Africa” (Watson, “Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee” 44).

Watson provides an analysis of the way in which Coetzee’s fiction enacts the predicament of the South African intelligentsia which “left in the cold . . . deprived of a role . . . like any other social organ, decays and begins to exhibit every type of morbid symptom” (46). Coetzee’s plea, made in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, might well be a refrain for the intellectual, whose thoughts, abstracted or divorced from meaningful action, turn in on themselves, becoming preoccupied with their own impotence and irrelevance, producing neuroses: “How we [novelists] long to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation” (98).

Cherry Wilhelm recognises this in *In the Heart of the Country* when she notes a “self revulsion: symbolic, symptomatic, structural and sis-making” (43). *In the Heart of the*

*Country* is one of Coetzee's most obviously bookish novels, but all of Coetzee's fiction displays (or is it 'performs'?) Coetzee's literariness. Most of Coetzee's novels reproduce this pathological self-consciousness in alluding to themselves as literary artifice. By comparison, in *Disgrace* we have an undisguised confrontation of the role and fate of the academic in South Africa in the 'person' of David Lurie. By eschewing the devices of postmodern texts which insist on their own illusionary existence, in *Disgrace* Coetzee makes forays into the realm of realism:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no separate existence, can only exist in things. So when it needs to debate ideas . . . it is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them.  
(Coetzee, "What is Realism?" 65)

The physical attack on Lurie and his daughter, Lucy, provides a realist scenario for the battle between Lucy's pragmatic and Lurie's dogmatic solutions for dealing with violence and guilt. Lurie's attempts to assimilate the attack fall foul of the fact that the criteria he uses belong to a different world – the world of ideas and abstractions – a world inhabited by "dead people" (162).<sup>1</sup>

Yet David Lurie's idea of the world, indebted as it is to artistic representations and abstractions, is in constant conflict with the violence and indelicacy of life in South Africa. When he returns to Cape Town to find that his house has been ransacked, he wonders whether "Beethoven and Janáček found homes for themselves or have . . . been tossed out on the rubbish heap" (176). When some curious children peer over the wall at the "mad old man

---

<sup>1</sup> One feels that Coetzee's sympathies lie with David Lurie at this point, as opposed to the "Post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate [students who] . . . might as well have been hatched from eggs yesterday" (*Disgrace* 32), and who dismiss as 'irrelevant', 'obsolete' and 'elitist' anything which predates the last century. The literary references in the text are meant to reflect David Lurie's literary and scholarly background, yet one notices in the literary allusions which call on Greek and Roman mythology, Dante, Virgil, William Langland, Rainer Maria Rilke, Yeats, Goethe, and probably a few more (as well as artists and composers), that Coetzee is testifying to the place these have in his own education. It is difficult to imagine that a writer as self-conscious as Coetzee would be anything but very deliberate in his allusiveness, suggesting a predicament akin to Lurie's: the representations of the writers/scholars who precede him are so much a part of the fabric of his being that he cannot create or sustain his idea of the world without them.

who sits among the dogs” (212) eliciting a dissonant twanging from his banjo, he despairs at the yawning gap which exists between himself and his countrymen, a gap which he can’t imagine bridging: “How can he ever explain, to them, to their parents, to D village, what Teresa and her lover have done to deserve being brought back to this world?” (212). Their resurrection is not only futile, but, he realises, unjustifiable to his poor, illiterate, black compatriots living in the location.

Anne Waldron Neumann says of *Waiting for the Barbarians* that “it is an account of – it *is* – a struggle . . . to determine the value literary art can have in the context of a political struggle” (79). One sees, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, and in *Foe*, Coetzee’s struggle to avoid speaking on behalf of the ‘other’, a battle to avoid falling into reinforcing the colonial and patriarchal imposition of one’s voice on another. Yet in *Age of Iron*, and more directly in *Disgrace*, this lack of authority is extended to the speakers themselves, who no longer feel that they are allowed the authority to speak on their own behalf: they have no ‘right’ to raise a voice in their own defence, never mind to articulate the subject position of another.

The opera which Lurie writes is an attempt to free his voice. The motivation for the opera is a disenchantment with language, especially the English language. David Lurie wishes to hark back to a time before words, to the origins of speech which “lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul” (4).<sup>2</sup> English is no longer capable of serving this purpose because it is itself “tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites” (129). This image of the language can be

---

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor, in *The Master of Petersburg*, believes in the resurrecting power of music: “Poetry might bring back his son. He has a sense of the poem that would be required, a sense of its music” (17); “. . . a boy’s clear bell-voice pleading out of the deep dark. ‘Sing to me, dear father!’ . . . Somewhere within himself he would have to find not only that voice but the words, the true words. . . . Perhaps – he has an intimation – they may be waiting for him in one of the old ballads” (110-11). Mrs Curren too, puts faith in the ability of music to initiate a relationship with Vercueil: “Has it made its way into the heart too of the man in the sagging trousers eavesdropping at the window? Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound?” (*Age of Iron* 22); “I made tea, put on a record. Bar by bar the Goldberg Variations erected themselves in the air. . . . Against the garage wall the man was squatting . . . . Together we listened. At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love” (26-27).

contrasted with another metaphor which stresses the staid and rigid nature of English through its comparison with a dinosaur “expiring and settling in the mud” (117) to become a fossil, a relic. What these descriptions have in common, though, is the incongruity of English in Africa, and by extrapolation all things foreign or extrinsic which have been imposed on the land and its people throughout the colonisation of Africa. During the attack on himself and Lucy, Lurie laments the incompatibility of his education and his surroundings, and in doing so, invokes a comparison between the position of the original coloniser and the coloniser’s descendant at the two historically disparate moments in time, the inception and the dissolution of colonisation. The suggestion is that Africa remains inviolable to attempts at appropriation:

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see. (95)

In the same way that the language is diseased and disintegrating Wilhelm suggests that there is a “disease that lurks at the heart of the country: the self-defining lovelessness of father and daughter, master and slave, self and shadow” (43). While this reinforces the motif of sickness and emptiness as the condition of the South African intellectual, it also introduces an element which anticipates Coetzee’s Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech in 1987: love, or rather the “failure of love” (*Doubling the Point* 97). The ‘lovelessness’ which defines relationships in South Africa infects fathers and daughters, masters and slaves, and, in the image of “self and shadow”, is seen to invade the deepest recesses of identity and psychological integrity.

This failure of love, or “fraternity” (“Jerusalem Prize” 97), says Coetzee, is experienced most acutely by the white man in South Africa when,

stepping down for a moment from his lonely throne, giving in to a wholly human and understandable yearning for the people among whom he lives, he has discovered with a shock that fraternity by itself is not to be had, no matter how compellingly felt the impulse on both sides. Fraternity ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality. The vain and essentially sentimental

yearning that expresses itself in South Africa today is a yearning to have fraternity without paying for it. (97)

In this speech, Coetzee invokes a famous quotation from Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, we will find we are turned to hating" (46). It is ironic that in Paton's novel this fear is expressed by a black character, as it was this fear among white people that was played upon by nationalist politicians in the 1980s to justify iron-fisted rule, and it is this persistent underlying fear which Coetzee examines in *Disgrace*. David Lurie's reaction to the men he and Lucy meet on the lonely farm road betrays his prejudice, a fact which cannot be eradicated by a change in government and an insistence on political correctness. Racism is ingrained and tenacious, even in an educated man like Lurie, and the irony of the situation is that David's suspicion and fear are justified and Paton's prophesy is realised – 'they' have not only turned to hating but to vengeance. *Disgrace* sets about answering the question Coetzee asked twelve years before: "What is the price that has to be paid?" ("Jerusalem Prize" 97).

*Disgrace* is not just about David Lurie: "*Disgrace* is about a society in the process of being overhauled, in which morality has been 'erased and reborn' and all the terms have changed" (Lowry 7). In the past commentators have been quick to accuse Coetzee of not being explicit enough about South African issues, of not dealing with his own role as a South African writer. It is quite possible that they will be as unhappy about the result of a direct confrontation of the 'South African situation' as they were about his earlier "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions" (Gordimer 6). *Disgrace* reflects a cynicism arising from the fact that 'change' in South Africa has not come about gradually, but has been imposed, with the result that for many the new democracy is perfunctory rather than heartfelt. One suspects that while political correctness can be enforced by bodies such as the tribunal which decides Lurie's fate, and the committee on discrimination chaired by one of Lurie's colleagues, the very existence of such managed, utilitarian politics betrays a realisation that the minds and hearts of South Africa's people are not transformed by democratic elections

and representative government. Ironically, attempts to proscribe and police the undemocratic thoughts and actions of citizens undermines the basic freedoms that underpin democracy, and David Lurie's allusion to Mao's China and the Roman censor warn us of the tragic outcome of attempts to subordinate individual rights to a socially defined goal, or majority 'good', by depriving individuals of a private, personal, interior life.

The fact that such bodies have no jurisdiction over the hearts and minds of individuals perhaps explains their compensatory tyrannical insistence on the abjection of those who stand accused before them. Their insistence on meretricious sentiment is sophistically concealed in the jargon of human rights: "The wider community is entitled to know . . . what it is specifically that Professor Lurie acknowledges and therefore what it is that he is being censured for" (50). The insistence on a public "spectacle: breast beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact" (66), paradoxically betrays an obsession with the private – a preoccupation with the fact that the minds and hearts of individuals are out of reach. The paradox of these bodies of social control is that they cannot insist on repentance, and require only to be able to claim public moral victories. As Mathabane communicates to Lurie when he phones to offer him a confession upon which he need only affix his signature:

The criterion is not whether you are sincere. That is a matter, as I say, for your own conscience. The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it. (58)

One is reminded of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the way in which the media brought its "prurience and sentiment" (66) into the living rooms of the public.

'*Gatvol*' is an idiosyncratically South African term<sup>3</sup> which has come to have new relevance in connection with the TRC – Coetzee's comment in 1987 is perhaps more true now than it was then: "In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (99).

*Disgrace* suggests that the demand for public remorse is the way in which censors

---

<sup>3</sup> This word means "fed up", but has cruder connotations.



mask their inability to pierce the darkness of the soul. They reclaim a measure of power by humiliating and subjugating the individual. It is not enough for David Lurie to plead guilty to the charges; he suspects: “they wanted me castrated” (66). The attack on the farm achieves what the committee could not – his emasculation. During the attack Lurie refers to himself as an “Aunt Sally” (95), and later, in recalling his powerlessness, he mockingly recalls the rhyme “*Two old ladies locked in the lavatory*” (109). In raping Lucy and preventing her father from helping her, the attackers appear to be making a very deliberate point: a man who cannot protect his women is no man at all – a point which is reinforced by Lucy’s decision to “creep under [Petrus’] wing” (203). Power has been transferred from the David Luries to the Petruses of the world. What *Disgrace* suggests is that crime is a war of retribution and redistribution: “No ordinary burglary. A raiding party moving in, cleaning out the site. . . . Booty; war reparations; another incident in the great campaign of redistribution” (176). Gordimer’s comment on *Life & Times of Michael K* seems relevant here. She says that Coetzee’s failure to represent black people’s heroic, spirited resistance to “evil” (6) can only mean that he “does not believe in the possibility of blacks establishing a new regime that will do much better”(6); Lurie also faces the charge of being “prevented by guilt from according to blacks a fully human status which would include the capacity freely to choose evil, and to be held accountable for that choice” (Cornwell, “Recovery of Grace” 252) in his pronouncement on crime: “Too many people, too few things . . . . Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system” (*Disgrace* 98). But race is not the deciding factor in Coetzee’s tacit condemnation of the new South Africa, violence is. Lucy’s decision may make better sense on a symbolic than a realistic level, but it is in the current South African climate not entirely fictional. A Zimbabwean farmer, Alex van Leenhoff, who was forced to sign away half his farm to war veterans who had punched and whipped him in front of his wife and children, described his concession with a simile about rape: “It’s like a woman being raped then standing up and saying ‘thank you’” (Herald 7).

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee examines how former slaves and masters are renegotiating their

positions in a society in which liberty and equality have been nominally introduced. Petrus is shown as energetically establishing himself in this new order. Just what his new position is, is a more difficult question. David Lurie tries to describe who and what Petrus is, but struggles to find appellations which are not remnants of the old order; in other words he has yet to find a new vocabulary for articulating their changed situations. Lucy describes Petrus as her “new assistant” (62) and “co-proprietor” (62), while Lurie ironically comments at the market that it is “just like the old days: *baas en Klaas*. Except that he does not presume to give Petrus orders” (116). This attempt to reconstitute the world according to new power relations seems to suggest an adaptability on Lurie’s part, yet after the attack, as he begins to suspect Petrus of having had a hand in it, as fraying tempers strip away the veneer of tolerance, he demonstrates a discomfort in having to relate to people without the old distinctions, without the old stereotypes:

In the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one’s temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place. But though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help. It is hard to say what Petrus is, strictly speaking. (116)<sup>4</sup>

Lurie seems to be immured in old classifications and ways of relating that have, almost overnight, been abolished. The designation that he settles on, with some discomfort, is that of ‘neighbour’:<sup>5</sup>

Petrus is a neighbour who at present happens to sell his labour, because that is what suits him. He sells his labour under contract, unwritten contract, and that contract makes no provision for dismissal on grounds of suspicion. It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it,

---

<sup>4</sup> Lurie resents having to resort to stock prejudices:

Swine! Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: *Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*. (206)

Yet in reaction, Pollux throws the white man’s own creation – *swart gevaar* – back in his face, and further entrenches the ‘us and them’ divide: “‘We will kill you all!’ he shouts” (207).

<sup>5</sup> This discomfort is not strictly racial. Lurie has as much difficulty in countenancing Bill Shaw as a friend as he does in applying the designation ‘neighbour’ to Petrus. He follows the etymology of the word trying to find some trace of the fellow feeling which it is meant to evoke, “*friend* from Old English *freond*, from *freon*, to love” (102), but he does not find it.

and Petrus knows that he knows it. (116-117)

Unlike Lurie, Petrus is at home in this new world, and is comfortable enough to enjoy a joke about ‘the way things were’:

‘I am going to dig the trenches. That I can do by myself. That is not such a skill job, that is just a job for a boy. For digging you just have to be a boy.’

Petrus speaks the word with real amusement. Once he was a boy, now he is no longer. Now he can play at being one, as Marie Antoinette could play at being a milkmaid. (152)

Yet at other times Lurie shows admiration for Petrus’ connection with the land, his stoicism and wily nature:

A man of patience, energy, resilience. A peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country. A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too, like peasants everywhere. Honest toil and honest cunning. (117)

Lurie does not disdain the inversion of roles as he plays the part of Petrus’ “*handlanger* . . . Petrus is a good workman, it is an education to watch him. It is Petrus himself he has begun to dislike” (137). This dislike grows as Petrus assumes the upper hand, culminating in his offer to make Lucy his wife and take her under his wing in exchange for her land. Once again their relationship is reduced to an undisguised dichotomy in their argument about Pollux:

[Petrus] stares challengingly. ‘You have no work here. You come to look after your child. I also look after my child.’

‘Your child. Now he is your child, this Pollux?’

‘Yes. He is a child. He is my family. My people.’

So that is it. No more lies. *My people*. As naked an answer as he could wish. Well, Lucy is *his people*. (201)

Lurie has already noted with heavy irony that the name of the young boy who took part in Lucy’s rape, and who is part of Petrus’ extended family, is Pollux: “What a name!” (207) “not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?” (200). The irony doesn’t only exist in the fact that the boy’s name is not an alien one, in a language unfamiliar to the tongue of the white Professor Lurie, but is one which belongs more to his world of literary and classical allusions than to rural old Kaffraria. There is literary irony too, in the notion of a boy rapist bearing the name of a mythological figure, the son of Leda. Leda

is, certainly in some versions of the myth, the victim of rape by Zeus incarnated as a swan.

Lurie's indignation encompasses this added irony when he says

Three fathers in one. Rapists rather than robbers Lucy called them . . . Well, Lucy was wrong. They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself. And now, lo and behold, *the child?* (199)<sup>6</sup>

Lurie asks the question: "What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine?" (199). The suggestion is that violence begets violence, that the son of a rapist, conceived in violent union, becomes "a jackal . . . Deficient. Mentally deficient. Morally deficient" (208). There is nothing in *Disgrace* to suggest that Pollux is literally the progeny of such a union, yet figuratively speaking Pollux is the child of a violent clash which has been figured as rape – the brutalisation of South Africa's black people by colonisation, and its successor apartheid. Lucy's reaction when her father remonstrates with her about having an abortion proposes to end the cycle of lovelessness: "I am a woman, David. Do you think I hate children? Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?" (198).

Significantly, Lucy behaves maternally towards young Pollux when he is set upon by the bulldog, Katy, refusing to call him anything more sinister than "a disturbed child" (208). This, along with her undertaking that she will love her child – "I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person" (216) – suggests that it is Lucy who performs the act of radical self-refashioning which may be required, as individuals and as a society, in order to escape the binary logic of our societal impasse (Cornwell, "Recovery of Grace" 248). Lucy's rape will force her to accept the role of a dependant with a male protector. Her subsequent pregnancy has been achieved through a violation of her self-defining lesbianism, yet she is prepared to embrace the child which will change her role to

---

<sup>6</sup> The imagery of this passage obliquely recalls Yeats' version of the myth in his poem "Leda and the Swan" in which the act of 'mating' begets a vision of destruction:

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
An Agamemnon dead. (9-11)

that of 'mother'.

To the end Lurie has difficulty in accepting these enforced terms; he prefers to fall back on the definitions and distinctions of the past when he says of Pollux: "in the old days we had a word for people like him. Deficient. He should be in an institution" (208). Lucy's response is "that is reckless talk, David" (208), a warning which suggests that not only may it be dangerous for him to be overheard, but that to speak in this way is irresponsible and self-defeating, because Lurie's pronouncement which consigns Pollux out of sight doesn't mean he will "disappear in a puff of smoke, he is a fact of life" (208). Lurie's rage, when analysed, may appear to stem from the old fear of miscegenation, the idea of contamination: "the thought that like a weed [Pollux] has been allowed to tangle his roots with Lucy and Lucy's existence" (209).

The shock of the attack and its aftermath strains the relationship between Lurie and his daughter, exacerbating the differences between them, turning fissures in the relationship into gaping cracks. When Lurie first seeks refuge on the farm he looks at his daughter and her lifestyle and comments that in her creation "perhaps history had the larger share" (61); commenting here on her similarity to the *boervrou*, he calls her a "throwback, this sturdy young settler" (61). It is precisely this fatalism that Lurie reinforces when he says of her rapists: "It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (156); and yet it is this same pact with history that he urges Lucy to renege on when he urges her to leave the farm, to refuse to pay what she has called the "price . . . for staying on" (158). According to Lucy the price demanded is "not slavery. [But] subjection. Subjugation" (159), a reversal of the old perverse power relations – the debt generated by the pillaging, raping and brutalising of the old settlers must be settled by the new. When Lucy decides to cede the farm to Petrus she indicates that she is willing to humble herself before history, past and future. Lurie comments

‘How humiliating . . . Such high hopes, and to end like this.’

‘Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’

‘Like a dog.’

‘Yes, like a dog.’ (205)

Is this the answer to Coetzee’s question in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech? Is this the price which must be paid? Is this complete inversion, this bringing low of those who were mighty, what must be achieved in order to demolish the “unnatural structures of power” (“Jerusalem Prize” 97) which have for centuries defined the South African state?

Lurie rejects this solution for his daughter, even though he has undergone a similar descent: from university professor to “dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*” (146). Throughout, Lurie has been blind to the parallels in their respective disgraces. During the tribunal which finds him guilty of having abused a woman student, the Head of Social Sciences at the university levels the following accusation at him: “it is not the abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the *long history of exploitation* of which this is part” (53, emphasis added). Lurie’s insistence that Lucy make her private shame public, by reporting the rape to the police, seems surprising, and hints at a double standard. The point Coetzee makes about *Burger’s Daughter* in “Into the Dark Chamber” is echoed in Lucy’s attempt to communicate to Lurie her reason for keeping silent about her rape:

‘The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, in this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.’

‘This place being what?’

‘This place being South Africa.’ (112)

Rosa Burger witnesses the flogging of a donkey by a similarly victimised man, a scene of abstract brutality, and unable to live in this defiled and fallen world she flees South Africa. Coetzee says that

what Rosa suffers and waits for is a time when humanity will be restored

across the face of society, and therefore when all human acts, including the flogging of an animal, will be returned to the ambit of moral judgement. In such a society it will once again be *meaningful* for the gaze of the author, the gaze of authority and authoritative judgement, to be turned upon scenes of torture. (*Doubling the Point* 368)

Lucy's point is that in even in the new democratic South African dispensation, her rape is outside the "ambit of moral judgement" because of the brutalised state of her rapists. In the current dystopia her rape is not a source of moral outrage but a mere casualty of the "war of restitution". Amid Lurie's dismay and bafflement he persists in believing that through forbearance she is trying to save both herself ("Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out?" [112]) and the society as a whole ("Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" [112]), in the way that Bev Shaw gives herself to him: "like a nun who lies down to be violated so that the quota of violation in the world will be reduced" (148). Lurie, like Fyodor in *The Master of Petersburg*, wants to protect his child from the horror and proximity of death.<sup>7</sup> Lurie wants Lucy to leave South Africa and go to Holland: "[It] may not be the most exciting of places to live, but at least it doesn't breed nightmares" (161-62) he says to Bev Shaw. Of course it is too late to save Lucy from disillusionment, violence and suffering. It is a fiction designed to alleviate the grief of the parent rather than the child.<sup>8</sup> Lucy's decision to stay on at the farm, to refuse the anaesthetising effect of life in Holland, is a tacit acknowledgement of Mrs Curren's belief that life "is dust between the teeth. . . . Or: life is drowning" (179). This attitude opposes South Africa and the First World (Holland, and Canada, where Mrs Curren's grandsons "will never drown" [*Age of Iron* 178]) in the sense commented upon by Coetzee in an interview for the *Washington Post*:

There is a certain controversy . . . about "the end of history" . . . . The position,

---

<sup>7</sup> Lucy likens rape to murder (158), and later writes a note to her father saying: "I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away" (161).

<sup>8</sup> Like Fyodor's fantasy that he can, by an effort of will, keep Pavel from knowing that he is dead – "he wants to believe in order to etherize himself against the knowledge that Pavel, falling, knew everything" (*The Master of Petersburg* 21).

expressed in a very crude way, is that the Western democracies have reached a stage in their historical development in which development ceases because there is no stage beyond it. . . . It's actually the Third World where history, real history, is happening. And the First World has played itself out of the game. ("Author on History's Cutting Edge", cited in Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 124)

That Lucy chooses to deal with her rape pragmatically points to the major difference between herself and her father. Lurie has noted earlier that it is "curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler"(61). Lurie insists on intellectualising Lucy's rape by converting it into a mythopoeic battle between right and wrong, past and present, guilt and salvation. Lucy signals her difference from Lurie in her refusal to live according to ideas. In the aftermath of the attack David tries to encapsulate the horror of what has happened in words but it proves too dark: "*War, atrocity*: every word with which one tries to wrap up this day, the day swallows down its black throat" (102); inevitably, "the great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas, find themselves usurped by mere sense images" (22). The difference between the brutish nature of the attack and of Lurie's dream vision demonstrates his need to elevate the event to a realm of abstraction, to a rarified and simplified battle between good and evil in which he still has the power to save his daughter from harm: "Lucy has spoken to him; her words – 'Come to me, save me!' – still echo in his ears. In the vision she stands, hands outstretched, wet hair combed back, in a field of white light" (103). This image of Lucy is in stark contrast with the Lucy who confronts him with "neck stiff, eyes glittering. Not her father's little girl, not any longer" (105).<sup>9</sup> He remains in the dark as to the motivations for the actions of his daughter in real life. He is baffled by her decision to go back to the farm, probably because, as she says, it is not based on an "idea, good or bad. I'm not going back for the sake of an idea. I'm just going back'" (105).

---

<sup>9</sup> The connection between Lucy's appearing 'in a field of white light' and the Latin word for light, *lux*, from which the name Lucy is derived, betrays Lurie's spontaneous and uncontrollable translation of the everyday into the symbolic. Perhaps he conceives her as the enigmatic and fey Lucy from Wordsworth's poems (I am indebted to Dr Margot Beard for this suggestion), making her pragmatism all the more jarring. It is obvious that Lurie has an instinctive affinity with Lucy as a figure from literature, and that he 'misreads' his daughter.



Lucy demonstrates a need to 'get on with her life', to make the necessary sacrifices and move on because "there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (74). Lucy is shown to be grounded in more sense than one. His daughter, Lurie realises, is "solid in her existence, more solid than he has ever been. . . . When he is dead she will, with luck, still be here doing her ordinary tasks among the flowerbeds" (217). Yet Lucy has another quality which will ensure her survival: "Women are adaptable", says Bev Shaw, "Lucy is adaptable. And she is young. She lives closer to the ground than you. Than either of us" (210). Lucy shows irritation at David Lurie's romanticised and old-fashioned proprietorial attitude: "Stop calling it the farm, David. This is not a farm, it's just a piece of land where I grow things – we both know that" (200).

Although Lurie is sceptical, he does, by the end of the novel, come to see Lucy in a new light:

At this distance the flowerbeds are solid blocks of colour: magenta, carnelian, ash-blue. A season of blooming. . . . The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard. (216, 218)

He sees Lucy at a remove, as if looking at an impressionist painting, and pointedly, it is a scene from which he is absent; with the benefit of perspective he sees her differently. For once he is not projecting his rage, despair and exhaustion, he is not lecturing her on what he thinks she should feel or react: "She is flushed from her labours and perhaps a little sunburnt. She looks, suddenly, the picture of health" (218). It is from this new vantage point that David Lurie accepts his daughter's offer of new terms:

'Will you come in and have some tea?'  
She makes the offer as if he were a visitor. Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start. (218)

Bev suggests to Lurie that Lucy "lives closer to the ground than you" (210), foreshadowing Lurie's own realisation that "his daughter is becoming a peasant" (217). She is transformed from "an amateur, an enthusiast of farming life rather than a farmer" (117), into the matriarch

of the hardy and enduring “line of existences” (217) that he imagines at the end of the novel. Lucy’s decision to stay on the farm recalls Michael K’s own “idea of gardening” (Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening” 3), which suggests that we must “keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord [is] broken, the earth [will] grow hard and forget her children” (*Life & Times of Michael K* 109).

In many of Coetzee’s texts a lack of authority is elided not only with a sense of the frailty of ideas, but also with bodily infirmity. When Coetzee says in *Doubling the Point* that in looking over his work he sees a simple standard erected, and that standard is the body, that the body is the only thing that exists indisputably (248), he casts a mantle of validity over those characters who endure beyond words and thoughts, who exist in the texts almost exclusively as bodies, bodies which are denied language in one way or another. There is the body of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which refuses translation and remains inscrutable to both Joll and the magistrate; there is the tongueless and hence wordless body of Friday in *Foe*; there is Michael K who, like a pebble in the gut of history, is not consumed and digested, but endures, as a “meaning [that] can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (*Life & Times of Michael K* 166); there is the churlish and pungent physicality of the nevertheless mysterious Vercueil in *Age of Iron*. In each of these novels an attempt is made by a character, who is positioned as or allied to the intellectual, to confer language on these bodies, to draw out their story, to theorise their existence. The magistrate tries to get the barbarian girl’s story from her, he wants her to verbalise the pain she felt in the torture chamber, to turn the marks on her body into words. Yet he never learns her language and realises, when she is engaged in banter with the soldiers on their journey across the desert, that this is a young woman whom he does not know. Susan Barton in *Foe* is desperate to know Friday’s story, and hopes to “build a bridge over which, when one day it is grown sturdy enough, he may cross to the time . . . before he lost his tongue, when he lived immersed in the prattle of words unthinking as a fish in water; from where he may by steps return . . . to the world of words” (*Foe* 60). What in fact comes out of Friday’s open mouth is

a “slow stream, without breath, without interruption. . . . Soft and cold, dark and unending” (*Foe* 157). Friday’s silence is so powerful as to be tangible, and it induces a soporific closure of the text. A similar dynamic exists between Mrs Curren and Vercueil in *Age of Iron*, and the medic and Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*. What Coetzee suggests in *Doubling the Point*, however, is that the power of these ‘bodies’ lies in their ability to resist incarceration in language, to resist being turned from a solid physical presence into an ephemeral idea of themselves. A question lurks: In affirming the power of these bodies does Coetzee intend to undermine those characters who are creatures of thought, who do intellectualise and verbalise rather than exist? Perhaps it is relevant in this regard that these characters are often portrayed as infirm, feeble, or diseased.<sup>10</sup>

Lurie demonstrates an interest in the ‘story’ of Petrus, yet he affirms that the only language which he and Petrus have in common, English, is an “unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (117). Lurie has referred to himself as a moral dinosaur, and here he applies the description to the English language to illustrate how unwieldy it has become under the burden of its historical associations. Its inability to adapt to changing circumstances is also implied by the use of “settling in the mud”, “pressed into the mould”, and “arthritic” (117). Immediately after this David Lurie asserts that what appeals to him in Petrus are his weatherbeaten hands and face, the “marks”(117) which the world has left on him, and later he will attest that Petrus is impervious to the probing of Lurie’s language: “Talking to Petrus is like punching a bag filled with sand” (153).

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie’s lack of authority does not only spring from his injuries as a result of the attack, nor is the atrophy of his power merely incidental to the displacement of a political power with which he is allied by race and history, but also results from the twin

---

<sup>10</sup> In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate is forced to acknowledge the superiority of the body’s needs over those of the mind or soul when he is tortured and imprisoned: “The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight . . . even the prospect of defending myself in court, have lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions and the boredom of living one hour after another” (96); Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, must deal with the infirmity brought on by a terminal illness, and is imaged as being eaten from the inside out by the crab-like cancer. Even David Lurie wears his skullcap of bandages and his malformed ear, almost as the marks of a caste, marks which denote him as damaged, neither healthy nor whole.

processes of aging and the loss of sexual identity. This process, as expressed by David Lurie, conflates his age and sexuality and accuses society of a thinly disguised enforcement of Darwin's notion of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. Lurie invokes these concepts indirectly through his use of imagery pertaining to the animal kingdom, and it is especially pertinent that the context for his use of these metaphors is his relationships with women. When he tries to contact Soraya after she has broken off their professional relationship, her reaction makes him feel like "a predator [who has] intruded into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs" (10). The imagery of Nature 'red in tooth and claw' is used to describe a particular sexual encounter between himself and Melanie: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck"(25)<sup>11</sup> and later he will feel the urge to call her "*My little dove*" (34); at the hearing he asks himself whether the board sees him as "a shark among the helpless little fishies" (53); during his liaison with a secretary, Dawn, her "*bucking and clawing*" (9, emphasis added) cause him to consider a solution usually reserved for animals:

He ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions, but then aging is not a graceful business. . . .

A simple enough operation, surely: they do it to animals everyday, and animals survive well enough, if one ignores a certain residue of sadness. . . . A man on a chair snipping away at himself: an ugly sight, but no more ugly, from a certain point of view, than the same man exercising himself on the body of a woman. (9)

But Lurie does not 'retire from the game', and his relationship with the student, Melanie, is 'ugly' from the point of view of the review panel which audits his desire and pronounces it unacceptable. Hidden beneath their pronouncement on the unsuitability of his desire he discerns a more rabid judgement, one in which the old may be dispensed with as dogs are:

---

<sup>11</sup> Later Lucy will describe rape as a little "like murder, like getting away with murder" (158). This adds an interesting retrospective gloss to this encounter between Lurie and Melanie. When Lurie recalls the event he again, notes that while "peeling off her clothes, her arms flop like the arms of a dead person" (89).

“The truth is, they wanted me castrated” (66) is the verdict he refrains from offering Lucy.

Lurie strips the ‘trial’, which establishes his disgrace, of all pretence and directly invokes

Darwinism:

On trial for his way of life. For unnatural acts: for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*. If the old men hog the young women, what will be the future of the species? That, at bottom, was the case for the prosecution. (190)

One would like to suspect Lurie of irony at this point, but there is a residue of sadness in his tone and it is the tired voice of one who half believes the prosecution’s argument.

Increasingly Lurie labours under an internalised prejudice against the aged. He mourns his lost sexuality with the words of one of Byron’s lyrics: “who would have thought it would come to an end so soon, so suddenly: the roving, the loving!” (120), and vainly battles, like the golden retriever, to bury his instincts and turn his attention to the “proper business of the old: preparing to die” (9). His literal description of castration as “severing, tying off” (9) evokes a more figurative image of disconnection from the well-spring of life. Sex is shown to be medicinal, returning the body to equilibrium, exorcising the animal and restoring the cerebral:

A woman in love, wallowing in love; a cat on a roof, howling; complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and the voice thicken as the soul hurls its longings to the skies. That is what Soraya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry. (185)<sup>12</sup>

Lurie finds, in picking up a young prostitute, that sex softens “the shocks of existence” (194), so that afterwards he feels “drowsy, contented; also strangely protective. *So this is all it takes!*, he thinks. *How could I ever have forgotten it?*” (194).

Throughout the novel Lurie compares his exploits in love to those of the legendary Byron. Like Byron he is forced to leave his home under a cloud of sexual scandal, to seek refuge – for Byron literally in another country, for Lurie, in a place which is as foreign to him

---

<sup>12</sup> Yet again this condition is blamed on animal instinct, rather than enlightened or civilised pursuits, and again is allied with the animal kingdom in the image of a cat howling on a roof.

as another country. In his opera-in-progress, “Byron in Italy”, Byron expresses the disillusionment Lurie feels – “*Out of the poets I learned to love*, chants Byron in his cracked monotone, nine syllables on C natural; *but life, I found* (descending chromatically to F), *is another story*” (185). “Then one day there emerges from the dark another voice” (186), as if from Lurie’s own subconscious, the voice of Byron’s daughter bewailing her abandonment by Byron, and we recall that Lurie, too, is haunted by visions of his daughter with outstretched arms, calling to him, asking him to save her, in much the same way that Fyodor dreams of Pavel, the son he abandoned, and hears him calling to be brought back to life. However the opera is primarily about lost love and lost sexuality. It is strange therefore that the Teresa whom Lurie resurrects resembles Bev Shaw rather than Melanie. Instead of the “pert, precocious newlywed” (181), he summons a fervid, barren, middle-aged Teresa who coaxes and badgers her Byron back into life. From the underworld Teresa hears the words she fears “*secca, dry. It has dried up, the source of everything*” (183). She reminds Byron that she was once the object of his desire: “*I am your source. So you remember how together we visited the spring of Arquà? Together, you and I. I was your Laura. Do you remember?*” (183), reinforcing the idea of sexuality as the wellspring of life. Without his sexuality, David Lurie feels he must surely become a dry, listless ghost like Byron, so he turns to Teresa as the “last one left who can save him. Teresa is past honour. She pushes out her breasts to the sun; she plays the banjo in front of the servants and does not care if they smirk. She has immortal longings, and sings her longings. She will not be dead” (209). Teresa, unlike Lurie, will not allow her desire to be audited by a committee, she will not allow herself to be pronounced embarrassing or irrelevant.

Further ignominy awaits Lurie when he returns to Cape Town to discover that his successor is a much younger man whose “specialism [is] applied language studies” (179), a course that fits in better with the “post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” (32) scheme of education than his “dead poets” (179) do. He is disbarred from an active role in society, not only by the judgement of the tribunal, but by the judgement of a society which is based on

age, which renders aging people useless; he begins to internalise the image of himself as a tired old man whose opinions are irrelevant, thinking of himself as “obscure and growing obscurer. A figure from the margins of history” (167). He feels keenly the irrelevance of his vocation, the alienation of being an intellectual, the debilitation of old age, so it seems apt that his condition is described by the title as one of “disgrace”. I do not believe that his affair with a student and the loss of his job is the kernel of his abject state. This is not to suggest that David Lurie has done nothing wrong, yet I disagree that Lurie’s fault is as perverse as that which Elizabeth Lowry accuses him of in casting Lurie in the role of the “sexually predatory father . . . [who enacts] a certain kind of exploitative colonial paternalism” (4), which, Lowry suggests, sets up a parallel between Lurie and Coetzee’s other characters who fulfil this role: Magda’s father, Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Magistrate. David Lurie tries to rationalise his behaviour with “*I was a servant of Eros: that is what he wants to say, but does he have the effrontery? It was a god who acted through me. What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely. In the whole wretched business there was something generous that was doing its best to flower*” (89).

‘Disgrace’ means a loss or absence of grace, grace being to give without asking anything in return, to give selflessly and unconditionally. Hence forgiveness is a gracious act, so is charity. It is apparent that for a large part of the novel David Lurie is rather self-involved, even to the point of imposing *his* reaction to the attack on his daughter Lucy, and nearly destroying their relationship.<sup>13</sup> Similarly he won’t countenance the idea that Melanie would have, of her own volition, laid the charge of sexual harassment against him, and he fails to recognise as intrusive his attempts to contact Soraya, the woman with whom he has a sexual ‘arrangement’. (One is reminded also of his troubled relationship with Petrus and his

---

<sup>13</sup> In *The Master of Petersburg*, Fyodor, who makes unwelcome advances to his landlady, Anna Sergeyevna, on the stairs, thinks to himself: “Disgrace . . . this is how one enters disgrace” (59). Although this has a certain resonance with the sexual misdemeanour which cast Lurie into a state of disgrace at the University, it hints at the real nature of disgrace, and Fyodor and Lurie’s cardinal error, in Fyodor’s realisation that “Nothing in the pressure of her body answers him” (59). It is the pressing of one’s own selfish needs, the failure of mutuality, that characterises a fall from grace.

inability to befriend Bill Shaw.) Both relationships are exposed as “projection[s] of his own vanity and need” (Cornwell, “Recovery of Grace” 249). Yet Lurie is saved from an irredeemable state of disgrace by this bud of generosity which struggles to flower. Lurie’s redemption lies in the recovery of grace – a feat which is achieved “by discovering the irreducibility of the alterity of the Other [through which] . . . I understand that I am neither solipsistically alone in the world nor part of a totality to which all others also belong” (Davis 48). In *Disgrace* Lurie’s encounter with radical otherness is not with that of the human Other, but begins in his awakening to the plight of animals. It is only once Lurie has begun voluntary work at the animal welfare clinic, that he begins to learn the lessons of empathy and selflessness.<sup>14</sup> His initial feeling towards animals is one of indifference, and for Bev Shaw he can muster only scorn presented behind the veil of humour: “to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat” (73). Once again Lucy’s pragmatism brings her into conflict with her father’s world of ideas. She reacts to his condescension to the Shaws by saying:

They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. . . . That’s the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. I don’t want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us. (74)

Lurie misinterprets her imaginative identification with, and compassion for animals as guilt, or fear at the prospect of having our sins visited on our own heads. Ironically, he counters her argument with a rather self-righteous pronouncement which he does not yet recognise as the lesson that he must learn in order to reclaim grace: “if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution” (74).

The novel abounds with biblical imagery, especially the trope of the sheep and the

---

<sup>14</sup> These can be interpreted as purely secular attributes, yet ‘grace’ is more difficult to define outside of the religious paradigm. According to catechism, Grace is one of the seven virtues, the antitheses of the seven deadly sins.



goats.<sup>15</sup> One of the first animals Lurie helps Bev to treat is a goat, which makes its appearance after a reference to “the Great Reckoning” (82). Lurie first begins to feel empathy for animals through a bond with the two Persian sheep due to be sacrificed for Petrus’ celebration feast:

“The bond is not one of affection. It is not even with these two in particular . . .

Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (126).

Lurie’s explanation of scapegoating is one which evokes the epistemology of his own “Post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate” world:

Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat’s back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed. It worked because everyone knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism. The censor was born, in the Roman sense. Watchfulness became the watchword: the watchfulness of all over all. Purgation was replaced by the purge. (91)

David Lurie is himself a victim of the censor, the purge. In a society in which humans have assumed responsibility for the expiation of sin and the meting out of punishment, the individual has no ritual of purification with which to raise himself out of the state of disgrace into which he has been cast. Lurie wonders if this is what Lucy is trying to do, to negotiate “some form of private salvation” (112), as if her acquiescence to the rape will save her from worse fates. Lurie tries to dissuade her from her course of action (or inaction against the perpetrators of the rape) by illustrating what he sees as the practical uselessness of her sacrifice in saving her from further harm. He compares her act to both secular and religious trials: “Do you think what happened here is an exam: if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct to the future, or a sign to paint on the door-lintel that will make the plagues pass you by?” (112).

---

<sup>15</sup> By all accounts Coetzee is not religious (“I am not a Christian, or not yet” [*Doubling the Point* 250]), yet often in the novel reference is made to animals in the context of religion: the first conflation of the two: “We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different” (74), invokes Genesis, in which God created man in his image and created the animals and plants to be presided over by man. The abuse of that trust and authority has led us to abuse each other, and has resulted in our fallen or disgraced state.

By degrees, at first with the abandoned bulldog Katy, and then with the Persians, Lurie begins to build a rapport with animals. Katy's situation recalls Lurie's own, except that he has found refuge with his daughter while Katy's offspring cannot of their own accord offer her a home because "it is not in their power to invite her. They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things" (78). Lurie must overcome his perception of animals as things, must learn not to be indifferent to their fate, before he can learn to look at humanity differently. The strange combination of religious and secular imagery can also be noted in "the old men whose company he seems to be on the point of joining, the tramps and drifters with their stained raincoats and cracked false teeth and hairy earholes – all of them were once upon a time children of God, with straight limbs and clear eyes" (24). Even though God is mentioned directly, there is something vaguely Platonic in the conception of a time outside of time where things exist in perfection, where the "crudity of life . . . the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies" ("Jerusalem Prize" 99) is unable to touch us. For Plato perfection exists on another plane, in the dimly apprehended world of ideal forms; for Coetzee glimpses of perfection are possible in the equally vague and nostalgic realm of memory.<sup>16</sup> God is merely another concept, another incarnation of perfection, in this realm of ideals. This strange conflation of Christianity and philosophy is again evident in the idea that "we are all souls. We are souls before we are born" (79), invoking the Christian "immortal soul" and Plato's conception of metempsychosis. If we are souls before birth then we carry the memory of that 'life before life' within us.

These ideas surface many times in Coetzee's fiction, but are most similar to those expressed in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Here Coetzee proposes that we are born with a

---

<sup>16</sup> This description recalls the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The magistrate struggles to remember the girl before she is tortured, unable to picture her without crooked ankles and opaque eyes. It is significant that he can only envision her 'with straight limbs and clear eyes' in his dreams, and that there is a similarity in the non-linear timelessness of dreams, memory, and the world of ideal forms.

conception of truth, freedom and justice in their ideal forms, and that we must work to preserve the memory of these things against the vagaries of this fallen world. The magistrate attests to the fact that “each one of us, man, woman, child, even the poor old horse turning the mill-wheel [knows] what [is] just: all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 152). Lurie continues in this vein in *Disgrace* by engaging in the debate about whether animals have souls. His starting point is a religious one: “the Church fathers had a long debate about [animals] and decided that they don’t have proper souls . . . . Their souls are tied to their bodies and die with them” (78). This is a concept which worries him when a bond is established between himself and the two Persians which are to be slaughtered for Petrus’ party. He considers the fate of animals earmarked for human consumption: “They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry. Nothing escapes, except perhaps the gall bladder, which no one will eat. Descartes should have thought of that. The soul suspended in the dark, bitter gall, hiding” (124). Lurie himself feels like an animal in a laboratory during the excruciating dinner at the Isaac’s house. He envisions himself as

stretched out on an operating table. A scalpel flashes; from throat to groin he is laid open; he sees it all yet feels no pain. A surgeon, bearded, bends over him, frowning. *What is all this stuff?* growls the surgeon. He pokes at the gall bladder. *What is this?* He cuts it out tosses it aside. He pokes at the heart. *What is this?* (171)

While this provides a metaphor for self-examination, a laying open, it also has disturbing overtones of disembowelment which recalls Lurie’s public disgrace, the review committee’s insistence that the public be allowed to examine and pronounce on his ‘insides’. One recalls the earlier reference to the sheep’s soul trying to avoid detection in the gall bladder. If Lurie’s soul too, is lodged in the gall bladder, the surgeon, whose comments imply the uselessness of this organ, and of the heart (the metaphysical seat of love), in cutting them out performs a moral amputation on Lurie. This fantasy implies a symbolic repudiation of the complications which feelings bring. Lurie wants an end to the pain and trials of remorse and doubt which are risked by having a soul and a heart.

It is at the Isaacs' house, shortly after having this fantasy, that David Lurie performs the first in a series of acts of self-humiliation and self-abasement, acts which could be described as symbolic of penance and atonement. Isaacs leads Lurie in a game of negotiation with God, forcing Lurie to confront the real reason why he has come to the Isaacs' house. Isaacs is at once the devil bargaining for Lurie's soul, and Lurie's confessor, mediating between Lurie and God and prescribing Lurie's penance – self-immolation at the shrine of womanhood:

He rises, blunders through the empty dining-room and down the passage. From behind a half-closed door he hears low voices. He pushes the door open. Sitting on the bed are Desiree and her mother, doing something with a skein of wool. Astonished at the sight of him, they fall silent.

With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor.

Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? (173)

On his return to Cape Town, whilst sitting in the darkness of the theatre, he has another vision

In a sudden and soundless eruption, as if he has fallen into a waking dream, a stream of images pours down, images of women he has known on two continents . . . . *A fair field full of folk*: hundreds of lives all tangled with his.

. . .

*Enriched*: that was the word the newspapers picked on to jeer at. . . . yet now, at this moment he would stand by it. By Melanie, by the girl in Touws river; by Rosalind, Bev Shaw, Soraya: by each of them he was enriched, and by the others too, even the least of them, even the failures. Like a flower blooming in his breast, his heart floods with thankfulness. (192)

On this “night of revelations” (194) he achieves the completion of the generous impulse which was “doing its best to flower” (89) in his relationship with Melanie, and which was cut short by its ignominious end. Instead of feeling the disgrace with which society has sanctioned his desire, he feels only grateful and enriched.

We see by the end of the novel that Lurie believes in the existence of the animal soul; he becomes a conductor of souls, easing their passage, and an undertaker, disposing of the animal corpses, performing the last rites to preserve the dignity of the dogs. This act is as much self-preservation as it is about saving the dogs from dishonour. Not to do this would be to relinquish “his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses

into a more convenient shape for processing” (146), a world in which habitual and ritualised cruelty hardens one to the individuality of pain, where “people from whom cruelty is demanded in the line of duty, people who work in slaughterhouses, for instance, grow carapaces over their souls” (143). It is a world in which we murder the best part of ourselves in order to become more ‘useful’ in an increasingly utilitarian system.

In analysing his role as an ‘animal undertaker’, he says it is “little enough, less than little: nothing” (220); yet it is essential: to perform a service when one believes that it is stupid and degrading, rather than edifying and rewarding, to perform a service simply because it should be done, is to be truly generous:

Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. . . .

But there are other people to do these things – the animal welfare thing, the social rehabilitation thing, even the Byron thing. He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. (146)

It is obvious that at this stage Lurie does not yet fully appreciate the importance of the work he does.

His own state of disgrace and the heightened awareness of his disenfranchisement lead him to countenance the similarity between his condition and that of animals. This in turn leads to an empathy for the plight of animals at the hands of humans, the selfish and ungrateful way in which the devotion and love of animals is used and abused by humans. Further he realises that it is human beings who teach animals and other human beings to hate their own nature. To repay that devotion and unconditional love he mourns the animals which are disposed of, attempting to accord them dignity in death. His disposing of the bodies is a dedication to a conception of the world, the only trace of which exists in memory, or in hope. This world is hinted at through literature and music, things which are dying in the increasingly rationalised, utilitarian, high-tech world. The lyrical impulse in David Lurie “is not dead” (214); this is evident in his refusing to grow a carapace over his soul, in refusing to relinquish Teresa and Byron. What Lurie fears however is that “after decades of starvation

[the lyrical impulse] can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed” (214).

The imagery here recalls Coetzee’s comment on his own task as a writer: “I see [justice] mainly as flickering or dimmed – the kind of awareness you would have if you were a prisoner in a cave, say, watching the shadows of ideas flickering on the walls. . . . I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light” (*Doubling the Point* 341). The challenge which the otherness of animals poses to Lurie is what “gives a proper foundation to freedom. The transcendental Ego would like to be the sole source of its own knowledge, actions and meanings; the encounter with the Other shows such freedom to be egoistical, arbitrary and unjustified” (Davis 49). The process by which Lurie comes to countenance the divinity in all consciousness, human and animal, results in his transformation, and ultimately his redemption. David Lurie’s fear is that if the buds of generosity and love are blighted by the world before they are allowed to flower, then there will no longer be any chance of us slipping our chains and turning our faces to the light, we will no longer hope and dream of emerging from the cave, nor even dream about what lies beyond its walls; we will remain in the cave, like a plant kept in the darkness, “pinched, stunted, deformed” (214). David must take to heart the lesson which he preached to his students: “we cannot live our daily lives in a realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not, How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist?” (22).

In the closing paragraphs of the novel we witness the reintroduction of grace into Lurie’s life. He is helping Bev with the “*Lösung*” (218) of the animals whose own term of grace has expired. His cynical attitude to the work of those “animal welfare people” who are a bit like a certain type of Christian (73), is gone, and in its place he has learnt from Bev Shaw “to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has any difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). This act might easily be

given a number of appellations: generosity, unselfishness, sacrifice, but its full resonance as the act which saves Lurie, is communicated in the term 'grace'. Despite the repetition of this ritual killing Lurie does not become hardened; his only concession to the habitual cruelty is that "One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet" (219). Atonement can only be made with the intervention of grace, and this is only to be achieved with penance and sacrifice. Through his duties at the animal welfare clinic Lurie serves out a sentence which is part 'community service' and part penance. In sacrificing the little dog with the withered hindquarter, Driepoot, Lurie relinquishes what is precious to him (in spite of his attempts to remain detached, he has formed a bond with the little dog; perhaps its deformed, stunted state strikes a chord with his perception of himself), and sacrifices in the sense of making an 'offering' to expiate his sin. The religious symbolism in his act of giving up the dog to be killed is overt:

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. 'I thought you would save him for another week,' says Bev Shaw. 'Are you giving him up?'

'Yes, I am giving him up.' (220 )

Not only is the lamb the biblical animal of sacrifice, but the overtones of Jesus as the lamb of God, as well as the shepherd who bears the lost lambs in his arms, suggest that David Lurie has, at least in a theological sense, expiated his sin. Symbolically, Lurie is doing the bidding of some external and transcendental imperative. A religious equivalent is found in the story of Abraham, who was willing to obeying God's will even if that will was the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Abraham's actions, if God had not withdrawn the command, would have appeared to those around him as the actions of a madman, rather than an act of faith. Similarly Lurie's actions cannot be audited according to the tenets of 'realism'. As Mathabane points out:

"What goes on in your soul is dark to us" (*Disgrace* 57), and Coetzee does not care to elaborate on the personal meaning generated by the act. It seems clear from this refusal to reduce the significance of Lurie's deed, by swamping it in realistic detail and explanations, that it is a gesture, a symbolic action which answers Fyodor's plaintive question: "Without

the risk, without subjecting oneself to the voice speaking from elsewhere . . . what is left that is divine?" (*The Master of Petersburg* 84).

According to Coetzee, grace is a precondition for telling truth "clearly, without blindness" (*Doubling the Point* 392), while cynicism undermines the idea of truth by "the denial of any ultimate basis for values" (*Doubling the Point* 393). The distinct absence here of the cynicism with which David Lurie, "whose attitude towards men is corroded with skepticism" (102), treats the review committee, is perhaps a validation of private and personal repentance and absolution rather than public exposure and retribution.

Unlike Fyodor, who turns away from an opportunity to redeem himself in turning his back on the chained dog, Lurie recognises the moment of his deliverance, and as in *The Master of Petersburg*, it involves sacrifice. When viewed through the prism of realism, Lurie's sacrifice of the dog is as unpalatable and inexplicable as Lucy's decision to abide her rape.<sup>17</sup> But both acts are private matters; the realm of the private is also the realm in which personal meaning is generated, where Lurie, like Lucy, can work out "some form of private salvation" (112). As a symbolic act of atonement it is a triumph of grace over cynicism.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ian Hacking suggests that Coetzee is a pioneer of a "new era of cosmopolitics" (26) which countenances animals as "in community with" human beings and as worthy recipients of our moral responsibility. He comments on the role that *Disgrace* plays if we want to broaden our sympathies in ways that we do not well understand. We shall have to own up to the messiness of our passions. *Disgrace* ends with an action which I cannot comprehend, and only barely feel as possible. That is where we need Coetzee, not to make us reason, yet, but to help us experience the confusion. (26)



## Conclusion

Is a true confession still true if it is not heard?

*Age of Iron*, 1990

The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which proposes to uncover the truth about South Africa's past, to lay bare a suppressed history of suffering, has concentrated attention on the ritual of confession, atonement and forgiveness. Against this rather public baring of souls, Coetzee posits the stories of individuals whose private confessions are aimed at securing self-forgiveness. These four novels consist of sustained confessions of individuals who understand, to a greater or lesser degree, the sacrifices which must be made in order to achieve a state of grace. The affinity (and reciprocal relationship) between confession and writing is demonstrated in these four works, most notably in *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*. The history of confession offered by Coetzee's *oeuvre* postulates the resistance offered to the totalising myths of history by individual and irrepressible stories.<sup>1</sup>

In making confession central to the development of the protagonists and their narratives, Coetzee must constantly guard against the trap which Fyodor falls into: perversion or betrayal in order to earn hard currency for the economy of confession. Coetzee's writing must negotiate "how *not* to sell himself or attempt to redeem himself; how to describe the horrors enacted on black South Africans in the name of white South Africans, without succumbing to the false impulse to construct an identity founded on self castigation or immolation" (Dovey, "Writing in the Middle Voice" 27).

The trend in the four novels under discussion is not towards orthodox religiousness: rather, one senses that Coetzee is feeling his way towards a secular conception of grace. The concept of grace is used rather loosely by Coetzee. In *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*,

---

<sup>1</sup> In much the same way as the confessions and tales of suffering offered as evidence to the TRC served to show up the mythical nature of accepted official histories. Conflicting evidence in representations made to the TRC demonstrates most clearly that rather than being a process of uncovering the 'real' history, the 'true' story of South Africa, the concept of 'history' itself is a myth. Coetzee's novels postulate that even the 'truth' of the stories which individuals confess about themselves, to themselves, is subject to corruption.

*Boyhood*, and *Disgrace*, a plethora of meanings, connotations and contexts accrue to the extent that 'grace' appears to be the name given to any and all instances of 'good' in the texts. But there are certain contexts in which Coetzee uses 'grace' more specifically, and in which it can be more sharply defined. In such instances 'grace' becomes a synonym for seeing clearly. Religious confession locates Grace outside of the human subjects who are involved in the confession. It is bestowed from above. It is also from the act of confession that grace comes to be allied with forgiveness, a gift born of God's generosity. Truth is only apprehended in the presence of grace, because grace is what enables clear-sightedness. In secular confession the subject is often blinded by self-interest or self-doubt, incapable of relinquishing the cynicism which endlessly defers the arrival of resolution, the end to confession. Clarity of vision and self-forgiveness are seemingly impossible without the intervention of an outside force or being in the process. Hence, Coetzee suggests, the process of realising the necessary passage of the self through the other results in grace. According to Levinas, the intervention of grace hinges on the way in which the self receives the challenge posed by the Other. One's reaction to the Other, if it is generous, involves self-examination and offering up of the self to the Other.

Mrs Curren's question about whether the confession (which invites the intervention of grace) must also have its passage through an other, is a valid one. Although her confession is written to her daughter, there are many ways in which Vercueil is more important to the creation of the narrative. He is there as a physical interlocutor, to hear her true confession and to intervene in the "sterile monologue of the self" ("Confession and Double Thoughts" 291). Mrs Curren's narrative is saved from the sterility and death which plagues her womb, by the change in her which it records: the self, redefined and reconstituted in the face of otherness, in the face of the borders, boundaries and limits to the self which are shown up in the encounter with the Other. The circumstances which surround the creation of the narrative and its reception ensure that the relationship with Vercueil can only be a generous one. She hopes that he will post the letter to her daughter once death has brought her story to an end, in

which case she will no longer be around to enforce her wishes. Mrs Curren's narrative is ethical, in the sense that Levinas intends, in that she does not base her relationship with Vercueil on the expectation that he will deliver her letter. Death is both other and limit. Mrs Curren's narrative exceeds the moment of death, refusing to be limited. It consumes the otherness of death, assimilating it as part of the narrative, containing it within its fabric, and thus embracing within itself the borders it attempts to impose.

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Fyodor loses his soul by staking all on a ploy to force the intervention of grace. He enters the archetypal Faustian wager, in the expectation of something in return: he wishes to bring his son back to life, and to receive his son's forgiveness. He turns his grief (a generous impulse in and of itself) into the bitterness of gall by descending into the realm of representations which have no place in the world. The motif of gambling aptly reflects his attempt to force the hand of fate, as he starts gambling on all the numbers. Fyodor tries to predict and respond to that which is unknowable, an enterprise which is doomed to failure.

In *Boyhood*, Coetzee performs a process of othering in distancing his younger self. The third person narration externalises the young boy. But Coetzee's injunction to approach our former selves with forgiveness and charity, but above all with clarity of vision, is evidence of the desire graciously to embrace this Other self. Yet *Boyhood* is also a double confession: the revelation of the young John masks the continuing deceit of the older narrator in a *double entendre* which performs the self-defeating convolutions of confession without grace. *Boyhood* suggests that for Coetzee the dialogue between cynicism and grace is ongoing.

David Lurie is the first of Coetzee's protagonists who, in the trajectory through the novels of an increasing recuperation of agency, achieves a measure of grace. Lurie gives up the dog to which he has grown attached, in an act of sacrifice which remains inexplicable. It is a gesture of pure generosity not designed to effect any particular outcome: a sacrifice without the expectation of anything in return. Truly unselfish behaviour has no reason for

being: we struggle to understand acts which do not seem to have a *rationale*. At the conclusion of *Disgrace*, one certainly feels more uplifted and hopeful than at the close of *The Master of Petersburg*, despite Rachel Lawlan's effort to convince us that "the book is not itself a gloomy experience" (155), that Fyodor, by losing his soul to writing, *saves* the narrative from the betrayal and closure that grace brings.

The trajectory of Coetzee's work takes the interaction with otherness in an interesting direction in *The Lives of Animals*, the work which immediately follows *Disgrace*. David Lurie's greatest act, in *Disgrace*, is the recognition of a shared divinity in all consciousness, a reverence for life, whether human or animal. Commenting on *The Lives of Animals*, Ian Hacking designates Coetzee as "the artistic voice of those who, almost against their reason, begin to feel how we are bound to our fellow animals. He speaks for a felt sympathy between some people and at least some animals" (20). It is not only sympathy with animals that Coetzee explores or is interested in, but their complete alterity. In dramatising the encounter with the Other Coetzee seems increasingly to turn to the otherness of a different species to demonstrate just how much faith is necessary in order to enter a state of grace. One must be prepared to be receptive to that which cannot even be imagined in the terms which we use to define and create meaning in our world. It cannot be doubted that it is his work with animals which opens David Lurie to the transformative leap of faith necessary to change his life. It is suggested that in offering love to an animal from which he cannot expect or confirm reciprocation, David Lurie demonstrates the potential to begin rebuilding his relationships with human others too.

This association of otherness with animals does not begin with *Disgrace*. In *The Master of Petersburg* the conception of an animal as 'the Other' is less overt, but no less pivotal to the fate of Fyodor's soul. Attridge recognises Fyodor's encounter with the dog chained in the alley as an encounter with otherness central to Fyodor's moral evolution:

the thief in the night . . . is the unexpected already defined against the expected, the proper, the orderly. The cry of the dog, however, is not the unexpected in this sense; it is the event that interrupts the order of the familiar

and unfamiliar with absolute heterogeneity, an appeal from the other which comes from outside any structure of ethical obligation. It carries no guarantees, fits into no programme, is imbued with no particular significance. It is the easiest thing in the world to ignore. This is why it must be answered. ("Expecting the Unexpected" 29)

Fyodor does not respond to the animal in a way which will alter its fate or his because he lacks the courage (or is it faith?) to see the act through to the end: in failing to save the dog he proves that "whatever it was that wavered towards [him], [he] was unworthy of it, and now it has withdrawn" (82). Although animals have always featured literally, and in figurative language, in Coetzee's work, this tendency to countenance animals as a natural, even vital part of the ethical development of the human community is an increasing trend.

All four of these stories are confessions, a seeking after truth, and all of the confessions point to the idea that in the absence of grace they are little more than stories, for,

[if] Coetzee reads his essay on Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky as hidden autobiography, even as it explores the problems of autobiography in other writers, then it is possible to read into his novels a covert self-examination of his role (and perhaps duty) as a white South African author, even as he interrogates the guilt and self-doubt of his characters. Equally, if it is possible to read Coetzee's autobiography, or autobiographical confession, in his novels, then the reader can be sure that what he or she reads is "storytelling." (Lawlan 141)

Without grace the truth cannot be told clearly, and truth is what all the protagonists and the stories themselves are engaged in pursuing. For Coetzee, the intervention of grace dispenses with the self doubt brought about by cynicism, "the denial of any ultimate basis for values" (*Doubling the Point* 392), and confirms the existence of concepts such as freedom, love, justice, which were previously only experienced as intimations – "the kind of awareness you would have if you were a prisoner in a cave, say, watching the shadows of ideas flickering on the walls" (*Doubling the Point* 341). Furthermore, grace requires that we invoke these ideas in our behaviour towards the Other.

Lawlan says that Coetzee is "facing up to the realization that his longing for grace, for transcendence over contingency and eternal confession, is finally a longing for authority" (153). The authority that Coetzee supposedly craves, however, is not the voice of God, an

imposition from above. It is not necessarily an end to dialogue, debate, or writing. Rather it is the ability to trust in the clarity of vision afforded by grace, the authority to trust the assumption (as he suspects Tolstoy of having in *The Kreutzer Sonata*) that one can “*set down the truth*, finally as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority to do so” (“Confession and Double Thoughts” 293). For Levinas the encounter with otherness is the starting point for “dialogue, teaching, and hence reason, society and ethics” (Davis 49). Surely these are not issues on which Coetzee, as an author, will remain quiet. The intervention of grace does not silence the desire to write, it enables negotiation between the author’s transcendental imperative and his duty to society. Perhaps grace is simply a name for the entrance of something otherworldly into the closed terrestrial system of history. Perhaps the intervention of grace is simply that which allows the play of writing to begin.

## Works Cited

- Attridge, Derek. "Literary Form and the Demands of Politics: Otherness in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*". *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*. Sue Kossew (ed). New York: G. K. Hall, 1998: 198-213.
- , "Expecting the Unexpected in Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg* and Derrida's Recent Writings". *Applying: To Derrida*. Brannigan, John, Ruth Robins and Julian Wolfreys (eds). London: Macmillan, 1996: 21-40.
- , and Rosemary Jolly (eds). *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970 - 1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Attwell, David. *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1993.
- , "'Dialogue' and 'fulfilment' in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*". *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970 - 1995*. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 166-79.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Dusklands*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1974.
- , *In the Heart of the Country*. 1977. Rpt. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978.
- , *Life & Times of Michael K*. 1983. Rpt. London: Penguin, 1985.
- , "Truth in Autobiography". Inaugural Lecture. University of Cape Town, 1985.
- , *Foe*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1986.
- , "The Novel Today". *Upstream*. 6.1 (1988): 2-5.
- , *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Sandton: Radix, 1988.
- , *Age of Iron*. 1990. Rpt. London: Penguin, 1991.
- , *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992.

- , "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech". *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992: 96-9.
- , "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky". *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992: 251-93.
- , "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State". *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992: 361-68.
- , *The Master of Petersburg*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1994.
- , *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. 1997. Rpt. London: Vintage, 1998.
- , "What is Realism". *Salmagundi*. Robert Boyers (ed). Nos. 114-115, Spring/Summer 1997.
- , "Borge's Dark Mirror". *New York Review of Books* October 22, 1998: 80-82.
- , *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1999.
- , *The Lives of Animals*. Princetown, NJ: Princetown University Press, 1999.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Cornwell, Gareth. "The Recovery of Grace". *English Academy Review* 16 (1999): 248-54.
- , "Realism, Rape, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*". Unpublished Paper, 2001.
- Davis, Colin. *Levinas: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity, 1996.
- De Waal, Shaun. "Caught in the webs of the self." *Electronic Mail and Guardian*. Internet. World Wide Web: <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/books/sep97/6oc-coetzee3.html> (26 May 1999).
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. 1866. Rpt. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994.
- Dovey, Teresa. *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*. Craighall: Donker, 1988.



- , "Introduction". 1989. *J. M. Coetzee: A Bibliography*. Kevin Goddard and John Read (eds). 1990: 1-14.
- , "J. M. Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice". *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*. Sue Kossew (ed). New York: G. K. Hall, 1998: 18-28.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. 1845. Rpt. New York: NAL Penguin, 1968.
- Edwards, Paul (ed). *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967.
- Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten. *A Story of South Africa: J. M Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Gide, André. *If It Die*. Trans. Dorothy Bussy. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. 1961. Rpt. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966.
- Gordimer, Nadine. *The Conservationist*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1974.
- , "The Idea of Gardening". *The New York Review*, February 2, 1984.
- Hart, Francis R. "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography". *New Directions in Literary History*. Ralph Cohen (ed). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.
- Hacking, Ian. "Our Fellow Animals". *New York Review of Books* June 29, 2000: 20-26.
- Head, Dominic. *J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Herald Correspondent. "Z'babwe farmers go". *Eastern Province Herald*, Monday April 10, 2000: 7.
- Huggan, Graham. "Evolution and Entropy in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*". *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (eds). London: Macmillan, 1996: 191-212.
- Jolly, Rosemary. *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand

University Press, 1996.

Kossew, Sue. *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and Andre Brink*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996.

-----, "‘Women’s Words’: A Reading of J. M. Coetzee’s Women Narrators". *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*. Sue Kossew (ed). New York: G. K. Hall, 1998: 166-79.

Lawlan, Rachel. "The Master of Petersburg: Confession and Double Thoughts in Coetzee and Dostoevsky". *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 29.2 (1998): 131-57.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "Time and the Other". Trans, Richard A. Cohen. *The Levinas Reader*. Seán Hand (ed). Oxford: Blackwell, 1989: 37-58.

Lowry, Elizabeth. "Like a Dog" [Review of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*]. *London Review of Books* 21.20 (1999): 12-14.

Marais, Michael. "Places of Pigs: The Tension between Implication and Transcendence in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 31.1 (1996): 83-95.

-----, "‘Little enough, less than little: nothing’: Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee". *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 159-82.

Morphet, Tony. Review: "Coetzee gives measure to worlds taken for granted". *Sunday Independent*.

Neumann, Anne Waldron. "Escaping the ‘Time of History’? Present Tense and the Occasion of Narration in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*". *Journal of Narrative Technique* 20.1 (1990): 65-86.

Paton, Alan. *Cry the Beloved Country*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1948.

Penner, Dick. *Countries of the Mind*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Probyn, Fiona. "Cancerous Bodies and Apartheid in J. M Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*". *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*. Sue Kossew (ed). New York: G. K. Hall, 1998: 214-25.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

1989.

-----, "Being that can be understood is language: Richard Rorty on H.-G. Gadamer". *London Review of Books*, 22.6 (2000): 23-25.

Sampson, Lin. "Looking for the heart of JM Coetzee" [Review of *Disgrace*]. *Sunday Times Supplement: Lifestyle*, 22 August 1999: 4-5.

Scanlan, Margaret. "Incriminating Documents: Nechaev and Dostoevsky in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*". *Philological Quarterly* 76.4 (1997): 463-77.

Viola, André. "'Two Mothers and No Father': J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*". *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 20.1 (1997): 96-99.

Watson, Stephen. "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee". *Selected Essays 1980-1990*. Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990: 35-55.

-----, "The Writer and the Devil: J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*". *New Contrast* 22.4 (1994): 47-61.

Wilhelm, Cherry. "South African Writing in English: 1977, Part I". *Standpunte* 141, 32.3 (1979): 37-49.