

**THE POSTMODERNIST TEXT IN
CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA:
A DEFENCE OF J M COETZEE.**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE
(by course work and dissertation)
in the
Department of English
University of Natal
Durban
1988

ABSTRACT

One of the most pressing debates in South Africa concerns the need of writers to address the complex sociopolitical demands of the present day situation. In this paper I examine J M Coetzee's use of Postmodernism forms as an attempt to develop a language and structure of consciousness which offers a telling critique of authority and power in South Africa. My purpose is not primarily to offer an aesthetic appreciation of Coetzee's works, but rather to assess the efficacy of the Postmodernist approach in a world of material forces. The central problem which I explore is whether Coetzee's experimental fiction speaks to a world of "total politics".

In the Introduction I consider the way that Coetzee himself establishes the terms for a debate of his texts, a debate which juxtaposes his rejection of realism, mimesis and the dictates of history, (a strategy necessitated by his Postmodernist and Poststructuralist understandings) with his call for a language adequate and sufficient to Africa. Section I explores the claims of those critics who view Postmodernism as a Eurocentric and highly recondite form of elitist exclusion which retards the development of a vital post-colonial expression while extending the ideology of capitalism. Thus Postmodernism is seen to lack a cogency adequate to address a South Africa dominated by a politics of oppression. Section II discusses the implications of Postmodernism as an interventionist strategy which deconstructs hegemonic notions of reality, replacing them with a radicalised doubt and scepticism. This doubt is seen as having an informative role to play in the constitution of a consciousness both subjective and political which is capable of providing a counter to the politics of hegemony, and the monism of a one dimensional state, either of the left or right. In Conclusion I contend that J M Coetzee's texts pose a linguistic and fictional significance within the context of South African polity and literature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisor Dr P E Strauss, for inspiration and discussion.

I am also grateful to the Human Science Research Council for a generous study grant. The thesis presented here is my own and should not be taken to represent the views of the Council.

DECLARATION

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use was made of the work of others it has been duly acknowledged in the text.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent talk given at the occasion of the 1987 Weekly Mail Book Week, J.M. Coetzee asked a question in relation to the task of the novelist. It is a question which seems to be of vital significance to any one who would wish to make sense not only of Coetzee's own work, but that of any South African novelist. "Are we trying to escape historical reality," he asked, "or, on the contrary, are we engaging with historical reality in a particular way, a way that may require some explanation and some defence?"(1) Coetzee then proceeds to give an eloquent defence of his own novelistic strategy, by way of a plea for artistic freedom. He argues that artistic freedom is being thwarted by what he refers to as the strategy of supplementation: in other words, the strategy by which a novel is subsumed under a dominant discourse - in this case history - whereby the task of the novelist is reduced to making "imaginative investigations of real historical forces and real historical circumstances."(2) Coetzee then goes on to compare the strategy of supplementation with that of a novel which operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions. Accordingly, he is anxious to condemn what he sees as a tendency in contemporary South Africa, to reduce the writer to a handmaiden of a particular political or social practice, which in striving to gain hegemony demands the allegiance and adherence of those writers who wish to be thought of as politically responsible.

Coetzee makes the point that the colonization of literature by history is a process which in South Africa is occurring at an alarming rate. It is a process made more

disturbing in Coetzee's mind because Coetzee himself proceeds from the premise that "history is not reality, that history is a kind of discourse,"(3) and that as a consequence its veracity will carry the force of agreement rather than truth. If history is a kind of story, therefore, we need no longer accept the authority of history, or indeed any other kind of discourse, that presents itself as what J.F. Lyotard has called a Master narrative. According to Lyotard the essence of our modern condition is its propensity towards the metadiscursive mode:

I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end - universal peace.(4)

The essence of the modern, as characterised by the Enlightenment's notions of progress and redemption, finds its antipode in what has been called the "Postmodern". As Lyotard says:

Simplifying in the extreme, I define Postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.(5)

Coetzee's conception of history as discourse, it will be argued, emerges from his own Postmodern and Poststructuralist understandings, and is reflected in the literary

Postmodernist forms of his novels. These two terms, Postmodernist and Poststructuralist, are to be understood, in the light of Lyotard's assertions, as the portmanteaux terms standing for a complex web of cultural and theoretical concerns, which for the moment can be characterised by three major theoretical themes: 1) the exorbitation of language; 2) the attenuation of truth; 3) the randomization of history.(6) All of these understandings share the Saussurean notion of the arbitrary relation of signifier and signified and give emphasis to the role of language in the construction of reality. Accordingly, any notion of a literary engagement in which the writer pursues some determinate truth is brought into question, and Coetzee goes on to argue :

In our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other.(7)

For Coetzee, the apparently arbitrary relation that exists between language and the "objective social world" acts as one of his major premises in justifying his resistance to what he sees as the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history. He argues that the writer should resist being seduced by the call to literary or political consensus, even in the name of political action. Such a notion, Coetzee claims, has validity even in a South Africa beset by material factors of oppression, and he adds that he "sees no reason why a moratorium on this kind of thinking should be acceptable."(8)

Having dealt with what he sees as the invidious trend of history, Coetzee continues to argue for the near autonomy of fiction, as a procedure of sense making and

interrogation outside the immediate arena of politics. Arguing that storytelling is a special kind of activity, he points out that it has its own laws and logic, that it qualifies easy notions of an objective reality and that it re-shapes consciousness. These opinions are part and parcel of Coetzee's own endorsement of the Postmodern rejection of Mimesis. As he writes

..... a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue, the residue, the art with which the message is coated with the residue, forming the subject matter of rhetoric or aesthetics or literary appreciation. There is no addition in stories. They are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure(9).

Coetzee argues that stories need not necessarily be about, say, class struggle or the contradictions of patriarchal society: "storytelling is not a way of making messages as they say, more effective, storytelling is another mode of thinking."(10)

As Coetzee states in an interview with Tony Morphet:

I don't have much interest in, or can't seriously engage myself with the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the real world.(11)

Coetzee's apparent lack of concern with realistic representation is commensurate with Brian McHale's thesis that literary Postmodernism constitutes a major shift in what he calls the dominant: that is, "the major focussing component in a work of art, that which guarantees the integrity of its structure."(12) McHale argues that the

dominant of the Postmodern novel is a concern with ontology. The Postmodern novel foregrounds such questions as: "Which World is this?" "What is to be done with it?" "Which of my selves is to do it?" These kinds of questions represent a shift from the preoccupation of the modern novel, which tended to foreground question of epistemology: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part?" "And what am I in it?"(13) Magda, the warped subject of In the Heart of the Country, for example, faces a world in which the normal relations between space, time and subjectivity become confused. Consequently she is an incomplete subject, a subject to whom the world is represented as a jumble of images. It has to be grasped through a kaleidoscope of discourses, none of which seems adequate to the task of organising her own subjectivity:

I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside of me, I signify something, I don't know what, I am dumb, I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is. If I press harder the glass will break, blood will drip, the cricket song will stop for a moment and then resume. I live inside a skin inside a house. There is no act I know of that will liberate me into the world.(14)

We enter here into a state in which Magda, the repressed widow of late nineteenth century rural life, shares an existence populated with carts, bicycles, planes and the language of the Post Second world war years. We hear talk of an "epileptic Fuhrer,"(15) an "atomic aimlessness,"(16) while Magda's "dream realities" are filled with strange aircraft, which give shape to a fantastic utterance of prophecy and vision:

When first the machines began to fly overhead and speak to me I was eager to speak back. I would stand on the head of rock behind the house dressed for preference in white, in my patched old white nightdress, and signal with my arms and call out my responses, first in English then later, when I begin to see I was not understood, in Spanish. "ES MI," I shouted, "VENE!" in a Spanish which I had to invent from first principles, by introspecting, as I went along.(17)

Teresa Dovey (18) argues in fact that Coetzee deals not so much with the real as with the constructed notions of the real. Indeed, for the Postmodernist writer the so called "real" is precisely the effect of the weight of convention and the linguistic process that gives to concepts and perceptions the illusion of objects. It follows that Dovey should see Coetzee's fictions as "criticism (or criticism as fictions)."(19) In keeping with this Coetzee has in a number of interviews refusing to interpret his own novels. Instead he has remained an absent voice, a 'silence' who refuses. Typical of his strategy is the reply he makes to one of Tony Morphet's questions on the relationship between the writer and the text:

Question Do you pursue the logic of the story for its own sake or your readers?

Coetzee I hope to pursue the logic of the story for its own sake. That is what it means for me to engage with a subject.(20)

The position that Coetzee takes up with regard to his work is given further emphasis in his remark concerning the kind of criticism that commentators and activists on the left have made regarding the relationship between the text of Michael K and the material conditions in South Africa:

Question The left will charge you with furthering the liberal fantasy of the politics of innocence and so obstructing progressive action. They will, possibly, question the final clause of the quotation most closely, "How will the earth forget her children?" and accuse you of mystificatory categories. Do you have a sense of how you will answer the question?

Coetzee I have no wish to enter the debate as a defender of Michael K. If war is the father of all things, let the objections you voice go to war with the book, which has now had its say, and let us see who wins.(21)

Despite this, arguments concerning Coetzee's political witness persist, and some irritation might be discernible in Coetzee's next reply to Morphet:

Question Sometimes the impression is that you write to satisfy a cruel and exacting internal criteria and that any reference external to the work are arbitrary and the creation of chance - at other times, especially in the Life and Times, one gains the sense that you are conducting a very precise dialogue with the South African reality. Would you like to comment?

Coetzee I don't know what the "South African reality" is, but I suspect that you are unlikely to discover it by reading newspapers, if only because

what you read in a newspaper (of whatever orientation) has been mediated through the epistemological framework called news. I have never found anything about Michael K in the newspapers. If I was conducting any dialogue in *Life and Times* it was with Michael K.(22)

What is interesting however is that Coetzee's apparent unconcern for the specificity of reference and place is to a large extent undermined by the social and geographical topography of his own work. His first four novels, on which I intend to focus in this paper Dusklands (1974), In the Heart of the Country (1977), Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), and Life and Times of Michael K (1983) all seem to touch on themes which have a peculiarly South African significance. These are the Frontier, Empire and "the relations between the powerful and powerless, between public corruption and private conscience." Lois Parkinson Zamora(23) argues that Coetzee's works are actually allegorical, and goes on to suggest that allegory, traditionally a conservative rather than subversive form, has increasingly been used by writers to indicate political and social injustice: that allegory is no longer used to point towards the ideal, but rather to interrogate abuses of power: she writes:

The purpose of allegory in Coetzee's fiction is no longer to suggest the means to mend a fractured world, but rather to draw attention to the fractures, a purpose which current events in South Africa are so tragically serving. His allegories depict a painfully divided world, a state of irreconcilable contraries and unresolvable differences. They are spare, often incongruously poetic depictions of the mind and psychic repression which results from a corrupt political and social order.(24)

Zamora argues that allegory is a form which recommends itself to writers who have to live in the reified atmosphere of oppression, because the writer is able to narrate the "political and social conditions which he/she opposes more subtly than he/she could in a constructionally realistic mode." This is because allegory allows the writer to "slip from a realistic to symbolic narration, and from public to private realms." Further "allegorical structures permit them to distance or to approach the reality which they describe, and thus to modulate the intensity and angle of their protest."(25) In Waiting for the Barbarians, therefore, the Magistrate's observations on Empire can be seen as the allegorical locus for a series of reflections on the situation of the South African totalitarian state, desperately re-arranging its meagre moral capital and its not so meagre military power, in an attempt to retain the initiative of power and politics and cling to hegemony:

Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire : how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era:(26)

Notwithstanding the fact that allegory can have political purpose, Coetzee's stories do not seem to point towards a resolved or conclusive future, or an ideal level of meaning where truth awaits interpretation: Rather, they repeatedly call into question the very possibility of an ultimate interpretation, challenging the simplification of absolute power, leaving the reader faced with the plenitude of indeterminacy.

This very indeterminacy taken together with Coetzee's unwillingness to engage in overt political debate, has tended to obscure his need to defend his own position in the public sphere. After all, if Coetzee had made claim to be dealing with external reality or claimed to be a writer intimately involved with social and political issues, then critics could rightly have expected him to take cognizance of, and comment on struggles in the political arena. But because Coetzee (up to now) has wanted to deny the value of mimetic truth claims then to take him to task for his supposed evasion of such issues, has only a limited interest. However in an introduction to his recent publication of essays White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa,(27) Coetzee has offered several comments which seem to allow critics to respond to his works in a direct relation to the challenges of concrete social life. Most notable is Coetzee's statement that South African literature has been a literature of empty (that is, unpeopled) landscape, and that it is thus a literature of failure. The failure is that of the historical imagination.(28) This literature of empty landscape derives from

The failure of the listening imagination to intuit the true language of Africa, the continued apprehension of silence (by the poet) or blankness (by the painter), stands for, or stands in the place of, another failure, by no means inevitable: A failure to imagine a peopled landscape, an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self.(29) ✱

The central failure which Coetzee identifies, the "failure to imagine a peopled landscape," is - Coetzee assures us - by no means inevitable. Nevertheless, its continued presence as a leitmotif in the (white) South African literary imagination

ensures that the topography of South African literary discourse is populated, in white writing, not by socialised black people, but rather by what Coetzee (in the Adamastor tradition) identifies as "giant monsters" which reside under the earth and provide the psychic equivalent of what is repressed in the white sensibility: its horror, or fear of belonging in Africa.

In terms of this, Coetzee poses a question:

Is there a language in which people of European identity, or of not European identity, then of a highly problematic South African - colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?(30)

The nature of the problem, Coetzee suggests, is further complicated by what he reads as a "certain historical will to see as silent and empty a land that has been, if not full of human figures, not empty of them either." And he goes on to claim that

Official historiography long told a tale of how until the nineteenth century of the Christian era the interior of what we now called South Africa was unpeopled. The poetry of empty space may one day be accused of furthering the same fiction.(31)

In an attempt to respond critically to Coetzee's own works, this paper will take up the challenge of the silent landscapes in his own fiction in discussing the relationship between the "writing of politics to the politics of writing."(32) I intend to examine whether Coetzee's own Postmodernist and Poststructuralist language is adequate to the task of addressing the social dynamics of contemporary South African society.

Despite Coetzee's own ambiguous responses to questions concerning the novelists social role, such an emphasis seems unavoidable where the confrontation in South Africa between the ideologically structured text and the ideologically constructed reader is grounded in a situation of total politics and massive material oppression. Accordingly, this empty landscape suggests most seriously the absence of the majority black population. As Michael Chapman states:

In our industrialised present, these (figures) will be black socialised human beings who have their own voices and their own stories, and may even belong to trade unions.(33)

Coetzee, it seems, is aware of these problems. In a number of essays he comments on the tendency, or even the psychic need, of white writers to deny the black presence and voice, so as to buttress white justificatory myths related to the dispossession of black land. The terms of dispossession involve not only land but also articulacy. As Coetzee writes about the attitude of white ownership of land:

If the work of hands on a particular patch of earth, diggers, ploughing, planting, building, is what inscribes it as the property of its occupiers "by right" then the hands of the black serfs doing the work had better not be seen.(34)

Coetzee extends the argument in his claim that South African fiction is full of examples of people (and peoples) to whom whites have attributed a language limited and simplified in various ways, and where a range of intellect and feeling is, by implication, necessarily limited and simplified.

Coetzee's awareness, in his "white writing" essays of the various forces contributing to the suppression of the Black voice should alert the reader to the danger of underestimating his grasp of the interrelationship between literature and social process. Does Coetzee's perspicuity as a critic of considerable brilliance and power, however extend to the informing consciousness of his novels?

The answers to such questions are not merely confined to the calm air of the academy, but are possessed of an urgency articulated within the arena of political and social struggle. Can the South African writer who wishes to be taken seriously continue in a fictional mode which discounts the material factors of oppression, and refuses the role of advancing struggle and social reconstruction? To what extent are Coetzee's pleas for novelistic freedom undercut by the populist claim that literature must reflect not only the lived experience of the masses, but the socio-economic conditions which can be seen to determine their existence? These considerations will of necessity bear on the reception and appropriation of Coetzee's texts within the academy, a reception which has been characterised by an enthusiasm bordering on adulation, virtually guaranteeing the works 'canonization'. But the right of the academy to appropriate texts on the basis of some hermeneutic concept of aesthetic appropriateness has become increasingly difficult to defend as the differing ideological and material factors that comprise the South African situation continue to polarize along conservative and radical lines, and a variety of discourses begin to struggle for cultural authority.

This struggle, conducted as it is amongst compelling material conditions, might be most fully captured by a 'committed' literature: a literature which directly reflects

the codes, language, hopes, and aspirations of the black working class or the popular masses. Instead Coetzee presents a literature of negation, albeit a negation that attempts to subvert our habitual ways of thinking or perceiving, and reminds us, in our poststructural differences, of systems of power that endorse certain representations while prohibiting others. In contrast a black writer such as Eshia Mphahlele speaks in affirmative tones on the role of the intellectual in the liberation struggle:

[Black people] need to be told now who they are, and where they come from, and what they should be doing about these things that we're talking about. That's where the scholar comes in; he must exploit that consciousness, the black consciousness, so as to probe deeper into the personality and move forward.(35)

To what extent does the potency of Coetzee's fiction offer a critique of the current South African situation? To what extent does his fiction, as Michael Vaughan has suggested,(36) merely represent a modernist challenge to liberal aesthetics while reinforcing the political and social vision of the white intellectual bourgeoisie? As Vaughan says:

As a consequence of the prominence given to a state of agonised consciousness, material factors of oppression and struggle in South Africa achieve a subordinate attention It would seem, then, that in his novels Coetzee gives privileged attention to the predicament of a liberal petty bourgeois intelligentsia.(37)

Questions such as these are firmly connected to Coetzee's use of Postmodernist codes, which partake of a complicated relation to contemporary theory, which are in turn concerned with our problematic relationships to power, truth, the human subject, representation, etc. Thus we find in Magda's monologue references to Wittgenstein's private language debate and Hegel's discourse on reciprocal influences of their master slave situations.

There are few enough words true, rock hard enough to build a life on, and these he is destroying. He believes that he and she can choose their words and make a private language, with an I and you and have and now of their own. But there can be no private language. Their intimate you is my you too.(38)

It is the slave's consciousness that constitutes the master's certainty of his own truth. But the slave's consciousness is a dependent consciousness. So the master is not sure of the truth of his autonomy. This truth lies in an inessential consciousness and its inessential acts.(39)

The major question which will direct the course of this paper will be the vexed one as to whether the Postmodernist/ Poststructuralist mode can engage to any purpose with the socialised human and political character of the present day South African situation. Or to put it another way, do Coetzee's novels simply address the problems of a privileged intellectual or white elite, or do his novels act to give shape to struggle, while perhaps even redefining some of its aspects and priorities?

The paper will comprise of two sections. The first will deal with the significance of Postmodernism. Here I shall note the criticism of Jameson in which Postmodernism

is seen as the ideological component of consumer capitalism. According to such a view Postmodernism is a First world, non committed form which directs attention from socio-political preoccupations, producing subjectivities to whom action seems futile and for whom dissent is limited to the socially sanctioned vagaries of style. I shall also examine the suggestion by Simon During that Postmodernism is an inappropriate form for the constitution of a truly postcolonial culture, for such a culture needs to be secure in its own conclusions and in a confident manner be able to project in a vision of the future. In the course of examining such theoretical matters I shall be looking at the way in which Coetzee constructs his characters, and I shall ask the question: Do such characters pose any significance as role models for the majority of people in this country? Having addressed the arguments advanced by detractors of Postmodernism, I shall go on in the final section to re-examine Postmodernism as an interrogative form, a form which attempts to understand the workings of power and the institutions through which power operates. This section will note the way in which mimetic representation can act to reinforce predispositions towards conformity and social acquiescence. The thrust of the argument will be that power and control are sufficiently insidious and subterranean to be able to evade the tools of conventional analysis, and that therefore, any analysis of power needs to be responsive to the practices through which power is manifested. Here I will suggest that although Coetzee might not possess a language of mass recognition his fiction remains responsive to the political intrusiveness of the South African situation. In other words the Postmodernist approach will be seen to be neither devoid of literary nor social significance.

SECTION I

With the publication of the novel Dusklands (1974), J.M. Coetzee was hailed by a certain section of the South African literary establishment as a novelist of international stature. Typical of the reaction was Jonathan Crewe's remark: "In Dusklands the modern novel in English arrives in South Africa for the first time."⁽⁴⁰⁾ In fact, as Stephen Watson has so aptly remarked, Crewe should have been more explicit, and appended the corollary: "the first modernist or Postmodernist novel."⁽⁴¹⁾ The Postmodernist novel, as we have seen, represents a break with the "normal" codes and representational modes of the traditional realist novel. J.F. Lyotard describes the Postmodernist novel as, "an arena in which discourses, or different ways of forming and combining sentences ... meet in a relation of fundamental antagonism."⁽⁴²⁾ This might be clarified by a brief examination of M.H. Abrams suggestion in the Mirror and the Lamp (1953)⁽⁴³⁾, that the literary text is to be understood in terms of four basic co-ordinates: 1) The expressive (the relation of text to author); 2) The pragmatic (the relation of text to audience); 3) The mimetic (the relation of text to world); and 4) The objective (the relation of text to itself, as a purely autonomous object).

With the advent of the Postmodernist and Poststructuralist Project, the expressive and mimetic function have been radically subverted. The mimetic or representational codes have been seen as a narrative trick, designed to mask the arbitrariness of signifier and signified, while the expressive act is seen to function merely as a residue of a romantic fiction mixed up with a proprietorial ideology of meaning. In short, argues Prendergast :

The route of the expressive and the mimetic has been part of the process of clearing away the debris of the ruined categories of an anthropocentric Metaphysics: self, nature, presence, and ultimately man. Conversely, Abrams' two other functions, the pragmatic and the objective, have gained pride of place.(44)

The text is thus seen as an autonomous entity, floating free of reference and engaging in the "jouissance" of its textuality, indeed intertextuality, thus:

What literature talks about is not the world or the self, but literature, engaged in self reflective scrutiny of its own fabricated reality, its specific processes of construction and under certain conditions deconstruction.(45)

If the arrival of Dusklands caused debate amongst the literary establishment, it was due in part to Coetzee's use of a number of themes identifiable as Postmodern. These themes are developed in the monologue of Jacobus Coetzee in the second half of the novel.

Behind this familiar red or gray exterior, spoke the stone from its stone heart to mine, this exterior jutting into every dimension inhabited by man, lies in ambush a black interior quite, quite strange to the world. Yet under the explorers hammerblow this innocent interior transforms itself in a flash into a replete, confident, worldly image of that red or gray exterior. How then, asked the stone, can the hammer wielder who seeks to penetrate the heart of the universe be sure that there exist any interiors? Are they not

perhaps fictions, these lures of interiors for rape which the universe uses to draw out its explorers? (Entombed in its coffer my heart too had lived in darkness all its life. My gut would dazzle if I pierced myself.)(46)

This interpretative dilemma is one of the agons which confronts not only the writer of fiction, but also the human subject. The moment of decision, the moment in which one ties the linguistic sign to a fully constituted meaning, is not an innocent activity, but rather a moment imbued with cultural, ideological, theoretical and political implication. Thus Eugene Dawn, the protagonist of the Vietnam project (which dominates the first half of Dusklands) tries to decide on the meaning of himself as a fully situated subject, and he is led to reflect:

I am eager to confront life a second time, but I am not impatient to get out. There is still my entire childhood to work through before I can expect to get to the bottom of my story In my cell in the heart of America, with my private toilet in the corner, I ponder and ponder. I have high hopes of finding out whose fault I am.(47)

The problematising of the self, a recurrent theme in Coetzee and in Postmodern writing in general, is simply one theme amongst a number of others, where traditional notions and norms are placed under scrutiny. In Dusklands, for example, Coetzee explores the discourses which comprise our ideas of frontier, history, truth and fiction. His technique involves his parodying the methods of traditional scholarship. It is a technique which relates him to other writers, such as Borges,(48) whose tales explore the interface between language and reality, truth and fiction. In Dusklands the stories of both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee

are told through pseudo-documents which claim to possess the legitimacy of traditional scholarship and history. Indeed, the introduction which prefaces the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, "What is important, is the philosophy of history," sets the ironic tone for the rethinking of history as implied by Coetzee's method. The historical setting, Namaqualand (1760-2), is supplemented by the detail of historical material and historical events. In the case of the four documents which comprise the second part of Dusklands, however, only the last is authentic. The authentic document, the three-page deposition made by Jacobus Coetzee at the castle (Cape Town) in 1760, provides the framework for the fictional narrative of the explorer's first journey into the interior.(49) The fiction itself acts as a supplement to this framework, linking fact and fiction in such a way that fiction soon establishes itself as "a more potent truth."(50) But a truth which none the less, continuously points towards its own fictionality. We are, for instance, given two equally plausible accounts of the Hottentot servant's (Klawer's) death.(51)

Coetzee's stories therefore announce their own fictionality, as they remind the reader that they create rather than reflect meaning. The power of fiction to claim a more potent truth, to somehow 'possess' our imagination becomes part of its continual allure. In In the Heart of the Country Magda speculates on the power of the imagination to create more inclusive categories of understanding:

Fascinating this colonial history: I wonder whether a speculative history is possible, as a speculative philosophy, a speculative theology, and now it would appear, a speculative entomology are possible, all sucked out of my thumb, to say nothing of the geography of the stone desert and animal husbandry.(52)

The struggle to give experience meaning, the struggle to create an ontological and epistemological coherence, becomes one of the central sites of the Postmodern agon, paradoxically carrying with it the burden of its own rejection of mimetic certainties both in the subjective and corporate realm. The individual, faced with the uncertainty of interpretation, may glimpse areas of possibility beyond the safety of positive and empirical responses, but is simultaneously left in a position of extreme anxiety.

This anxiety is reflected in the nature of Postmodern characterisation. Characters exhibit more often than not, pathological if not schizophrenic, orientations. Thus Magda's various versions of the fantasy death of her father give evidence of a mind struggling to find a viable basis from which to constitute itself. This anxiety is also manifest in Eugene Dawn's struggle to construct the "truth" out of the only faculty left to him, introspection.

I come to the truth as I discovered all truths in my Vietnam report, by introspection. Vietnam, like everything else, is inside of me, and in Vietnam, with a little diligence, a little patience, all truths about man's nature.(53)

Introspection without an objective basis for decision, seems to prove inadequate when choice and action are demanded. The need to actualise 'being', and to project a coherent, an active 'becoming', are hindered by the arbitrariness of Postmodernist linguistic sense-making. In contrast, the knowledge claims of those social projects which attempt an analysis of the world based on an active and totalising

understanding provide the individual with a coherent picture of reality which is arguably indispensable to any conceivable social action. Perhaps as Prendergast remarks "the supreme illusion would be the assumption that we could live entirely without them (Masternarratives) in a euphoric monument of unabandoned desire and infinite semiosis." (54)

Let me suggest, at this juncture, that if one is to think seriously about Postmodernism and its significance for South Africa, it is necessary to understand a number of the major conceptual pressures which underlie its critique. These will bear significantly on the ability of Postmodernism to grasp and reflect the nature of the South African topos, and on the adequacy of Postmodernist premises to constitute a language sufficient and appropriate to South Africa. For our purposes here it is worth noting the lucidity of Georg Lukacs' critique of avant-garde experimental modernism, in "The Meaning of Contemporary Realism"(55) and the comments of Frederic Jameson as reflected in his paper 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'.(56)

Lukacs

Georg Lukacs acts as the precursor of any critique of Postmodernism through his criticism of the avant-garde 'modernism' of Kafka, Joyce, Musil, Beckett and Faulkner. The thrust of Lukacs' critique, is his castigation of what he sees as these literatures static and subjective view of the human condition displayed in the way they systematically dissolve character, and substitute characters possessed of pathological orientation. These tendencies are exacerbated by what Lukacs identifies as a lack of historical perspective in such literature. He argues that such literatures discount history, and lack a sense of its dialectical movement. These literatures thus produce a contingent view of the world, one in which social progress is not possible:

This vision of the world as chaos results from a lack of a humanist social perspective. The self deception from which modernism suffers in this respect is based on a peculiar, and contradictory piece of dogmatism. To modernist thought they are almost without exception supporters of extreme subjectivism, the static nature of reality, and the senselessness of its surface phenomena, are absolute truths requiring no proof.(57)

Jameson's critique of Postmodernism has a strong family resemblance to Lukacs' reservation about experimental modernism. Jameson, however, borrowing liberally from the themes of the Frankfurt school of critical theory, extends the critique by arguing that Postmodernism is the most adaptive and subtlest expression of the capitalist mode of production, which has found its most exquisite expression in multinational capitalism. Postmodernism, argues Jameson, in all its various guises acts to extend the hegemony of world capital by denying dialectics, and stultifying thought within the endless present, exemplified in the libidinal ecstasy of consumer society. Consciousness is captured in what Jameson calls a flatness or a depthlessness, a situation in which a critique of ones condition is not possible, and one in which even the humanist notion of the subject is allowed only a marginal or even non existent, status:

Most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and the outside And this is perhaps the moment to say something about contemporary theory,

which has among other things been committed to the mission of criticizing and discrediting this very hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside and of stigmatising such models as ideological and metaphysical.(58)

For Jameson, as for Lukacs, the avant-garde modernist and the Postmodernist mode lead alike to the decentering of the subject: to a situation of alienation and, its extreme form Schizophrenia: a situation in which words escape any reference, and become free floating signifiers. The resulting kind of character as exemplified by Beckett's personage (Watt would be a prime example here), have a consciousness that is conveyed in an endless stream of images, which simply recount a jumble of distinct and unrelated signifiers. In consequence the individual thus finds him/herself trapped in a spatial field which reflects only the contingency of a never ending present. Space and not time becomes the underlying organizational-metaphor of Postmodernism, and Postmodernist space allows the individual no co-ordinates on which to inscribe a personal geometry of organization, all is a depthless simulacrum (an identical copy for which no original ever existed).(59) This leads Jameson to contend that:

what the burden of our preceding demonstration suggests, however, is that distance in general (including critical distance in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of Postmodernism. We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now Postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial co-ordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation; meanwhile, it has already been observed how the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing the very capitalist

enclaves (nature and the unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedian footholds for critical effectivity.(60)

This Postmodernist space - a space which denies time, history and anything but the most circumscribed vision - acts as a vindication of global capital.

Postmodern (or multinational) space is not merely a cultural ideology or fantasy, but has a genuine historical (and socio-economic) reality as a kind of third great original expansion of capitalism around the globe.(61)

Subverting the spatial co-ordinates of Modernism, Postmodernist space, argues Jameson, becomes in time a new realism, the newly accepted form of reality. And it follows that the claim Postmodernism makes regarding its ability to 'deconstruct' - to demystify a mystified reality - is paradoxically rendered null and void. Hence, Post-modernism may be read "as a peculiar form of realism (or at least Mimesis of reality) at the same time that it can equally well be analysed as so many attempts to distract and divert us from that reality, or disguise its contradictions and resolve them in the guise of formal mystifications."(62)

Drawing on Jameson's objections to Postmodernism Simon During(63) has commented on the effect of the Postmodern in ex-colonial lands. During in effect argues that the ex-colonial lands need to develop an aggressive national identity, and he refers to what he calls Postcolonialism which is seen as the need in nation groups which have been victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images(64). This is allied to the corresponding need for the peoples of the ex-colonial lands to achieve

"self representation": that is to shrug off the power of the Eurocentric image, and develop identities granted, not in terms of the colonial powers, but in terms of themselves. During develops his argument by positing a distinction between the Postcolonising and the Postcolonised forms. The former (During tells us) "Fit the communities and individuals who profit from and identify themselves as heirs to the work of the colonising. The latter fit those who have been dispossessed by that work and who identify themselves as heirs to a more or less undone culture."(65) During concludes that a truly Postcolonised project will understand its task as the deconstruction of the European imperialist mode, and the institution of a more appropriate cultural expression.

Coetzee, as we have briefly seen, attempts the deconstruction of the images and categories of representation through which we create our world. The method by which he does this, however, utilizes the highly recondite and complex strategy of Postmodernism, a strategy which critics such as Jameson and During identify as an ideological component of capitalism and Western culture. If Coetzee genuinely wishes to achieve a language adequately descriptive of Africa, and to be spoken to by Africa, why does he choose a verbal strategy which operates within the cultural modalities of a far-away Europe? Why strap oneself to the European Masters own methodologies?

Critics have recognised that Coetzee is acutely aware of South Africa's colonial legacy, and have identified colonial pre-occupation in Coetzee's first four novels Dusklands (1974) deals with both the American colonization of Vietnam and with the colonisation of the South African interior; In the Heart of the Country (1976) deals with the haunted voice of the isolated coloniser; Waiting for the Barbarians

(1980) deals with the paranoia of an imperialist empire, while Life and Times of Michael K (1983) deals with an individual intent on eluding colonisation both of the mind and of the body. Stephen Watson has extended the debate by arguing that Coetzee's critique of colonisation finds its repressed moment in Coetzee's own position as coloniser:

The solid core to his (Coetzee's) work lies elsewhere, outside the works themselves, in something that is effaced, implicit, barely alluded to the one fact most important for an understanding of the apparent anomalies in his work is that he is not only a colonizer who is an intellectual but a colonizer who does not want to be a colonizer.(66)

Coetzee is the colonizer who refuses. Does his apparent refusal of colonial repression, however, sufficiently justify him as a legitimate voice of a Postcolonised South Africa. Some critics have answered, no!

As we have seen Michael Vaughan reasons that although Coetzee challenges the assumptions of liberal aesthetics, he does it in such a way as to reinforce the concerns and predicament of a liberal bourgeois intelligentsia.(67) Paul Rich argues that while Coetzee has "stripped away layer upon layer of the mythology that has overlain the consciousness of the white settler society," and while he has sought to reveal an inner existential dilemma confronting the inheritors of a European culture, "his art form is probably destined to remain a vehicle for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of White artists and intellectuals.(68) Peter Knox Shaw remarks that it is regrettable that a writer of such considerable and varied talents should play down the political and economic

aspect of history in favour of the psycho-pathology of Western life.(69) In fact Coetzee's tendency to efface the political and economic aspects of history can be seen to be commensurate with his virtual effacement of the lived life and dilemmas of the ordinary people who inhabit the landscape of his colonial world. In Waiting for the Barbarians this is noted in the incapacity of the Magistrate to communicate with the barbarian girl, either sexually or verbally, and in the lack of a 'Barbarian perspective' on the enmity between the Empire and their own culture. Indeed Barbarians' aspirations and wishes are mentioned only once, and then through the consciousness of the 'non Barbarian' Magistrate:

"Tell me, Sir, in confidence," he says, "What are the barbarians dissatisfied about? What do they want from us?" ---

"They want an end to the spread of the settlement across their lands. They want their land back, finally. They want to be free to move about with their flocks from pasture to pasture as they used to" We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire - our outpost, our settlement our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think like that at all.(70)

The inability of the subject peoples to speak, and the inability of the colonisers to transcend their own language of dominance is a recurring concern in Coetzee's vision. Referring to this phenomenon, Watson speaks of Coetzee being interested more in "the projection of (a) certain mental aberration located exclusively in the divided consciousness that is a special feature of Western humanity."(71)

This emphasis, argues Watson, takes precedence over any focus on either the economic or material conditions of South African life. Thus Coetzee's fiction works in favour of a language in which the reader is presented with mind rather than character, and situation rather than action.(72) This leads to the inability of Coetzee's characters to explain their lives in anything other than the most abstract and circumscribed form. Magda, the neurotic subject of In the Heart of the Country, for example, can make only brief, confused remarks on the economics of colonial life:

And economics: how am I to explain the economics of my existence, with its migraines and siestas, its envy, its speculative langours, unless the sheep have something to eat There is another great moment in Colonial history : the first marino is lifted from shipboard with block and tackle in a canvas waistband, bleating with terror, unaware that this is the promised land where it will browse, generation after generation, on the nutritious scrub and provide the economic base for the presence of my father and myself in this lonely house where we kick our heels waiting for the wool to grow and gather about ourselves the remnants of the lost tribes of the Hottentots to be hewers of wood and drawers of water and shepherds and body servants in perpetuity and where we are devoured by boredom and pull the wings off flies.(73)

Instead of social or economic perceptions we have an emphasis on the agonised consciousness, a peculiarly Western consciousness, trapped within the ideological parameters of Western life. It is easy to move to the conclusion that Coetzee appears, to be not so interested in the aspirations of Black life in South Africa. In

her response to Michael K Nadine Gordimer goes so far as to question Coetzee's commitment to any real possibility of change: His writing, she says, lacks "the energy of the will to resist evil: This superb energy exists with indefatigable and undefeated persistence among the black peoples of South Africa ... it is made evident, yes, heroically, every grinding day."(74)

Leon de Kock takes the argument further when in response to papers delivered at a conference devoted entirely to Coetzee's Foe, he makes this statement:

why do we privilege a single text by a self confessed marginal white writer for a seminar which approaches conference proportions ... Bereft of the moral legitimacy of liberalism we [the White South African literary establishment] were left with an increasing sense of decadence and we began to analyse our decay. In this it seems to me, Coetzee became our chief articulator, fictionalising the crisis by setting up discourses within discourses and collapsing the epistemological and moral self confidence of liberal writing, by recalling our brutal Colonial heritage.(75)

As de Kock concludes, "can we not find a better use for the power we have than to pick at our own cultural carcass?"(76) Is it not time, Michael Vaughan argues, to turn to writers who can strip through the textual strategies of the Nouvelle Critique and invest action with social legitimacy? Presumably for Vaughan such writers would include Njabulo Ndebele, Don Mattera, and Mongane Serote - writers who attempt to deal with the historical specificity of black culture, resistance and aspirations. The claim is that such writers are establishing the style and literary engagement necessary to a truly post-colonial response.

A recent article by Vaughan ('The Writer as Story-teller'),(77) in which he examines the literary project of Ndebele, might bring these thoughts into sharper focus. As Vaughan notes, Ndebele re-examines the notion of storytelling, which (following Walter Benjamin), he defines as a universal phenomenon, a popular phenomenon in which the lived lives of the people are realised and given expression. Ndebele argues that the "storyteller" should not impose his/her stories from the outside, but needs rather to immerse him/herself in the popular culture, in the lived experience of community life. In this way the storyteller becomes an apprentice in the lived manifestations of popular life. In this regard Vaughan writes:

... an apprenticeship to storytelling involves an education in popular culture, in popular subjectivity. The apprentice derives insight into popular life not in an objective way, in terms of those quantifiable conditions that impinge upon, "determine" the lives of the people, but in a subjective way, in the terms in which people relate to, and "reshape" such conditions.(78)

Of course, as Vaughan points out, this kind of populist view brings Ndebele into immediate conflict with Marxist and materialistic notions of ideology and with the claim that ideology produces misrecognition of the objective conditions of human life. Marxist critics would perhaps demand a literature which systematically exposes the supposed factors which create misrecognition. In Ndebele's view, however, these categories prove insufficient because they refuse the legitimacy of popular thought and practices, imposing the understanding of intellectuals who unavoidably occupy an estranged class position and possesses a consciousness which is not in touch with the masses. As Vaughan so eloquently puts it:

To show respect for stories is nothing more than to show respect for people as subjects.(79)

Ndebele is thus concerned with aligning literature with the ordinary lives of ordinary people, using a language and a code of expression commensurate with the lived life of social processes. As Ndebele points out, this will have repercussions for any writer, and specifically the white intellectual, although it would hold equally well for the black intellectual class who make bold to speak for the people:

... as far as the possible response to scholarly research is concerned, we have here yet another glaring tragedy of South African life. For historical reasons, only the whites have some access to the best educational facilities. This means that any research of radical interest which, by definition has to emanate from, and its evaluation be situated in, the very currents of the African struggle as it evolves, has no organic relationship with that struggle. So it cannot enrich the struggle in the immediate instance. This is so from the perspective of information giving as well as the assimilation of that information.(80)

The notion that stories can be legitimised when they reflect the lived life of the masses goes some way towards defining the form that a new post colonised culture might take; however, a literature which affirms the social and cultural norms of the masses discounts the rejoinder that this is already an ideologically constituted response with no guarantee of any legitimacy beyond common sympathy. Arguably Ndebele is not asking that popular experience be simply affirmed, but rather that it

should reinforce the human dimensions of progressive political movements, in both creative and critical ways. According to such a criticism Ndebele would probably promote the ideal of justice in a post-apartheid society as a more important yardstick of literary judgment than the analysis of a decaying social order. It is a political choice, demanding a secure foundation on which to build models of reality and reference. Concerns such as this return us to the vexed question of how we are to gauge the legitimacy of any judgment, statement, or representation?

Lyotard has argued that any form of judgment takes place within an order, "a set of commands within which any representation takes place." (81) This order is composed of three (heterogeneous) kinds of sentences: a descriptive; a prescriptive; a normative. The descriptive says, "this is how things are"; the prescriptive says, "you must accept this is how things are"; the normative says, "there is an authority validating the two previous sentences." The question thus becomes: how do we name the authority governing the normative? (82)

The notion of the normative raises the vexed question of the possibility of literary and social agreement or disagreement. The question is: within which set of discourses do we find the normative operating? Who constructs it? How does it gain from its hegemony? Further, how do "we" contend against it? To begin to understand the construction of mimesis as a code, is to see the Althusserian coupling of ideology and mimesis whereby mimesis is seen as a woven command belonging to processes of interpolation, thus the subject is understood as being imperiously called upon to occupy a fixed position within existing historical structures, themselves posited as made for all eternity. The question then becomes: how do we as subjects escape the codes which ensure the misrecognition which

ideology initiates, and is there an Archimedian point which allows us to escape ideology altogether? Althusser's understanding of ideology as being all pervasive in our sense making apparatuses has, of course, provoked the reply that such an understanding becomes too functional, too enclosing; that ideology is not immune to counter hegemonic practice and struggle. Volosinov (Bakhtin) an early precursor of the poststructuralist debate, argues that signs possess a multi accentuality.(83) He believed that the mastery of the struggle over meaning in discourse had, as its most pertinent effect or result, the importing of a 'superclass': an eternal character to the ideological sign, which would extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occur in it. The result would be to make the sign uniaccentual.(84) Volosinov's point is that closure can only be achieved through the hegemony of one discursive practice. But such practices are not conditional or necessary: thus if language can be coupled to a particular reality effect, it can also be uncoupled. There is, consequently a politics of signification in which successful articulation and dearticulation of certain themes, eg democracy, the rule of law, civil rights, the nation, the people, mankind, male, female could be seen to effect the emergence of subjects as politically and ideologically motivated and constituted beings.

Coetzee's aim is to trace the constructed nature of reality, and to expose the human presuppositions on which truth is based. He is therefore willing to see reality as residing as much in the arena of myth and discourse, as in that of economic conditions. Eugene Dawn's dialogue alerts us to the power of myth:

A myth is true - that is to say, operationally true - insofar as it has predictive force. The more deeply rooted and universal a myth, the more difficult it is

to combat. The myths of a tribe are the fictions it coins to maintain its powers. The answer to a myth of force is not necessarily a counterforce, for if the myth predicts counterforce, counterforce remains the myth. The science of mythography teaches us that a subtler counter is to subvert and revise the myth. The highest propaganda is the propaganda of a new mythology.(85)

Even the deconstructive exercise, however, does not necessarily guarantee a reaction that is innocent or value free. Accordingly, there is a danger that Postmodernist theory can announce itself as a privileged order of demystification, and claim for itself (in Peter Knox Shaw's phrase) "a more potent truth."(86) Indeed, such a tendency was acknowledged by Jacques Derrida himself; as Gayatri Spivak points out in the preface to Of Grammatology:

As she deconstructs ... the critic necessarily assumes that she at least and for the time being, means what she says. Even the declaration of her vulnerability must come, after all, in the controlling language of demonstration and reference. In other words the critic provisionally forgets that her own text is necessarily self deconstructed, always already a Palimpsest.(87)

The desire to deconstruct is thus not a project which itself is capable of what Barthes might call a below zero order of reference or accountability; rather it too will reveal its ideological and normative origins. What underlies the discourse of Vaughan, Knox Shaw, Rich and others, is the question: does Coetzee's fiction simply lead the reader to misrecognise the obvious material conditions which create the

real conditions for the interpolation of the subject? And if Coetzee's fiction does misrepresent this process, where interest does it serve? In this respect, the materialist critique is unequivocal, and might be best summed up in a SASPU National review of Waiting for the Barbarians which concludes:

As the CNA awards show, this is a book which will be enthusiastically assimilated into the very system it (vaguely) condemns. In the end it is not a disturbing book, and ultimately it challenges nothing. Coetzee is a fine writer, it is a pity he is not a bolder one.(88)

The Marxist notion of a radical dialectical process of enlightenment and progress, allied strategically to the eventual hegemony of the working class and to a set of progressive social practices, acts as one of the main conceptual counters to any Postmodernist critique. Marxism claims to capture history and the future, as the topography on which it writes its vision of a socialist society. Postmodernist practice, by contrast, attempts to explode the framework of Enlightenment rationality, upsetting the idea of knowledge, conscious awareness, selfconsciousness, and the powerful notion of progress. It thus lacks the dimension of a history or a future, and demands the end of history as teleology enlightenment, rationality, God or dialectics. Instead, it opens up the present to the contingency of being, denying as it does so any attempts to capture becoming within some grand narrational order.

Of all Coetzee's novels Life and Times of Michael K is perhaps the site on which such debates are most visible. The most overtly 'South African' of his novels, Michael K also acts as the prime example of Coetzee's unwillingness to deal with aspects of popular struggle or political processes. The story concentrates instead on

the dilemma of individual attempts to negotiate the contingencies of a world in which the established order is caught in a state of crisis. (The novel in this respect has links with the work of writers such as Kafka, Sartre and Beckett.) Michael K, the man, is most probably a member of the so-called coloured race, a gardener, a simple man with the additional burden of a harelip, who, made redundant from his job, chooses to ignore the civil war that rages around him, and undertakes a journey to return his ailing mother to the farm where she was born. The emphasis is, therefore, removed from the prevailing chaos of the war and placed upon K's own responses to his conditions. K's attitude, meanwhile, reveals simplicity and seeming incomprehension, an attitude best summed up by one of his fellow inmates in a labour camp:

You're a baby, said Robert. You've been asleep all your life. Its time to wake up. Why do you think they give you charity, you and the children? Because they think you are harmless, your eyes can't open, you don't see the truth around you.(89)

K is the original estranged outcast, an almost Beckettian character, a man who seems to experience life as a series of contingencies. Indeed, K's estrangement approaches the Schizophrenic authenticity suggested by Deleuze and Guatterri(90) as the individualistic and radicalised Postmodernist mode of escaping the authoritarian one-dimensional experience of modern society. The notion of the body without organs losing itself in the ecstasy of schizophrenia, becoming a passive monad which resists the desiring machines of paranoid authoritarian control, is the poststructural counter to the Marxist project of dialectical enlightenment and mass consciousness raising;

An apparent conflict arises between desiring machines and the body without organs. Every coupling of machines, every production of a machine, every sound of a machine running, becomes unbearable to the body without organs. Beneath its organs its senses there are larvae and loathsome worms, and a God at work messing it all up and strangling it by organising it. In order to resist organ machines, the body without organs presents its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface as a barrier. In order to resist linked, connected and interrupted flows, it sets up a counterflow of amorphous, undifferentiated fluids. In order to resist using words composed of articulated phonetic units, it utters only gasps and cries that are sheer unarticulated blocks of sound. We are of the opinion that what is ordinarily referred to as a "primary repression" means precisely that; it is not a countercathesis, but rather this repulsion of desiring machines by the body without organs. This is the real meaning of the paranoid machines: The desiring machines attempt to break into the body without organs and the body without organs repels them as an overall persecution apparatus.(91)

Gordimer's claim that K "is a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history and a creature no organ of state would recruit as one of its agents"(92) gives emphasis to the notion that K is the body without organs, the radical resistor of the desiring machines of state and authority. However, the notion of the passive monad in the midst of massive material oppression is a concept difficult to promote, especially within the form that such oppression takes in South Africa. K's resistance to the authorities has its counterpoint in his resistance to his own community.

Indeed he resists any notion of community. Rather, his authenticity (and this is what distinguishes him from the complete negation represented by Beckett's characters) lies in his fulfilling his function as a gardener: a man to whom is entrusted an ideal of humanity that seems no longer applicable. His refusal to join the freedom fighters as they pass through his garden in the veld is thus motivated by his self-imposed role as preserver of a simpler, more organic vision of life:

K knew that he would not call out and stand up and cross from darkness into the firelight to announce himself. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over: whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening: because the land was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why.(93)

This idea of the monadic Postmodernist hero has in European literature grown out of the failed hope of Western proletarian revolution. As Lyotard so succinctly writes

.... fifty years ago (we had to believe in the proletariat as the privileged locus of crises and social critique, well, these reasons have lost their cogency. One cannot say that the proletariat is this locus in any of the developed countries, it just isn't true.(94)

With the loss of the proletariat as the "locus of crises" the task falls to the artist, theorist, and groups constituting counterhegemonic culture to be the repositories of

a permanent revolution, instituting new and evermore radical modes of cultural, social and theoretical practice. Thus the notion of schizophrenia finds its application with the individual, and those radicalised communities (Hippies etc.) who attempt to break the deadlock of a monoglossic, one-dimensional culture. This of course may all be very well in the First World. The demise of the European working class as the locus of crises, however, need not necessarily have a theoretical significance in the Third World, where the working class find itself as the industrial reserve(95) of global capital and as such might still become the locus of crises.

In a South Africa embroiled in struggle, with a proletariat capable (and, indeed, showing signs) of becoming a revolutionary body, how can one reconcile K, the body without organs, the body which is "unable to act or be acted upon" and representing the extreme of individual freedom, with the needs and aspirations of a community of the oppressed? Here the notion of the individual, with his or her right to freedom apart from the community, becomes another of the vexed issues which arise out of a context of struggle and oppression. As I indicated above Nadine Gordimer suggests that Coetzee's own position towards popular struggle is at odds with popular black sentiment when she writes in relation to Michael K:

[there is] a revulsion against all political and revolutionary situations [that] rises with the instance of the song of the cicadas to the climax of the novel. I don't think that the author would deny that it is his own revulsion.(96)

A state of radicalized individual freedom can easily become a state of radicalized inertia. Schizophrenia becomes a repressed instance of the human condition, as suggested by Freud, exhibiting the death instinct in which the individual

unconsciously yearns to return to the womb, to enjoy the state of non-consciousness, and the radicality of pure being. It is a being which lacks a recognisable human project, a being which refuses to activate itself in praxis. Thus, being triumphs over becoming, and K is transformed into a human worm, burrowing into the primordial dark of the earth, and by implication the womb:

Like a worm, he began to slither towards the hole, thinking only; let the darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me.(97)

The shift in cultural pathology, in which the notion of subjective wholeness is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject, is one of the more disturbing aspects of a Postmodernist ontology, effectively denying the subject any basis for communal, social or political action. In relation to the life of the masses, such a conception seems to bear little relation to a reality in South Africa which increasingly assumes the corporate nature of struggle and cultural resistance. Coetzee's reluctance or inability to reflect this struggle, or to give voice to the culture out of which it arises, presents itself as one of his most disturbing ideological silences. It is a silence germane to the European Postmodernist and Poststructuralist strategies and understanding which permeate his fictions.

We are to return to the central question which has motivated my discussion so far; can the Post-modernist, Eurocentric, discourse of Coetzee have any relevance to the emergence of a self-assured post colonialised culture and literature? Can this kind of discourse pose a heteroglot significance, which can in some way answer Mphahlele's demand, indicated in the introduction to this paper, that literature should offer a path forward in a reconstructed future? These will be the questions

which will form the final section of the paper.

SECTION II

What is at stake in the debate surrounding the appropriateness of Coetzee's Postmodern writing, is really an aspect of the wider issue, of how we represent our experiences and values. Representation is a key factor in the politics of social hegemony, precisely because it is through the mimetic codes of signification that certain reality effects are produced and reproduced. The hegemony of a particular reality effect, the dominance of one particular "metanarrative" over another or over others, becomes the primary concern of any group which wishes to achieve authority and maintain it. The institution of a metanarrative, which legitimates knowledge, also implies a commensurate set of practices which act to govern social bonds. In the words of Lyotard, "justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth."(98)

Jacques Derrida provides the analyst with a powerful refutation of normative categories of understanding and reality construction, through his investigation of what he calls "logocentrism."(99) In other words he describes the way that writing (all manner of inscription) is reduced to a secondary status as a vehicle in which the signified or referent is always prior to the material sign. Derrida replaces this conception with a notion of the trace or gram. This effectively de-emphasises the notion of a transcendent referent underlying meaning, replacing it with the notion that the inner dynamics of language constitute their own meanings. These meanings are never ultimately definable, because they depend upon the transient processes of language rather than the stable forces of the 'real':

Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not present. This interweaving results in each element - phenomenon or grapheme being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other element of the chain or system. Thus interweaving this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever present or absent. There are only everywhere differences in traces of traces.(100)

This insistence on the trace does not necessarily lead to the heresy often attributed to Derrida that he rejects reference; rather, he rethinks reference in a way that "complicates the boundary line that ought to run between the text and what seems to lie beyond its fringes, what is classed as the real."(101)

The re-thinking of normative categories of reality, and the consequent re-evaluation of the particular discourses and institutions which uphold them, imply a commitment to heterogeneity and diversity, and an ability to realise the heterogeneity of differing "ways of life" and "language games" that they might imply.(102) This emphasis on diversity bears both an important critical weight in the refutation of any philosophical or political move to achieve consensus through an appeal to some extra-normative set of criteria; thus Lyotard argues

Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussions, as Jurgen Habermas thinks such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. An invention is always born of discussion. Postmodern

knowledge is not simply a tool of authority; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.(103)

Such statements are perhaps too iconoclastic to suit the taste of a world already split by too much diversity. An argument that even rules out Habermas' attempt to institute the idea of communicative reason, based upon a possible commensurability between language and truth and capable of producing a consensus of social, political and moral value seems too much like throwing out the baby with the bath water. The problems here can appear intractable. Nevertheless, Lyotard's statement, stripped of its "Utopian" disregard for the practicality of community needs, does, I will suggest, seem to offer an observation of the highest importance in the South African context. It is a view that needs to be brought into any discussion of literature:

Postmodern knowledge is not simply the tool of authority; it refines our sensitivity to differences.(104)

Coetzee's plea for the 'autonomy' of fictions is also a plea for the kind of autonomy of vision that reserves the right to disregard the accepted wisdom of the prevailing hegemonic discourse. As a direct consequence, he would be extremely wary of the social practices and institutions through which discoveries are formed, and through which the objects of reality are constructed. Against this, we may understand what Coetzee calls for :

A novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in the terms of the procedures of history and evaluates in conclusions that are checkable by history In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history - in other words, demythologising history. Can I be more specific? Yes: for example, a novel that is prepared to work itself outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any other of the oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (I need hardly add that to claim the freedom to decline - or better rethink - such oppositions as propertied, propertyless, colonizer, colonialise, masculine/feminine and so forth, does not mean that one falls back automatically on moral oppositions, open or disguised, like good/bad, life directed/death directed, human/mechanical, and so forth.)(105)

As we have seen it in Coetzee's claim that these discourses, the discourses of class, history etc., are fast colonizing the novel in South Africa and that this is perhaps an indication of a wider trend in political and social life: the attempts by particular interest groups to stifle any voice which does not conform to the requirements of their own preferred ideology. This tendency is as endemic to the political left as the political right, although the appeal of the left carries with it the supposed moral guarantee of a progressive and liberating political practice. Coetzee's meditations act, I believe, as a timely warning to anyone concerned with the institution of a more democratic and truly liberating social practice in South Africa. This warning issues forth in an implicit invitation to readers of novels to enter dialogues of

understanding, in which forms of hegemonic discourse and practices are subjected to the anti-authoritarian imagination of the fiction writer.

The desire of social activists to collapse meaning, reality, and the human condition into the confines of scientific analysis, is the antithesis of art's reliance on the imagination, on emotions, experienced, and intuition. As Tony Morphet acknowledges:

Art cuts into social reality in strange and unexpected ways. The images of self and the social world are two sources of a unified pattern of memory. The logic of the pattern is formed in the crucible of the self. The writer finds his/her authority in the reality of the experience endured within the self. That authenticity, once grasped, empowering the imagination to lend some degree and condition of selfhood to the lives of others in different conditions and circumstances of life. Art grows social reality from within. Social science looks on with a cool flat eye.(106)

Indeed, the power of art to interrupt the one-dimensional analysis of official versions of reality means that artists have often been dissidents, considered by the ruling elite to stand somehow outside of so called responsible consensus. Perhaps the strongest argument for the need to retain an autonomy of expression is the intense desire of the official elites of state, or government or powerful interest groups to co-opt the writer and thus stifle criticism. As Coetzee notes:

In our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master form of discourse, just as inevitably, people

like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a certain kind of story the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands.(107)

The appeal for artistic independence is in Coetzee at the same time an appeal for political and social freedoms, and it is here at the interface between art and society that the Postmodern writer finds his/her most vital function. It is the function of disregarding, or at least interrogating the societal norms which define reality and help shape widely held beliefs. Morphet, writing of the debate between Gordimer and Coetzee, argues

Set against the agonised hope of Gordimer's vision of a creative moral future in which the artist can find a home is Coetzee's much harsher vision of the artist as a solitary figure, eking out a meagre subsistence amid the unintelligible chaos of history, concealing the product of his labours, intent on nothing more than keeping the idea of his creative freedom alive.(108)

Coetzee's portrayal of the solitary, the fragmented, and the emphasis he places on the 'fictionality' of reality, is the Postmodernist rejoinder to the totalising vision of "revolutionary hope."(109) It is Coetzee's necessary condition for social, political and individual freedom, in which his rejection of revolutionary hope is allied to his rejection of all forms of authoritarian discourse. In this sense Michael K's fantasy of making the desert bloom becomes in the symbolic configurations of the imagination, his effective counter to the discourse of authority, not just the discourse of the military authorities, but the discourse of the idea of authority. Michael K presents a real danger to authority because he wants nothing from it. He essentially wants to

be left alone, but this is the one thing that authority cannot allow. Authority needs to work on its subjects, bring them into line with its projects, subject them to its disciplines and regimes, and initiate them into its practices. Michel Foucault articulates the relationship between discipline and power when he writes :

Discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus: it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets: it is a physics or an anatomy of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by specialised institutions ... or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end ... or by pre-existing authorities or finally by state apparatuses whose major, if not exclusive, function is to ensure that discipline reigns over society as a whole.(110)

If Michael K remains free of authority, he provides a small but valuable check on Coetzee's authority figures. Colonel Joll, for instance, the interrogator from the third bureau in Waiting for the Barbarians is the most extreme and obscene manifestation of state power. Joll's task is to extract the truth, which he achieves through the instruments and techniques of pain. "Pain is truth, all else is doubt"(111) meditates Joll, and truth itself is to be recognised in the tone of the victim's voice and manner:

"There is a certain tone," Joll says. "A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognise that tone" First I get lies, you see First lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That's how I get the truth."(112)

But the "tone of truth" is eventually revealed as the moment at which the interrogator recognises and confirms what "he" already believes to be the case. The interrogator does not want truth; he simply wants his own preferred truth; his own interpretation of reality needs to be confirmed and justified. Thus the torturers

were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. They did not come to force the story out of me of what I had said to the barbarians and what the barbarians had said to me.... They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal.(113)

The need for authority to dominate and to confirm the assumptions of its own truths are examined in more detail in Dusklands; in the narratives of both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee. In Dawn's narrative the suggestions of the character Coetzee that Dawn's report be rewritten to conform more to the expectations and organisational needs of the American military is an example of how authority uses "truth" to justify its own existence, its own propaganda. This is given further illustration in the need of authority to find its own ideology mirrored in those it places in position of subordination. Authority wants the other to be the other, but only in a form which it can recognise as being commensurate with its own expectations. Failure to find the mirror image of its own expectations leads to authority dismissing individuals or, indeed, societies as aberrant and therefore less

than human: this, of course, was amply demonstrated in the American intervention in Vietnam.

Why could they not accept us? We could have loved them: our hatred for them grew only out of broken hopes. We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence and asked only that they acknowledge us Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist; that since whatever we embraced wilted, we were all that existed. We landed on the shores of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality: if you will prove yourself, we shouted, you will prove us too, and we will love you endlessly and shower you with gifts.(114)

The problem with ideology is that once you have posited the idea of a false one, you have to posit a correct one, and you have to ensure that the truth of its correctness be vindicated. Choice implies closure, and closure implies power. Jacobus Coetzee, in the second half of Dusklands, is faced with a traditional society that refuses to accept the authenticity of his presence or practice. His need to dominate the Hottentots is thwarted by their refusal to accept his modes, language and practices as authoritative. The fictional Coetzee's frustration is summed up in his exclamation, "was there nothing to be done to make them take me more seriously?"(115) The consequences of the Hottentots' refusal to treat him seriously are nowhere better implied than in the incommensurability between Hottentot behaviour and his own, at the moment of the first meeting. Coetzee's address to the Hottentots utilises the symbols of European rhetoric which are intended to grant

stature to the speaker. However, the only response he draws from the Hottentots is one of boredom and incomprehension:

I saw by the third paragraph only gathering boredom and inattention. The irony and moralism of forensic oratory, uneasily translated into Nama, were quite alien to the Hottentot sensibility. They did not flare into action, nor indeed did my speech receive any reply ... the silence grew. It began to embarrass me.(116)

The example of Coetzee's attempt to force his consciousness on the Hottentots, or the attempt of the Americans to effect a transference of their own cultural norms onto the Vietnamese, or the frustrated attempt of authority groups to impose their organisational structures on Michael K, perhaps provide us with an important analysis of power. J.M. Coetzee gives a description of power which shows how it is manifest in our consciousness and practices. Resistance is seen in the various refusals of characters to accept the imposition of order and authority. In the case of the Hottentots, reality remains the lived experience of the indigenous community. Such considerations may paradoxically return us to Ndebele's wariness of the political aims and practices of middle-class activist-intellectuals, who are often ready to impose their theories on to a proletariat which chooses simply to ignore them, producing in the activist a state of consternation and even disgust at the masses. This seeming apathy, however actually constitutes the masses' ultimate manipulation of power and control. The masses' refusal to take authority seriously, be it the state, or the authority of the parties, or institutions which presume to speak on their behalf, - represents a kind of debunking of seriousness, a rejection of control. J. Baudrillard, responding to the incomprehension of European activists regarding the refusal or inability of the proletariat to initiate revolution, writes:

They (the masses) are neither good conductors of the political, nor good conductors of the social, nor good conductors of meaning in general. Everything flows through them without leaving a trace. And, ultimately, the appeal to the masses has always gone unanswered. They do not radiate; on the contrary they absorb all radiations from the outlying constellations of state, history, culture meaning. They are inertia, the strength of inertia, the strength of the neutral.(117)

The notion of a carnivalesque rejection of seriousness might be directly refuted by the heroic form of resistance offered by the masses in South Africa. The notion of a joyful rejection might very well be more adequate to describe the reaction of the European masses, while within the South African context such a "resistance" might simply lead to the justification for a policy of non-praxis.

Even if we could assume a coincidence of interest between the activist and the masses, the question arises as to how particular readers want to interpret the value of Coetzee's idea of radical freedom. The task of transformation, the task of creating a new nation will necessitate the use of power and the centralising of authority. On what foundation will the new authority legitimise its right to set agendas, and decide on interpretation? How will any new authority legitimise its own stories, its own histories? How will the new authority reverse and subvert old myths, and by what mechanisms will it propagate its own mythology? Will individuals or groups have the right to disagree? Whether or not any alternative will be sanctioned will, to a great extent, be decided in the "interregnum"; it will depend upon the decisions we make now. If in the interregnum, a climate is created in

which our several choices are seen simply as components of a bourgeois ideology which hinders social change, this will have important implications for any future policy. For in assuming the right to speak for the masses, any newly constituted authority might find itself entrenching its own structure of power rather than the desires of those for whom it purports to speak. In the case of Michael K, for example, his failure to respond to "history" and the wider struggles that surround him could be seen as a symptom of his stupidity or simply his unconcern. Another way of reading this, however, might be to see K as the healthy antithesis to those in authority... "in so much as they do not even begin to consider that there may be any alternative to their discourses, their own social realities."(118)

The alternative that K represents might, of course, be an option available to no more than a minority. But even if such an option represents a denial of community, can we or should we ignore its cogency? The real world demands choices, choices which are often vague, often ambiguous, choices that rarely resolve themselves in a satisfying manner. As far as the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians is concerned, the desire to act rightly becomes confused by his own sense of 'civilisation' that is in the process of decaying into a police state:

What, after all, do I stand for besides an archaic code of gentlemanly behaviour towards captured foes, and what do I stand against except the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees, confused and disgraced in their own eyes? Would I have dared to face the crowd to demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air? Justice! Once that word is uttered where will it all end? Easier to shout No! Easier to be beaten and made a martyr. 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 a laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped? The old Magistrate, defender of the rule of law, enemy in his own way of the state, assaulted and imprisoned, impregably virtuous, is not without his own twinges of doubt.(119)

Eskia Mphahlele's suggestion that the role of intellectuals in the liberation struggle must be a broadly didactic one, needs to be qualified by the understanding that "telling black people," indeed any people, who they are and where they have come from, can only occur from within the parameters of a particular discourse. A writer cannot simply presume a coincidence between his/her own discourse and the reader's. The writer cannot just assume a black consciousness or a white one, whatever that may be. Rather, such an identity is created by language and convention. If individuals or groups cannot identify with a writer's particular discourse, then it might be because their own experience of life differs.

In the case of Coetzee the particular manner in which his own novels differ from "committed" literature need not imply that he is somehow aberrant in his own social responsibilities. By the same token, his refusal to lead his characters out of the wilderness of their own fragmented subjectivities and into the clear light of commitment, community, and resolution, need not imply the idea of humanism or political irresolution. Magda's actions are not simply those of an estranged woman on the veld, for instance, but are acts of desperation aimed at overcoming her sense of alienation. Michael K is not simply the man who ignores the struggle for his own selfish ends; rather he is the individual who keeps alive the idea of gardening: the

idea of a more personal freedom amidst the slaughter and madness of civil war. The Magistrate, as we have seen, suffers the agonies of his own ambiguity. Jacobus Coetzee allows us to rethink, the stereotypical relationship between savagery and civilization, between order and tyranny:

But were they true savages, these Namaqua Hottentots? Why had they nursed me? Why had they let me go? Why had they not killed me? Why had they not killed me? Why had their torments been so lacking in system and even enthusiasm? Was I to understand the desultory attention paid to me as a token of contempt? Was I personally unexciting to them? Would some other victim have aroused them to a pitch of true savagery? What was true savagery in this context? Savagery was a way of life based on disdain for the value of human life and sensual delight in the pain of others. What evidence of disdain for life or delight in pain could I point to in their treatment of me?(120)

CONCLUSION

Hilary Putman writes: "craving absoluteness leads to monism, and monism is a bad outlook in every area of human life."(121) The need to militate against monism and to protect literature from becoming merely one of the mechanisms subserving the needs of a single historical or socio-political programme is, I believe, an increasingly important response in South Africa today. The politics of hegemony include the right to dispose of truth, and to possess the objects which define social reality. The

creative artist can play a role in struggle, not only by forging common bonds, but by alerting the subject to the potentiality of diversity, and by exploring the way power operates in structures, discourses and social practice. The text thus becomes a field in which ideologies are examined and scrutinized - not just the ideology of the present authorities, but the workings of ideology per se. In Coetzee's works texts become provocations, providing alternatives which disrupt the easy acquiescence of ideological preference, and deny the smooth workings of hegemony.

At a time when the discourses of history and scientific analysis are making undeniable headway in the academy, it is perhaps timely to consider the effects of Coetzee's works, in tones of poststructuralist difference, and to set up a lively debate with materialist inclined projects and understandings. In this dialogue the analysis of power as offered by Foucault, the idea of the simulacrum as formulated by Baudrillard, the analysis of the sign as defined by Derrida, and of the subject as offered by Deleuze and Guattari, can provide insights which help develop a healthy distance between the subject and the discourse. In reading Coetzee we can see a necessary alternative or supplement to the language of authority of the state or the equally monolithic voice of popular struggle.

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