

**METAPHORS OF THE BODY**  
**IN THE FICTION OF J.M. COETZEE**

**Jan Kosecki**

**Royal Holloway, University of London**

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## **DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Jan Kosecki

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the role played by the image of the body that features prominently in Coetzee's novels. In a series of close readings and utilising the tools of cognitive linguistics, it argues that the image creates meaning because of the employment of two conceptual metaphors, TRUTH IS IN A CONTAINER and BODY IS A CONTAINER, which endow the represented body with the attributes of truth. The meaning is then created through the foregrounding of the body (most commonly in the images of mutilation, disability and disease), through the use of the image as a blended space (a signifying body) and through the situating of the image as the narrative focal point, an object of scrutiny and interpretation. Such use of the image aids in interpreting the body as a container for truth, a kernel of human identity, a source of thought and morally purposive action. This often leads to interpreting the image of the body allegorically and partly explains the nature of the critical reception of Coetzee's novels.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 presents the history and theory of thinking about the metaphor from Aristotle to cognitive linguistics with an emphasis on the context-based understanding of metaphor and on its cognitive value. The final section of this chapter presents the author's engagement with the ideas expressed in Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chapter 2 presents the problem of reading and interpreting the body on the example of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*. Chapter 3 analyses corporeal metaphors and gender symbolism in history through the reading of *Dusklands* and *The Age of Iron*. Chapter 4 presents *Foe* and *Master of Petersburg* as examples of the representation of literary thinking, creation and interpretation of bodily experience.

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## Introduction

One of the things a reader of Coetzee's fiction might soon notice is the ubiquity of bodily mutilation and disability represented in his novels. There is impotence and rape (as well as disease, stabbing and murder) in *Dusklands*; rape, hatred for one's 'monstrous' physicality and fantasies of self-mutilation in *In the Heart of the Country*; blindness and torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; cleft palate and starvation in *Life and Times of Michael K*; mutilation and muteness in *Foe*; cancer, mastectomy, and disability resulting from an accident (in addition to fantasies of self-immolation) in *Age of Iron*; epilepsy and suicide in *The Master of Petersburg*; rape and violence in *Disgrace*; ageing, disability, execution, dying, sexual attack, and the Holocaust in *Elizabeth Costello*; amputation and blindness in the *Slow Man*; Parkinson's disease in the *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Another thing our reader may notice is the endowing of a mutilated body with meaning whereby the body is made the object of scrutiny: it is read and analysed with the hope of uncovering and expressing the mystery imagined to exist within it. The tortured Barbarian girl and Michael K, Friday and Vercueil, Joll and Nechaev, are all mysterious creatures, who are read by other characters but repeatedly elude their interpretative attempts. Unclear are the reasons for Lucy's acceptance of her fate, the source of Joll's evil, Elizabeth Costello's obsessions, Pavel's death or Friday's history and behaviour. Similarly problematic seems to be the characters' relationship to their own bodies. Much is made of their coming to terms with the fact of embodiment: Mrs

Curren, Magda, Dostoevsky, Dawn or Paul Rayment all share estrangement from their bodies and strive to understand them, and for all the lack of acceptance, the analysis of disease, illness, old age or sexuality is an obsessive fact of daily life.

While most of these characters crave understanding and expression of their embodiment, all of them are at the mercy of language as the medium in which their experience is conceptualised. Many crave, variously understood, ‘bodily communication’ from which the imperfections of language as a tool for expressing bodily truth would be absent. Many directly discuss language as the reason for their failures to express, and thus come to terms with, their physicality.

The most extreme, and consciously realised, case of this entrapment in language can be found at the end of *Elizabeth Costello*. No longer a “lesson,” the ending passage is suggested to be Costello’s fiction, an example of her “parasitizing the classics” (14). This part begins with an excerpt from *the Letter of Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon*<sup>1</sup> that presents Chandos experiencing bliss and joy at the sight of the world. Expressing a sentiment akin to that expressed earlier by Costello,<sup>2</sup> his letter makes a reference to figurative meanings by distinguishing between things and signs: “*It is as if . . . everything that exists, everything that I recall, everything my confused thinking touches on, means something*” (226). The passage is followed by a letter from “Elizabeth C” (“Lady Chandos”) to Bacon (230).

Fictional Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee’s creation, follows in the footsteps of Von Hoffmannsthal's Philip. His crisis of faith in literature and language is mirrored

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<sup>1</sup> The passage is dated according to the publication of von Hoffmannsthal's *Ein Brief* (1902), rather than the fictional date given to the letter by von Hoffmannsthal (1603).

<sup>2</sup> Her argument that being alive is being “full of being” (77) is rephrased by him as “fullness” (226). Her “light soul” (215) is akin to Lady Chandos’s “extreme soul[]” (228).

by Costello.<sup>3</sup> Both are writers of considerable repute. Their first defeat is in academia where their discourse on philosophy and morality does not gain desired acceptance. Later, both experience the failure of language in everyday communication, and both turn to the Classics for inspiration. These failures lead to mental disarray in which reasoning fails, no proposition can be seriously maintained, and no thought grasps experienced reality. This lack of conceptual coherence contrasts with the promise of illumination and attaining full meaning offered in emotional epiphanies which, when expressed, remain imperfect mistranslations. Costello and Philip both seem to embody the assertions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* that sees in the limits of language the limits of thought, but also undermine its pronouncements about the relation between language and the world insofar as they find their experience inexpressible.<sup>4</sup> Both Costello and Philip are thus trapped in language which circumscribes what could be thought and expressed, relegating their bodily experience to the non-existent.

Elizabeth's letter explicitly deals with the entrapment in metaphorical language. She first admits to experiencing epiphanies through embodiment: "moments when soul and body are one, when [she] is ready to burst out in the tongue of angels" (228). Such moments arrive through sex; the "ruptures" form 'body language' that unites her mind and her body: "Soul and body he speaks to me, in a speaking without speech; into me, soul and body; he presses what are no longer words but flaming

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kovach sees this also as a crisis of "cognition" where the "inability to speak coherently is preceded by the inability to think coherently" (88). This seems to be how Costello is often perceived by her audience. He also presents the tension between "the self as observing subject and creative portrayer of reality" as opposed to "the self as object" as well as the tension between language as a product (a thing) and a medium (a sign) (91). Both these dichotomies exist in Costello's experience.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of Wittgenstein's role for von Hoffmannsthal's work and his fascination with *Ein Brief* falls beyond the scope of this thesis. For a brief account see: Alfred Nordmann *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* (2005).



swords” (228). Yet, the non-communicativeness of such experience threatens to trap the couple within figurative language in which words do not refer to objects but to other words, where meaning is perpetually in flux, and where the unanchored signifier always slips:

*Flaming swords* I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words. It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another (*like a contagion, I say . . .*). Like a wayfarer . . . I step into a mill . . . and feel of a sudden the floorboards, rotten with the wetness, give way beneath my feet and plunge me into the racing mill-waters; yet as I am that (a wayfarer in a mill) I am also not that; nor is it a contagion that comes continually upon me or a plague of rats or flaming swords, but something else. *Always it is not what I say but something else . . .* Only for *extreme souls* may it have been intended to live thus, where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards (*like rotting boards I say again, I cannot help myself, not if I am to bring home to you my distress and my husband's, bring home I say, where is home, where is home?*) (228).

This gap between language and the body (or the signifier and the signified), uncovers the metaphorical nature of language that forces her to say “one thing always for another” (228). The emphasis on metaphor is strengthened by the metaphorical images used by Elizabeth (speaker as a wayfarer, meaning as old boards) and her conscious emphasis (through italicising) on figurative expressions. Elizabeth’s language does not refer to her body experience and, with her words in flux, her thoughts are similarly unanchored. This fluidity of thought becomes the source of mental torment leading to insanity. Like the metaphorical evil in Costello's lecture, presented as causing contagion (167), her own crisis is contagious and Elizabeth fears infecting the reader with her affliction: “for who is to say that through the agency of his letter . . . of mine you may not be touched by a contagion that is not that, a contagion, but something else, always something else?” (228-229). Elizabeth claims a human being lacks

strength to live in the slippery medium of language.<sup>5</sup> Her affliction of speaking metaphorically is overpowering to the extent where her identity undergoes entropy and the speaking subject surrenders to the power of words.<sup>6</sup>

(I cease to hold myself back, I am tired now, I yield myself to the figures, do you see, Sir, how I am taken over?, *the rush* I call it when I do not call it *my rapture*, the rush and the rapture are not the same, but in ways that I despair of explaining though they are clear to my eye, *my eye* I call it, *my inner eye*, as if I had an eye inside that looked at the words one by one as they passed, like soldiers on parade, *like soldiers on parade* I say). (229).

Elizabeth finds it impossible to be both an embodied subject and a linguistic object, to be both herself and a language figure of something else. The rejection of such language is the rejection of God and of her diffuse identity:

All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation.<sup>7</sup> And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator (*our Creator*, I say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand. But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? *We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, my Philip*, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun (229).

Untouched by language,<sup>8</sup> Philip sees things and people not as themselves but as “*Presences of the Infinite*” (230). Since metaphorical language cannot express his

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<sup>5</sup> It is not yet the time when “giants or perhaps angels stride the earth” (229).

<sup>6</sup> Costello’s identity is scrutinised when her repeated “I” in her self-definitions in front of the tribunal (221) become Elizabeth C’s repeated “eye.”

<sup>7</sup> The reference is here to Costello’s vision of paradise. The sight of a dog guarding the gate immediately leads to an allegorical reading (“the anagram GOD-DOG” (225)) and it is only with conscious effort that she can see the dog as merely a dog.

<sup>8</sup> “Words no longer reach him, they shiver and shatter, it is as if (*as if*, I say) . . . he is guarded by a shield of crystal” (229).

experience, the help of Bacon is sought to salvage the couple from their entrapment in language and to successfully translate their lived existence in discourse. The call for help uses the common motif of drowning:

*Not Latin, says my Philip – I copied the words – not Latin nor English nor Spanish nor Italian will bear the words of my revelation. And indeed it is so, even I who am his shadow know it when I am in my raptures. Yet he writes to you, as I write to you, who are known above all men to select your words and set them in place and build your judgements as a mason builds a wall with bricks. Drowning, we write out of our separate fates. Save us. (230)*

The creative passage at the end of the novel refers the reader back to Costello's inability to make sense of her thoughts and ideas about, and her experiences with, the body.<sup>9</sup> Costello's problem differs from those of other Coetzee characters only in the scale of her self-conscious engagement. A similar preoccupation with physicality and entrapment in language is repeated in most of the author's novels, regardless of whether it is presented as a character craving bodily language (Magda, Mrs Curren) or perfect language expression (Dostoevsky, Susan Barton), whether it exists in a 'reader' and interpreter (the Magistrate) or the interpreted (Michael K).

The second passage I would like to invoke here is the testimony in the last lesson, "At the gate." Irritated at the cheap, almost allegorically "Kafkaesque" afterworld (209), Costello repeatedly faces the judges demanding a statement of her

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<sup>9</sup> These ideas include realist representation of the body ("Realism"), essentialism and négritude ("The Novel in Africa"), animal and human bodies in literature and ethics ("The Lives of Animals"), the representation of the body and suffering in Christian and classical tradition ("The Humanities in Africa"), violence and its representation ("The problem of Evil"), the body in love and in death ("Eros") among others. Many of the insights gained in the seven lessons are, however, contradicted in the final one, for example the idea that a writer should not judge the voice that calls them contradicts her assessment of Paul West, the idea that, as a writer, Costello does not hold opinions contradicts the Lives of Animals etc.

belief. The expression of her belief is presented precisely as a translation of the body into language:

... all she hears is the slow thud of the blood in her ears, just as all she feels is the soft touch of the sun on her skin. That at least she does not have to invent: this dumb, faithful body that has accompanied her every step of the way, this gentle, lumbering monster that has been given to her to look after, this shadow turned to flesh that stands on two feet like a bear and laves itself continually from the inside with blood. (210)

The uninvented body is contrasted with the inventions of language, its truth with the words she reluctantly writes.<sup>10</sup> She feels herself not “*in* this body,” instead, she “somehow *is* this body” (210). The corporeal certainty makes her equate the body with the truth. Unlike for Descartes, whom she criticises in one of her lectures, it is the existence without the body that is unthinkable:

How on earth can bodies not only keep themselves clean using blood . . . but cogitate upon the mystery of their existence and make utterances about it and . . . even have little ecstasies? Does it count as a belief, whatever property she has that allows her to continue to *be* this body when she has not the faintest idea how the trick is done? (210)

Appropriately, Costello’s reactions to literature are visceral, her favourite passages from the *Odyssey* “send[] a shiver down her back” (211). The love of literature and the belief in the importance of the body combine to produce a hope in the power of language to transcribe embodiment:

The pool of dark blood, the expiring ram, the man . . . ready to thrust and stab if need be, the pale souls hard to distinguish from cadavers: why does the scene haunt her? . . . She believes, most unquestionably, in the ram . . . The ram is not just an idea, the ram is alive though right now it is dying. If she believes in the

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<sup>10</sup> The body is unlike language: the “thing which not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up, so far beyond her powers would it be” (210).

ram, then does she believe in its blood too, this sacred liquid, sticky, dark, almost black, pumped out in gouts on to the soil where nothing will grow? (211).

The final definition is preceded by a meditation on the possibility of bodily language expressing her belief: “She could do the same . . . cut her veins and let herself pour on to the pavement, into the gutter. For that, finally, is what it means to be alive: to be able to die. Is this vision the sum of all her faith . . .? Will it be a good enough story for them, her hungry judges?” (211).<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on the body exacerbates the contrast with the “literary” surroundings (214, 215) and culminates in the scene of her final interrogation.<sup>12</sup>

Costello's final statement is a failed attempt to express her belief. Her presentation of the river Dulgannon and “tens of thousands of little frogs” (216) is meant as a plain description of the body and reality “transparently” and “without disguise” (217).<sup>13</sup> This presentation fails on two counts. One is Costello’s slipping towards figurative, “lamentably literary” (217) language (“excuse my language . . . extravagancies of the imagination” (216), “so to speak” (216, 218)) and the realisation that “the life cycle of a frog may sound allegorical” even though “to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself” (217).

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<sup>11</sup> Both of the quoted passages (211) repeat imagery from the *Age of Iron*: Mrs Curren’s description of blood, and her planned self-immolation to be read and judged by an observer.

<sup>12</sup> This emphasis is taken further in suggestions of universal language (212), descriptions of her appetite (214), ideas that morality stems from the body (“our hearts” (203)) as does truth (“It is here, buried in our heart” (214)) and the experience of her body “unpleasantly corporeal” (215).

<sup>13</sup> This extra-textual reality is emphasised several times: “the . . . mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them” (217), “Because they exist” (218). This lack of literariness is emphasised by an appeal to the body (“*toute nue*”) and the lack of “notes” (218).

The second count on which Costello's speech fails is the perception of her audience. Initially, the judges wondered whether Costello has anything to say regarding "[v]iolations of innocent children," the "fate of the Tasmanians" or "[a]trocities . . . extermination of whole peoples" (202), demanded, perhaps, the admission of "historical guilt" (203). In this role as listeners and interpreters the judges resemble critics playing the reductive allegorizing game of "Class Conflict or . . . Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook," the stance rejected by Coetzee in "The Novel Today" (4). Now, the story of frogs is taken to be a "highly allegorical" one in which frogs function as a symbol and "embody the spirit of life" (218, 219). Because Costello has no direct access to the frog's body she slowly accepts the critical interpretation that sees her believing in "the allegorical meaning of frog's life" (220).<sup>14</sup> With this interpretation forced on her, she loses her identity: her body falters (she feels "hot," "drugged" (220)) and her language fails. Its failure consists in its inability to fix her identity, to establish her "I" in language and to have any relation to her bodily core:

. . . who am I, who is this *I*, this *you*? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No *I*, no *you* is more fundamental than any other. You might ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second . . . both are true . . . And neither. *I am an other* . . . You have the wrong person before you. If you think you have the right person you have the wrong person. The wrong Elizabeth Costello (221).

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<sup>14</sup> Something she disputes earlier in her criticism of Thomas Nagel (75-79).

This attempt at transcribing her visceral intimations into language fails.<sup>15</sup> There is no truth in her language (“Is it true? It may not be true but it is certainly not false”), nor is there a successful self-definition: “Yes. Emphatically no. Yes and no. Both” (221).

I decided to begin this Introduction with the analysis of these two passages for they are symptomatic of the problems this dissertation raises. The first and most obvious is the emphasis on embodiment and corporeality in Coetzee’s fiction and the inability to either comprehend it, or to express it in words. The second question, suggested in the scene of Costello’s testimony, is the relative lack of critical interest in Coetzee’s representation of the body, as well as the reductive allegorical impulse leading critics to read the body images as allegories of abstract notions and to interpret depictions of bodily sensation as metaphors for what is non-physical.

Secondary literature that reads Coetzee’s fiction allegorically or metaphorically is abundant and multifarious.<sup>16</sup> The first monograph devoted to the author, Teresa Dovey’s *Lacanian Allegories* (1988) presents Coetzee as “adopt[ing],” “adapt[ing]” and “inhabiting” multiple “modes of writing” (11). His texts are seen as recuperating the “themes of each model they inhabit for a thematics of the Lacanian subject, which provides the means for a deconstructive reading and a self-deconstructive re-writing of these themes and genres” (11) and performing a “psychoanalytic deconstruction of the texts of the tradition” (28). But Teresa Dovey sees Coetzee’s novels not only as

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<sup>15</sup> Louise Bethlehem sees in the novel the “interrogation of the relations between the representation and material embodiment” (23). The irreducibility and “irrefutability” (28) of the body and its connotation of truth in *Elizabeth Costello* is shared, in her analysis, with the treatment of the body in the Truth and Reconciliation’s Commission’s final report. While the emphasis on the ‘reality’ and ‘truthfulness’ that the body confers is shared in this thesis, the premises, goals and the methods used by Bethlehem are different.

<sup>16</sup> An exhaustive list of all allegorical readings of Coetzee’s fiction falls outside the scope of this thesis. For a comprehensive treatment see the introduction to Sue Kossew’s *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee* (5-11).

allegories on the thematic level. Instead, they are seen as “(Lacanian) psychoanalytic criticism-as-fiction” (11). As such, their incorporation of theory does not merely “appropriate[]” but “problematise[s]” it (12). As “redramatisation[s]” of the “Lacanian subject” (13), Coetzee's novels become “allegories of the narrating self” (14). His characters are treated as “figure[s]” and “metaphors of the act of narrating” (20). While some passages in the text suggest Dovey might have in mind a conscious invitation to, and performance of, allegorical reading (the novels perform an “allegorical writing of their own evocation of the response of the Other in a future of potential readings” (43)), the issue is not explored in greater detail and Coetzee’s work is mostly treated as “psychoanalytic allegories (or allegorical psychoanalysis)” (45). If, in Dovey’s analysis, Coetzee’s fiction is allegorical, it is interesting to note the opinions of other authors who expect clearer political allegory and who believe Coetzee does not go “far enough in deploring the system, in delineating the historical and economic bases of oppression, or in projecting the ultimate triumph of the oppressed peoples of South Africa” (52).<sup>17</sup> This first full-length study played the part in “accustom[ing]” the readers to the idea that “Coetzee’s fiction represents the form of allegorised theory” (Attwell 8) and paved the way for the term (allegory) to be one of the terms “most frequently applied to Coetzee’s novels” (Attridge 32).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Michael Vaughan laments the fact that “material factors of oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa achieve subordinate attention” and Coetzee is too interested in the “predicament of a liberal petty bourgeois intelligentsia.” Paul Rich sees Coetzee's art as “destined to remain the vehicle for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals” while Peter Knox-Shaw maintains that Coetzee “play[s] down the political and economic aspects of history in favour of a psychopathology of Western life” (all qtd in Dovey 53).

<sup>18</sup> David Attwell’s own study, *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, does not give in to such allegorising impulse and deals, instead, with the development of Coetzee’s treatment of history and the “historicity of . . . storytelling” (7).



Thus Dick Penner sees *In the Heart of the Country* politically, as allegorizing contemporary South Africa in the face of an impending revolution (Penner 61-66). *Foe* is seen as a “symbol” of the “silent rage of all those in bondage” (22) and Friday as a figure expressing the “impending outrage of all the silent ones waiting to break their bonds” (127).<sup>19</sup> Stephen Watson’s analysis sees Coetzee’s use of language as an “act of decolonization” from which the texts derive their “political meaning” (Watson *Critical* 18). Dominic Head sees Friday’s silence as representing “the repression of South Africa’s black majority” and his mutilation as “a figure for colonial repression” (119, 120). *Waiting for the Barbarians* has been almost universally seen as an “allegory of imperialism” whose lack of specificity turns it into an “emblem of imperialism through history” and the Magistrate as the “contemporary South African liberal” (Head 72, 75). Some allegorical readings of Coetzee’s novels go further, finding real-life equivalents of fictional characters in a vertical allegory.<sup>20</sup>

Other readings of allegory attempt to remove themselves from such easy substitutions. Dominic Head, for example, sees allegory as a “specific feature” of Coetzee’s work and postcolonial literature more generally (20). He invokes Fredric Jameson’s horizontal allegory to analyse how Coetzee’s fiction performs the “blurring of . . . the allegorical and the literal referent” (22) and Stephen Slemon’s model of the “dialectical interaction of discourses” which explains how the two modes can be intertwined. Head is mostly concerned with the representation of history in Coetzee’s

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<sup>19</sup> Given most societal groups are in “bonds” in one sense or another, such open-ended metaphoricity might be concretised in a variety of readings.

<sup>20</sup> This is easiest to observe in novels which do not deal with South Africa. Such procedure involves, for example, seeing Cruso as an “analogue[]” of white South Africans (Penner 124), or claiming that he “represent[s] the Afrikaner government of South Africa” (Post 145), but also in seeing characters and events an embodiment of abstract concepts: Friday as “social condition,” or an expression of *écriture féminine* that opposes a “male-dominated analytical discourse” (Gallagher 181, 191)

texts (where allegory is to function as “historical revisionism” by foregrounding the textuality of history (23)) and with the postcolonial context of Coetzee’s writing (where such allegory is to perform “textual decolonizations” (22)) but his analyses can equally well be applied to the self-reflexive treatment of allegory in Coetzee’s fiction.<sup>21</sup>

A breakthrough for allegorical readings of Coetzee’s fiction came with the publication of Derek Attridge’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2005), a companion to his earlier *Singularity of Literature* (2004). In his book, and specifically in the chapter “Against Allegory” Attridge argues that the singularity of literary works requires a resistance to the easy impulse to allegorize. Easy and reductive allegorizations, the author argues, turn the alterity of literature into part of the same, stripping it of all that is unique or singular. Against such readings Attridge proposes reading as an “event” (39), a reading that is literal and literary in which an astute reader does not try, at all costs, to find the significance of the text “elsewhere” but treats reading as a singular event (43). I shall engage with Attridge’s argument in greater detail in chapter 1 of this thesis, but now I would like to draw attention to the moment in which Attridge’s understanding of allegorization seems to suggest it not only as a way of reading, but a mode of thinking and understanding characteristic of the human mind:

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<sup>21</sup> Head’s analysis of *Life and Times of Michael K* attempts to operate on both planes. On the one hand, fictional images are read as allegorical (gardening is an “allegory of repossession” (Head 105)). On the other, other images are seen as illustrating theoretical concerns (the medical Officer’s mention of allegory alludes to the “idea of an infinitely deferred meaning” (106), and K’s gardening is seen as a “parallel of Derrida’s version of textuality as ‘dissemination’” (107)). But whether Head talks of representing something in an image or of “alluding” to a theoretical position through an image, he treats both as allegorized and hence some of his analyses degenerate into vertical substitutions. In chapter 2 of this thesis, I also disagree with the idea that the conscious and self-reflexive reference to allegory and its examination in the text calls the “idea of allegory into question” or puts it “under erasure” (107).

The urge to allegorize Coetzee – and I am including here the urge to treat elements in the text as symbols or metaphors for broader ideas or entities – is, I believe rooted in the formidable power of this traditional trope to make sense of texts that, for one reason or another, are puzzling when taken at face value (39).

This dissertation initially started with the interest in this “power” of allegorical thinking to “make sense” of what is unknown. It also developed out of the interest in why such allegorical readings, rejected by Attridge as reductive, happen in the first place. It therefore attempts to investigate what precisely it is in Coetzee’s fiction that makes it such an easy target of allegorical, or metaphorical, thinking. In this small sense, I hope, it might answer questions raised by the reading of Attridge’s work.

The answer to these questions lies, I would like to suggest, in Coetzee’s use of the image of the body. I would like to argue that his representation of the body plays a significant role in the creation of meaning, especially allegorical meaning that “makes sense” of what is “puzzling.” In other words, I would like to suggest that the function of body imagery in Coetzee’s fiction is that of meaning-making that extends far beyond the corporeal and the immediate.

Such meaning is created in several stages. The first is the foregrounding of the body where the prevalence of body imagery suggests its significance. This is achieved through depictions of mutilation, trauma and disability, but can also happen in more mundane representations of ageing, sexuality or bodily functions.

The second way in which the image of the body prepares the ground for the creation of meaning is through recourse to signification. On the one hand, the body exists prior to symbolization and is the passive object of signification. It can be spoken about and meanings can be imprinted on its surface. On the other, the suggestions of

body language and non-verbal signifying systems, the body's ability to "speak" or its "muteness" introduce an element of activity that contradicts reading it as exclusively passive.

Third, the body is suggested as meaningful within the narrative. This is achieved either by means of presenting a character in search of a truth about another character (either mute or whose language is untrustworthy), or by depicting characters obsessively analysing and investigating their own bodies: their diseases, sexual urges or bodily states. They unwaveringly pursue the (imagined) truth residing in the body, or attempt to "read" or make the body "speak" in the hope of grasping whatever truth they imagine to reside therein.

The expectation of meaningfulness (and signification) of the body is maintained throughout the text but is foregrounded and made dynamic through the simultaneous suggestion of meaning and the continual contradiction of this suggestion. This is achieved by the narrative navigation between suggesting the body's meaningfulness and denying this meaningfulness, promising a revelation of its figurative, transcendent meaning, and the frustration of that promise through the foregrounding of the body's physicality and 'literalness.' I have termed this navigation between the literal and the figurative, between suggestions of meanings and the denials of such meanings a narrative 'two-way movement.'

This movement refers to the authorial position vis-à-vis his characters and their preoccupations: characters are led through the narrative by their belief that truth (of a bodily nature) is accessible, and while their failure to access it and comprehend it are always the result, the lack of success of their undertakings is never presented as final,

but always as contingent and individual, thus saying nothing about the nature of the narrative world. This particular avoidance to take sides and determine whether the truth the characters search is only projected – or whether it is actually there but failed to be revealed as *aletheia* in those particular instances – is often achieved not only in the succession of events, but also in characters' meditations and in changes of register. Typically, such a “two way movement” would consist of: (1) the building up of an expectation (on the part of the character, and – by extension – the reader); (2) the denial of the fulfilment of the expectation. The denial is never final and seems never to apply to universal truths, for it is very often followed by: (3) a contradiction of the denial – a contradiction that foregrounds the contingency of the particular situation rather than allows the denial to serve as a basis for metaphysical propositions concerning the narrative world at large.

In short, Coetzee's novels present the reader with a problematic body and institute its ‘mystery’ promising the revelation of this meaning at a later stage within the narrative. In the course of the novel this meaning is approximated, and the revelation of meaning is suggested as imminent. The second movement refuses the revelation of such meaning in a suggestion that any meaning is a readerly projection and the represented body is literal and meaningless: does not signify anything apart from itself. (Indeed, Coetzee is more interested in the process and the failure to find meaning, in the pursuit, in problematising the very issue of truth's existence and accessibility, in failures on the part of a rational, linear mind to grasp – and on the part of the language to express – experience or what is merely an intimation of meaningful sense within experience rather than in presenting successful completions of such a

search). This tentative model also relies on the novelist's characterisation of language. The two-way movement refers to the language insofar as the promise of the revelation of bodily meaning implies the communicability of such meaning, the power of language to express bodily reality. The frustration of the expectation is hence matched by the suggestions of language's inability to express what is bodily, as in the case of Elizabeth Costello earlier.

Given the body has been suggested as meaningful, but is not meaningful in any concrete sense, it can easily be seen as allegorical, without being allegorical in the sense of concretising one particular idea. In this sense, the body provides ample opportunity to be an overdetermined figure thus falling prey to the readerly impulse to allegorise it in various ways. This explains the ubiquity of allegorical readings whereby no reading is final and none exhausts the potential for concretisation (interpretation) of the text.

This dissertation is an investigation of how the image of the body creates meaning. Taking its cue from Attridge, it hopes to recreate the singularity of the encounter with Coetzee's novels and preserve this encounter with the text in a series of close readings whose result, it is hoped, will shed light on how the readers use the image of the body to construct meaning and 'allegorical meaning' in particular. It departs from Attridge insofar as it takes its methods and apparatus from cognitive linguistics (especially work on conceptual metaphor) and applies it to practical literary analysis.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> To my knowledge, there have been two main attempts to apply cognitive linguistics to the analysis of Coetzee's novels. These are Blakely Vermeule's reading of *Disgrace* in *Why Do We Care about*

Chapter 1 of this dissertation presents a short history of thinking about metaphor from Aristotle to Turner. It presents the struggle to understand metaphor as context-based rather than noun-based in the Aristotelian sense and ways in which it has been conceptualised as possessing of “cognitive value” and a tool of understanding. It suggests that the primacy of the body in Coetzee’s fiction stems from the overlapping of two conceptual metaphors: THE BODY IS A CONTAINER and THE TRUTH IS IN A CONTAINER. Their partial coherence allows for the suggestion that the main metaphor of Coetzee’s fiction, a metaphor active in the minds of the characters, is THE BODY IS THE TRUTH.

Chapters 2-4 present close readings of Coetzee’s novels. Chapter 2 concentrates on *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* to present the attempts at readings of others which, when unsuccessful, lead to the easy allegorization or an admitted failure. Chapter 3 analyses *Dusklands* and the *Age of Iron* with a view to presenting gender symbolism in historical thinking. Here the narrative suggestion deems otherwise inexplicable historical processes as explicable by reference to the human organism. Chapter 4 concentrates on *Foe* and *Master of Petersburg*. It presents the results of the failures to ‘grasp’ the body in the context of artistic creation, and the (mis)use to which readings of the body may be put.

This dissertation addresses the two questions introduced by the above analysis of *Elizabeth Costello*. In a series of close readings, I first attempt to present Coetzee’s treatment of the body as, on the one hand, an epistemologically-charged site, both pre-linguistic and deeply meaningful, and, on the other, as constantly at the mercy of

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*Literary Characters* (2010) and Barbara Dancygier’s “Close Encounters: The Author and the Character in *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*” (2010).

language to express and conceptualize its truth. At the same time, I will explore the relationship that the ‘immediate’ body in Coetzee’s fiction has with ‘mediated’ language, whose metaphors and allegorical character not only problematize intellectual conceptualization and truthful expression, but may, in fact, create the illusion of truth, depth and meaningfulness. It will be suggested that the inevitability of metaphorical thinking contributes to reading Coetzee’s fiction in a reductive and allegorical way. But it will also be proposed that the awareness of language’s potential for representation and enactment, and the recognition of the role conceptual metaphors play in human cognition may be useful to avoiding such reductionism. Therefore, the following chapter prepares the ground for my later literary analysis by presenting the history of the terms ‘allegory’ and ‘metaphor,’ discussing allegorical and metaphorical character of thought and language, defining the key terms used and establishing how they will be used in this dissertation.



## Chapter 1

### Metaphor: From Aristotle to Lakoff, From the Noun to the Text

#### 1. Substitution, *energeia*, genius.

When, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle classifies names according to quality, one kind he distinguishes as “most important by far” (P 32) is metaphor (28).<sup>23</sup> It is defined as “the application (to something) of a name belonging to something else” and might take several forms: “from the genus to the species . . . from the species to the genus . . . from a species to [another] species” or “according to analogy” (28). This chapter looks first at definitions of metaphor in Aristotelian thought (especially as expressed in the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*), and later at the long evolution of the understanding of the term with a view to presenting the divorcing of the term from its noun-based understanding, and the differing views as to its cognitive value. Both the context-based understanding of metaphor and its intellectual value have bearing on the analysis of the metaphors used by Coetzee, and on the investigation of the role of his metaphors in the creation of meaning. A question pertinent to this discussion is also whether the idea of the inescapability of metaphor (as suggested by Coetzee's fiction) is truly Aristotelian. This discussion takes place in the context of our understanding of audience as perceived by the Aristotelian orator.

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<sup>23</sup> The term metaphor, as Kennedy writes in a comment, “is itself a metaphor and literally means 'carrying something from one place to another, transference'” (R 222). This inescapability of metaphor is particularly interesting in reference to its inescapability in Coetzee's fiction.

In addition to the main definition (28), Aristotle presents other ways in which metaphor can be created. Thus it is possible to “add [to the metaphor] the thing to which the name relates, instead of what it means”, for example “old age of day”; or, after employing a term belonging to a different realm, “one can deny to it one of the things particular to [that thing]”, for example a shield described as “wine-bowl of Ares” and then “wine-bowl without wine” (29). As Moran argues (385), Aristotle's definition is “general enough to apply to many usages that would not ordinarily come under our contemporary understanding of metaphor.” In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that the mastery of metaphor is “an indication of genius” and “cannot be acquired from someone else” (32) making it a special case among other names described. In the *Rhetoric*, while he maintains that the use of metaphor “cannot be learned from someone else” (R 223), he also sees it as a feature of ordinary language, pointing to the ubiquity and inescapability of metaphorical expressions: “all people carry their conversations with metaphors and words in their native and prevailing meanings” (223).

In the *Rhetoric*, metaphor refers to the sphere of *lexis* rather than *logos*: it is a feature of speech rather than thinking. Much of the discussion there rests on the distinction between poetry and what one would nowadays call prose: while unfamiliarity of language is welcome in a poet, the orator should disguise his craft and “compose without being noticed” and “should seem to speak not artificially but naturally” (R 222). In the *Poetics* Aristotle outlines ways in which metaphors may influence meaning, make something sound better or worse, but he goes even further by suggesting that the metaphors have the power to name what is otherwise unnameable

(224). This is paralleled by what he claims in the *Poetics*: while there “may be no current name for some things in the analogy” it is possible to express them “in the same way” (P 29). Thus, because sowing seed resembles “scatter[ing] radiance from the sun” (29) which has no name, expressions like “sowing . . . radiance” (29) become intelligible.

As Moran argues, Aristotle's ambiguity towards metaphor includes both critical rejection (in *Topics*) and a mixture of praise and regret (in *Rhetoric*). In the latter work, metaphor is, at times, elevated to a “valuable place within . . . philosophy” (386), especially in regards to its ability to teach categories and relations, and its enabling of a philosopher to see similarity where, apparently, none exists.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, it is presented as worthy of analysis merely “due to the corruption of political life” (387) in which style is more important than substance. According to Moran, a question of interest to contemporary philosophers is “To what extent is metaphor a legitimate vehicle of understanding, and to what extent does its rhetorical usefulness depend on a lack of understanding, on the part of the audience, about its functioning?” (386). It is possible that the discussion of the overdetermined figure of the body in Coetzee's fiction might be illuminated by the answer to this question. For, if Coetzee presents the body as forever elusive and unreadable, and literary scholarship consists in the exposition of meaning (understanding) or the analysis of how meaning is constructed both by the text and the reader, it would be useful to see how the body in Coetzee's fiction creates meaning, and whether it depends for its meaning on a lack of understanding on the part of the reading audience.

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<sup>24</sup> “Metaphor most brings about learning” (R 244), “in philosophy, too, it is characteristic of a well-directed mind to observe the likeness even in things very different” (R 250).

Moran sees the Aristotelian ambiguity which “colors even the description of the specific virtues of metaphor” as already present in the metaphorical image of foreigners that Aristotle uses to describe metaphor (388). More interesting problems occur when Moran discusses the requirement that metaphorical expressions be disguised when considering the “concealment of their artfulness and their aims” (388); one explanation relates to the reliability of the orator and the trust listeners might have in his liability for deception or manipulation. This, however, would stand at variance with the previous assertions of metaphor as being able to aid the learning of what is new or not obvious. It would also imply a contradiction within the audience itself: while the audience takes pleasure in “marvelling” and being awestruck, it is also unwilling to listen to a speaker who is seen as unreliable (389).<sup>25</sup> The strange movement consists in wanting to be moved and simultaneously rejecting this emotion as unjustifiable (390).

To understand the reasons for Aristotle's insistence on concealment Moran analyses the problematic relationship between pleasure and learning. After Aristotle, he sees differences in judgement as coloured by the emotional attitude of the speaker. On the one hand, pleasure plays a role in making a listener “receptive” to the speaker and “imaginatively entering into a different viewpoint” (391). While the speaker actively pursues the listener's trust, at the same time he is trying to divert the listener's attention from this fact and from how much his enterprise depends upon it. At this stage the similarity between reading and listening to an orator are similar. The reader

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<sup>25</sup> This would be a major difference between rhetoric, where persuasion is the goal, and riddles (389).

reads with the hope of being both entertained and informed of something, whilst the writer attempts both to gain the reader's trust and to use it.

Another important metaphor used by Aristotle is the representation of figurative language as creating the meaning in an imaginary or “quasi-experiential” (392) way. Metaphor is endowed with the potential not merely to tell but to “*make us see one thing as another*” (392), the ability on which both its persuasiveness and emotional impact relies. The *pro ommaton poiein* (doing something before one's eyes), presenting images in the minds of the audience, is, according to Moran, the “primary virtue of metaphor” (392) as analysed by Aristotle. The figure of *pro ommaton poiein* (imagery) is intimately connected to the idea of the *energeia* (activity) of a successful metaphor (variously analysed as moving, being alive, being personified or actualised). Against Ricoeur, who reads activity “exclusively as pertaining to that which is represented in the metaphor,” Moran attempts to show how Aristotle's emphasis on *energeia* is to assist in the explanation of the nature and work of *pro ommaton poiein*. The visualization, thus, is “recognised as itself a metaphorical expression and in need of elucidation, and the various senses of *energeia* are presented as explications referring to the phenomenon that the original visual metaphor gestures toward” (393). The understanding of metaphor, in Moran's view, would depend on the activity of the “subject” of the orator's speech but would also involve active participation of the audience.

To understand how metaphor induces mental activity on the part of the speaker, Moran invokes Burke's analysis in the *Rhetoric of Motives*. In Burke's view, abstract ideas, when represented by imaginary concepts contain a “bundle of principles”

including those “that would be mutually contradictory if reduced to their purely ideational equivalents” (qtd. in Moran 394). The translation of a term into image (security represented as the mother, in Burke's example) allows the speaker to “profit not only from this one identification, but from many kindred principles or ideas which, when approached in this spirit, are associated with the mother-image” (394). In an argument, a speaker who argues using merely one “principle of appeal” of a given image is capable of gaining an “unearned increment” from “other . . . principles vibrant in the same image” (for example affection, tradition, naturalness etc.) (349). The “unearned” nature of the audience's response lies then in the fact that the speaker “has not provided reasons for belief about this matter,” but even more poignantly, he “may even have not raised that particular matter explicitly for consideration” (394). Secondly, the image can be divorced from the context in which it first appeared and pondered by the audience in a different context, while the speaker is free to “disavow” any unwanted “implications or conclusions” (394) the audience may reach. The “inexplicitness” of the image-as-argument insures the speaker against being contradicted on logical grounds: as his argument functions as an image rather than an explicitly stated proposition, it cannot merely be contradicted. Any contradiction of the *implications* of the image would be a contradiction not of the speaker, but of the *interpretation* of the meaning of the image on the part of the audience (394-395).

With this divorcing of the image from the speaker comes, of course, the change in the ownership of the argument. The audience members might feel themselves actively pursuing understanding rather than being at the mercy of some, perhaps unreliable, speaker. They are positioned as active pursuers of truthful conviction rather

than passive recipients of wisdom. The “discovery” and reasoning are all their own (395). Moran interprets the need to conceal one's own art of metaphor not merely linguistically, as necessary to hide “deliberately contrived” metaphors or the fact of making the audience “unaware that they are listening to a carefully composed speech,” but also in the conceptual sense (396). On the part of the speaker, importantly, there is the “avoidance of the commitment of explicit assertion” (396). While literary prose might not have all the elements of a persuasive discourse, it shares with it an element of creating the meaning or else supplying the reader with a material from which meaning can be created. In presenting the figure of the body, and characters – dissatisfied with language – passionately and obsessively attempting to “read” it, Coetzee's use of the motif resembles to a large degree the handling of a metaphorical figure by Aristotle's orator. Like him, Coetzee metaphorically washes his hands of interpreting the body for the reader, refuses to present the body as positively predicated. He avoids “the commitment of explicit assertion” in showing the body as important while leaving the readers to construct the meaning of the image. As no interpretation is his creation, he is free to disavow allegorical interpretations of the image put forward by his interpreters.

While it could be argued that fiction is *not* philosophy and thus shares little of its nature and its objective of persuasion, there are some passages in Aristotle which allow for a unified treatment of metaphor regardless of the discursive context of its appearance. One of Ricoeur's first points in his *Rule of Metaphor* is that, despite the fact that rhetoric and poetics functioned as two independent disciplines in Aristotle's time, metaphor had a “foot in each domain” (12). However dissimilar those two

disciplines were, they used the same definition of metaphor ( *Rhetoric* “adopts, pure and simple, the well-known definition of metaphor given in the *Poetics*” (13)), they relied on metaphor for their success, and understood metaphor in the same way. It existed both in the “mimetic arts” and in “persuasive proof” (13).

One problematic area (problematic both for Ricoeur's hermeneutics as well as my project on Coetzee's fiction) is the reliance of Aristotelian diction on the word-based understanding of metaphor. In Aristotle, metaphor is seen “not at the level of discourse” (14) but at the level of noun. Unlike Aristotle, Ricoeur believes that logos can have “unity that does not appear to be derived from that of the word” (16). As a result, Ricoeur attempts to build his own theory of metaphor in which he severs the links with the noun and, rather, develops a “theory of discourse” treating metaphor as discourse-based. Analysing Aristotle's reliance on movement for the definition of metaphor, “a transfer of the meanings of nouns” (15), and the uses of *epiphora*, Ricoeur reaches the conclusion that, in Aristotle, “*metaphor* applies to every transposition of terms” (17). Because of the difficulties implied by transposition, and the equivocation of figures and tropes of resemblance Aristotle appears to be more interested in “transpositional movement as such, in processes more than in classes” (18). This helps Ricoeur in the divorcing of metaphor from its word-based interpretation (18).

Another problem which pertains to Coetzee's fiction is the inescapability of metaphor. In Aristotle's explanations of its meaning, he uses the terms borrowing and *metaphor*. Ricoeur thus has reason to maintain that “it is impossible to talk of metaphor non-metaphorically” (18). Indeed, “there is no non-metaphorical standpoint



from which one could look upon metaphor . . . as if [it] were a game played before one's eyes" (19).

The definition of metaphor in Aristotle implies, according to Ricoeur, more than the author himself could have envisaged. Among other issues developed later (to do with the contrast between "proper" and "figurative" uses of language), Ricoeur pays specific attention to the idea of substitution and the concept of deviation from ordinary usage (19).<sup>26</sup> The exclusive emphasis on the theory of substitution in Aristotle seems to be limiting. Ricoeur explores the notion of *epiphora* treating it as an example of "categorical transgression" (23). By paying more attention to the mere transference of terms, Aristotle overlooked the fact that the displacement of meaning (which may challenge the categorical order of genus-species and of "relation-rules" (22)) might receive a less noun-based interpretation. Thus it is possible to see not the word but "the *pair* of terms or relationships between which the transposition operates" as the basis of metaphor (23). In this sense, while metaphor operates from within a given order, it has to "disturb a whole network by means of aberrant attribution" (23). It becomes more than just an ornament as a result of its capability of "destroy[ing] an order only to invent a new one." It "re-describes" reality (24), provides new information and contributes to learning. What is most important for Ricoeur, and later for the conceptual metaphor and its relevance for the analysis of Coetzee's oeuvre, is the emphasis on metaphor as belonging to an "heuristic of thought" (24). Metaphor may displace meanings within an order, but the order itself is also created in the same way: "The idea of an initial metaphorical impulse destroys these oppositions between proper

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<sup>26</sup> The concept of deviation, re-worded as perversion will be considered in relation to the the *Master of Petersburg*.

and figurative, ordinary and strange, order and transgression.” Furthermore, “it suggests the idea that order itself proceeds from the metaphorical constitution of semantic fields, which themselves give rise to genus and species” (24).

Among metaphor's virtues, one pertinent to the analysis of Coetzee is *pro ommaton poiein* (setting before the eyes, visualization): presenting “the abstract in concrete terms” (38), making it visible. In Coetzee's case the function might be shared by the depiction of the abstract – guilt, politics in *Age of Iron* for example, as the contingent, personified and “visible”: the body, disease, childbearing, sexuality. The rhetorical process in Aristotle and Coetzee is thus exactly the same: “Showing inanimate things as animate, is indeed not relating them to something invisible, but showing these things themselves *as if* in act” (38). While in the *Rhetoric* all the metaphors analysed concentrate on persuasion, it is undeniable that “one and the same strategy of discourse puts into play the logical force of an analogy and of comparison” (39). Indeed, to the extent that in his philosophical analysis Aristotle uses almost exclusively literary examples, it seems that the difference between the use of metaphor in poetry and oratory lies for him not so much in the process but the practical purpose (*telos*, end) of its application (39).

While the definition of metaphor in the *Poetics* is exactly the same as in the *Rhetorics*, the difference lies in the mimetic purpose of lexis in poetics. Ricoeur's objective is to ask whether metaphor in poetics may have an effect on the poem as a whole, whether, beyond what Aristotle imagined, “the secret of metaphor, as a displacement of meaning at the level of words, does not rest in the elevation of meaning at the level of *muthos*” (46). Once again, through the analysis of the concept

of setting before the eyes and the troubled term *mimêsis*, Ricoeur sees metaphor as joining what is poetic with what is metaphysical: “to present men '*as acting*' and all things '*as in act*' – such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which ever dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualised” (48).<sup>27</sup>

## **2. Metaphor as Ornament, Figure and Symbol (Eco).**

Many of the problems in the contemporary theory of metaphor are outlined by Eco in his “Scandal of Metaphor” (1983), where he links the problems of talking of metaphors with the more general question of the nature of language. Depending on whether language is viewed as primarily metaphorical or primarily rule-governed, definitions of metaphor will suffer in two ways. In the first instance all accounts of metaphor will necessarily be circular (because one would attempt to explain metaphorical expressions by means of metaphorical language), in the latter view, where metaphor is little more than a deviation from the norm, metaphorical expressions would exist outside the correct and intelligible use of language. Existing in “almost all semiotic systems” (218) the scandal of metaphor is more evident if we ask whether metaphor has cognitive value. This, Eco asserts has little to do with truth-

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27 Literature is akin to philosophy and in opposition to history: both of them deal with the subject of what could be, rather than what was. A more systematic account of metaphor can be found in the work of Quintilian. Metaphor is still described in terms of substitution that falls within four distinct classes (animate for inanimate, inanimate for inanimate, inanimate for animate and animate for inanimate) and into four species (431, 433). Unlike Aristotle, Quintilian sees simile as the basis of metaphor, the latter being a “shortened form of Simile” (429). It derives from a natural tendency of the human (even “uneducated” (427)) mind that uses it “unconsciously” thus ensuring that “nothing goes without a name” (427).

values but instead with the possibility to mark the ambiguity of “*pretend*[ing] to make assertions, and assert[ing] *seriously* something that is beyond literal truth” (219).

In his analysis of Aristotle's definitions of metaphors, the first two types (genus to species, species to genus) are found to be generalizing and particularizing synecdoches with little to redeem them (223). The first two types “let us know what we already know” (225). After careful analysis, the third type (species to species) requires not three but four terms, which effectively makes it a metaphor by analogy, and thus the fourth type of Aristotle's metaphor (226). In contrast with the first three types which have little cognitive value, in the fourth type of metaphor, Eco claims, a “superimposition . . . is created that is almost visual” (228). The new hybrid, both visual and conceptual (228), resembles Freud's condensation in jokes and dream visions (228).

Aristotelian metaphor, analysed in the context of various culturally and historically specific metaphors, would say something new only and only if “the proportion was not so commonly accepted” or if, alternatively, “it was accepted . . . [and] then soon forgotten” (233-234). The cognitive role would involve seeing of the “likeness” or “the subtle network of proportions between *cultural* units,” and would thus function as a “cognitive instrument, at once a source of clarity and enigma” (234). By invoking Ricoeur's emphasis on the links between *mimesis* and metaphor, Eco maintains that metaphor cannot be merely an “empty, gratuitous game.” In contrast, “the best metaphors are those in which the cultural process, the dynamics itself of semiosis, shows through” (234). In Eco's understanding, the likeness in Aristotle's account concerns both objects and the ways in which language definitions of objects

work. Thus Aristotle's lament that pirates call themselves “purveyors”<sup>28</sup> functions as proof that Aristotle saw ways in which language was used to manipulate reality: “All that pirates had to do . . . was find a genus that fitted their species and adapt to the purpose of a creditable Porphyry's tree.” What is “manipulatory of reality . . . is to select only *one* out of *all* the other properties that were characteristic of pirates, and through that choice *make themselves known*, put themselves before others' eyes in this perspective and *under that particular description*” (235).

Aristotle's mistake, in Eco's view, lay in his “identifying the categories of language with the categories of being,” the mistake that persisted throughout the Middle Ages when “every being function[ed] as a synecdoche or metonymy of the One.” (235). Everything, as medieval authors from Hugh of Saint Victor to Raban Maur claimed, could be interpreted by a code which, by “assigning to things emergent properties, allow[ed] them to become metaphors for supernatural things” (235). Thus, they posited the existence of a “*network of cultural information*” operating “as a cosmological code” (235) and that the world was a “mazelike network of *cultural properties*” (236). Thomas Aquinas, while maintaining the literal (and figural) nature of the Bible, also maintained that when it is impossible to speak of God either univocally or equivocally, he “must be spoken of . . . through analogy” (236).

Eco's proposal in the understanding and production of metaphor as a cognitive tool depends on the distinction between dictionary properties (conceptual content, necessary and analytic properties only) and encyclopedic properties (a theoretically unending list of synthetic properties, including metonymic and contextual ones). His

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28 Eco uses “purveyors” (234), Kennedy's translation of the *Rhetoric* renders them as “businessmen” (224).

own attempt is to explain metaphor founded on “*componential semantics*” in its encyclopedic form, one which accounts for “rules for contextual insertion” (243). Criticising the traditional and, according to Eco, unfounded yet philosophically disturbing, distinction into synecdoche and metonymy, Eco believes his model to be free of “implicit philosophical assumptions” (246). Naturally, given the potentially infinite nature of the encyclopedic representation, the importance of context cannot be overlooked (247).

Eco presents five rules for the “co-textual interpretation of a metaphor” which also function, reversely, as rules for its production (251). Invoking Werinrich's distinction between “micrometaphorics, metaphorics of the context and metaphorics of the text”, Eco proceeds to the analyses of various metaphors claiming that “it is difficult to say when the metaphorical interpretation stops” and that the “boundaries between metaphor, allegory and symbol can be very imprecise” (252). Eco's distinctions do not, obviously, allow us to distinguish between “beautiful” and “ugly” metaphors in the Aristotelian sense (254). What they are able to do, however, is to distinguish between open and closed metaphors (254) which, in the absence of an algorithm for metaphor, Eco believes is quite enough. The relative success of some metaphorical expressions would be based upon “the sociocultural format of the interpreting subjects' encyclopedia” (254). At the same time, the process allows for the invention of new metaphors, the revival of dead tropes (255) and contributes to learning (256).

### 3. Metaphorology: Problems and solutions (Genette, Ricoeur).

A critical view of the development of rhetoric, with a special emphasis on metaphor, can be found in Genette's *Rhetoric Restrained*. Aristotelian rhetoric, in Genette's view, was more general and extensive than the contemporary study of tropes. Rhetoric from the Middle Ages onwards is seen by Genette as having suffered from a “*generalized restriction*” which has led to the reduction of the discipline to the “study of the poetic *lexis*” (104). Genette attempts to outline the history of that process by focusing on various elements. The first is “tropological reduction” (105) initiated by Dumarais's *Des Tropes* (1730), a work which – by emphasizing “figuration” – put the literal / figurative distinction at the centre of rhetoric. The second is found in the work of Fontanier, who, by concentrating on the “criterion of substitution” and “extending it to the figurative field as a whole,” contributed to the development of rhetoric in which the trope became “the model of all figures” (105). While the object of his study was comprehensive and included “indeed all figures,” his principle, as Genette claims was “fundamentally and purely tropological” (106). If Dumarais's work connected metonymy and synecdoche, Fontanier (as Vossius before) was driven by an impulse to reduce and to subordinate: thus he disregarded irony as a “pseudo-trope” (107) and treated metaphor and metonymy as the principal tropes (107).<sup>29</sup> This has led to the confusion in the understanding of various types of “connection” and

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<sup>29</sup> As Genette claims: “Dumarais sketches a new conflation of synecdoche and metonymy, which are seen as connected since they are both based on a *relation*, or *connection* (together with “dependence” in the case of synecdoche), which is neither the relation of *resemblance* of metaphor nor the relation of *contrast* of irony: it was implicitly to “subordinate” all tropes to the free associative principles of similarity, contiguity, and opposition” (106).

“contiguity” and thus to the mistake of seeing synecdoche as identical to metonymy. This mistake, according to Genette, consists in treating inclusion (characteristic of synecdoche) as simple contiguity without inclusion (characteristic of metonymy); in other words, it consists in mistaking the relation of parts to whole (synecdoche) for the relation of parts to other parts (“remainder”) forming a given whole (metonymy) (108). Both Mauss and Jakobson are guilty of this confusion which overlooks the fact that the tropes are fundamentally different (109).

If all figures of connection have been, with time, reduced to metonymy, all figures of resemblance and analogy have been reduced to metaphor. The traditional view of contrasting metaphor and comparison is rejected, and, instead, Genette argues that much more should be taken into account: the absence or presence of a comparing (vehicle) and compared (tenor) elements, the presence or absence of a comparative modalizer, motive, etc. He sketches a table (112) in which he outlines all the figures of analogy. Only one of the ten figures of resemblance can be seen as metaphor proper, showing, as Genette hopes, that metaphor is “merely one form among any others” and also, that “its promotion to the rank of figure of analogy *par excellence* is the result of a sort of takeover.” (113). Seeing in the metaphor the “trope of tropes” is thus misguided.<sup>30</sup>

The restrained nature of rhetoric led, according to Genette, to its demise with the survival only of metaphor, “frozen in its useless royalty” (115). Genette sees a similar process in the appropriation and misuse of the term *image* in Surrealism, or *symbol* in Romanticism and Symbolism. In its current state, Genette sees the misuse of

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30 Among the authors Genette criticises for the misuse of the term are Proust, Lacan, Tesauro, the Liège group, Vico, Aristotle, Deguy or Sojcher, among others.



the term *metaphor* as symptomatic of a larger problem, but having an easily identifiable root cause: “There is, it would seem, an almost inevitable confusion . . . between *standing for* and *being like*, in the name of which any trope may be *regarded* as a metaphor” (120). From my perspective, Genette's views become particularly productive when he criticises the “absolute valorization of metaphor, bound up with the idea of the essential metaphoricity of poetic language – and of language in general” (118). This may suggest that the ideas of the metaphorical or allegorical nature of the body in Coetzee's fiction is *not* helped by the theories of the metaphorical nature of everyday language, and that metaphoricity may mean figurativeness rather than relating to metaphor as a figure. How then, can cognitive linguistics talk of the metaphorical nature of language and thought, rather than of its figurative nature? To answer this question it is necessary to trace the status of metaphor and its role in thought and language on the example of works by Ricoeur (who dedicates his chapter to Genette) and then by Black, Goodman and Davidson, which divorce metaphor from what Genette sees as fruitless tropology.

Ricoeur's “The Decline of Rhetoric: Tropology” continues his investigation of the history of metaphor in rhetoric from its heyday and to its demise, while at the same time attempting to free metaphor from its word-based limitations. Ricoeur criticises the rhetorical approach to metaphor for “the excessive and damaging emphasis . . . on the word . . . on the noun or name, and on naming, in the theory of meaning.” In opposition, the semantic approach “proceeds from the recognition of the sentence as the primary unit of meaning” (49). Ricoeur first outlines implicit postulates of tropology which allowed for the bridging of the gap between the word-based definition

of metaphor and the treatment of metaphor as merely an ornamental deviation,<sup>31</sup> which inspired by Aristotle, nevertheless overlooks his other statements: the close similarity between simile and metaphor (dissimilar as “two forms of predication”) or naming as predication (53).

Ricoeur notices how Genette's return to the figure was important in that, as neither merely a word, nor a sentence, it was “coextensive with discourse in general” (59). When Fontanier distinguished figures of deviation and figures of substitution, he did it, in Ricoeur's view to “found a rhetoric of figures that is not reducible to a tropology, to a theory of deviations” (61). In an inherent contradiction the trope remained the “key unit” while “the foundation remain[ed] the word” (62). Fontanier's work operates then on two assumptions: the first views figure as the basic unit, the second treated idea (and, what follows, word and trope) as central (62).

The implications of Fontanier's “admirable” (68) definition of metaphor was then killed by the “notion of trope taken as a single word” (68). Despite his respect for Fontanier's work, Ricoeur nevertheless maintains that it has led rhetoric into a dead end (70). In all of this, Ricoeur persists in stressing the need for a non word-based understanding of metaphor (73).

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<sup>31</sup> These are: “the proper versus the figurative,” “semantic lacuna,” “borrowing,” “deviation” (51), “substitution,” reason or “paradigmatic character of the trope,” “exhaustive paraphrase,” “no new information” and ornament (52).

#### 4. Three major approaches: interaction, transfer, comparison

Max Black's "More about metaphor" (1993) is an extension and correction of the earlier *Metaphor* in which he develops his theory of the interaction view of metaphor. The "mystery of metaphor" (21), and the rejection of reductionist approaches to its study are the prolegomena to sketching, once again, his view on the subject and investigating the cognitive value of metaphors. Throughout his work, Black uses metaphorical statements as examples, treating them not like Aristotle, as a feature of word, but that of discourse.<sup>32</sup>

Black opposes his interaction view, concentrated primarily on the functional work of metaphorical statements, with two other dominant paradigms: the substitution view and comparison view. The interaction view is based on two subjects (a "primary" and "secondary"), the secondary one "to be regarded as a system rather than . . . [a] thing," in which case we talk not of individuals or ideas but of "a system of relationships" or the "implicative complex" (27). Metaphor "works by "projecting upon" the primary subject a set of "associated implications," comprised in the implicative complex, that are predicable of the secondary subject" (28).<sup>33</sup> Further, the producer of a metaphorical statement "selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the members of the secondary subject's implicative complex" (28). The interaction view

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<sup>32</sup> On his use of the term "metaphorical statements" Black writes: "A "statement," in my intended sense, will be identified by quoting a whole sentence, or a set of sentences." He goes even further in the discussion of metaphor-themes "identified merely by a formula like "the metaphor of A as B . . . regarded as an abstraction from the metaphorical statements in which it does or might occur" (24).

<sup>33</sup> Here, the change occurs from the past term *system of associated commonplaces*. Black defines the new term 'implicative complex' as Aristotle's *endoxa*: "current opinions shared by members of a certain speech-community" (28).

finally sees the two subjects as interacting in several ways (28). Thus, metaphorically described, statements involving metaphor are a “verbal action essentially demanding *uptake*, a creative response from a competent reader” (28). The analysis of metaphors consists in comparisons between statements belonging to respective implication-complexes which, due to their “isomorphic” (29) nature, are correlated “by a “mixed lot of projective relations” (30).

The interactive view of metaphor is based on resemblance (30). Thus, each metaphor “mediate[s] an analogy or structural correspondence” and each “implicate[s] a likeness-statement and a comparison-statement” (30). The functional definition of metaphor, in the interaction view, is “an instrument for drawing implications grounded in perceived analogies of structure between two subjects belonging to different domains” (31). Using a series of geometrical figures as examples, Black attempts to convince the reader that the imaginary re-visualization of a shape is akin to that of metaphorical thinking. The figure functions as model-example for processes “needed in producing, handling, and understanding all but the most trivial of metaphors” (33). In Black's analysis, metaphors have a cognitive function insofar as they “generate new knowledge and insight by *changing* relationships between the things designated” (35). Black analyses various sentences to arrive at his “strong creativity thesis” in which metaphors are viewed as “cognitive instruments” (37).

With the acceptance of the cognitive value of metaphors comes the conviction that metaphors may reveal “how things are” (38). However, while metaphor may present “novel views of a domain of reference” (38), Black believes it a mistake to attempt to ascribe truth-values to metaphorical statements, concentrating, rather, on

their “representational aspect” (39). Metaphor itself, thus, can be “cognitive, informative, and ontologically illuminating” (39). The interaction view proposed by Black sees metaphors as based on the “interactions between two systems, grounded in analogies of structure (partly created, partly discovered)” and subject to the determination of their “appropriateness, faithfulness, partiality, superficiality, and the like” (39).

A competing account of metaphor, and thus a different understanding of the literal and figurative, is ‘transfer theory’ of metaphor, developing Aristotle’s substitution intuitions. Nelson Goodman’s theory of metaphoric transfer begins with the definition of a realm in which a semantic label operates as the “aggregate of the ranges of extension of the labels in a schema” (72).<sup>34</sup> In metaphor, a label “with others constituting a schema is . . . detached from the home realm of that schema and applied for the sorting and organizing of an alien realm” (72). This “transfer of schema” resembles a “calculated category-mistake.” It is complicated by the fact that not only the schema itself, but also the “ordering” as well as “other relationships” are subject to this transfer (73). Rejecting Ernst Cassirer’s analysis of how metaphorical statements relate to previous literal uses (76-77), Goodman also rejects the view of metaphor as an elliptical simile and treats metaphor as the basis of a corresponding simile (77).

The difference between literal and metaphorical statements does not influence their status as true or false, since the “[s]tandards of truth are much the same whether the schema used is transferred or not” (79). Although he maintains that a “metaphorical sorting” will necessarily be “more novel . . . less sharp and stable than

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<sup>34</sup> Schema is defined as “[t]he implicit set of alternatives” (73).

correlated literal sorting” the difference lies merely in degree and is not qualitative (79). There is also little correspondence between a valid and truthful metaphor, and a metaphor that is effective. One speaks of good metaphors (or “potent” in Goodman's language) when the “transferred schema effects a new and notable organization rather than a mere relabeling of an old one” (80). The significance and value of metaphor lies in these new ways of organization (80). However, the reliance on novelty and “intriguing” character means even potent metaphors are necessarily short-lived and become “commonplace,” reduced to “mere truth” (80).

Goodman analyses various metaphors in two groups: those like personification or antonomasia, where one can speak of a “transfer of a schema between disjoint realms” (80), and those within one realm like hyperbole and litotes, where “the entire schema [is] squeezed into a central part of the original realm” (81). In either case, metaphor for Goodman always consists of transfer where “some labels of the schema are given new extensions” even if, as in irony, “the realm itself may remain constant under the transfer” (83). Metaphor, in this view, cannot easily be opposed to literal usage for the features helping to distinguish the two are inherently “transient” (85).

The third major type of contemporary views on metaphor, alongside interaction and transfer, is the comparison view, commonly held in analytic philosophy. In Donald Davidson's “What Metaphors Mean” (1976) he posits himself against both Black and Goodman. Both the creation and interpretation of metaphor function as creative activities without fast rules. In this sense, they are already akin to literal language, since “all communication . . . assumes the interplay of inventive construction and inventive construal” (29). Assessing or constructing metaphors can only be achieved

successfully by reference to “taste”; and there is nothing, as Black claimed, like rules of language determining what counts as metaphor and what does not. Davidson, on the other hand, maintains that metaphors mean “what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more” (30). While not wanting to be associated with those who see metaphor as purely ornamental, Davidson claims that metaphors cannot be paraphrased “because there is nothing there to paraphrase” (30). And, while metaphor might be a useful device, while its point might be “brought out by using further words,” metaphor itself “doesn’t say anything beyond its literal meaning” (30). Metaphor, he argues, “belongs exclusively to the domain of use” (31). Davidson rejects the idea of explaining metaphors through reference to ambiguity by claiming that in metaphor “we are seldom in doubt that what we have is a metaphor” (33) and do not struggle between competing 'meanings' of the word.

## **5. Metaphor and Allegory (Fletcher, Fineman)**

The author of the most important allegory of the late Middle Ages, Dante, provided some conceptualization of the trope. His views on allegory are clearly influenced by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, with the latter defining allegorical sense in his *Summa Theologica* as signifying the new law of the New Testament, as a prefiguration. The concept, applied by Dante in poetic practice, is analysed theoretically in his “Letter to Can Grande della Scala,” where the author admits his work to be intended as “polysemous”: literal and allegorical at the same time (121). Various figurative, or “mystical” senses are called by the author “allegorical,” “since

they are all different from the literal or historical (121).<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Dante notes that in his title, comedy “is derived from *cosmos*”, and is at pains to explain the divisions existing in his work: “the form is twofold... treatise and . . . treatment. The form of the treatise is threefold . . .” Both the idea of cosmos, and Dante's strict structural divisions as characteristic of allegory are later taken up by other theoreticians of allegory: Angus Fletcher and Joel Fineman.

Angus Fletcher's *Allegory* (1964), presents what the author intends to be a “theoretical” and “non-historical” (1) analysis of the “mode of allegorical fiction” (2). Allegory, broadly understood as “say[ing] one thing and mean[ing] another” (2), is explained etymologically (stressing the importance of its public nature expressed in *agoreuein*) and traced to Plutarch. Fletcher sees allegory as a “fundamental process of encoding . . . speech” that exists across genres. As such it can function equally well in verse, drama, fiction, non-fiction, popular genre fiction, religious sermons or political pamphlets, poetry (as “extended metaphor” (4)), or as *aenigma*, a riddle: “the oldest allegorical type” (6). It can also function as a motif, as in Zane Grey, where the scenery becomes a “*paysage moralisé*,” description works as a “carrier of thematic meaning” (6). The “point” of broadly understood allegory is that it does not need to be “read exegetically,” but it “often has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself” (7). For this reason, one can speak of allegory when the work has a structure “that lends itself to a secondary reading, or rather, one that becomes stronger when given a secondary meaning as well as a primary meaning” (7). Not every reader of a given text need be conscious of its allegorical nature (e.g. political allegories (8)), but,

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<sup>35</sup> Allegory is derived from the Greek *alleon* which is rendered in Latin as *alienus* (“belonging to another”) or *diversus* (“different”) (121).



in agreement with Northrop Frye, Fletcher claims that for a literary critic all literature is “more or less allegorical” (8) even if specimens of “pure” allegory cannot be found. Even the works famously believed to be allegories (*Commedia*) would be, for a variety of critics (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Erich Auerbach), “quasi-allegorical” (10). Fletcher despairs of the lack of agreement in defining and understanding figurative language, but also of the misuse some rhetorical terms are subject to. Thus Goethe's distinction between allegory (where one sees “the particular for the general”) and symbol (“the general in the particular” (13)) proves to be of historical significance. Coleridge's distinction between symbol and allegory, while interesting, is still problematic: the understanding of symbolical as synecdoche (untranslatable and unconscious) and the allegorical (as translatable, based on metaphor and conscious) results in seeing the former as participating in the “idea symbolized” (17-18) and allegory as primarily interested in categories and logical order. Coleridge's other definition of allegory is eventually used by Fletcher as a starting point for his own discussion, where both the psychology of reading and the rhetorical nature of allegory are brought together.

Beginning with traditional rhetoric of Quintilian and Cicero, where allegory was understood as a “sequence of submetaphors which amount in aggregate to one single, continued, ‘extended metaphor’” (70), Fletcher continues his discussion with William Empson's idea of two distinct levels of being within allegory, and Rosemond Tuve's equation of allegory with metaphor (and its “normal relation of concretion to abstraction” (71)). For Fletcher, those views are tenable only when “metaphor is understood ‘loosely’”: “If metaphor is to be the general name for any and all

“transfers” of meaning, it will necessarily include allegory” (71). Fletcher rejects those conceptualizations based on the equation of metaphor and allegory. In fact, he sees allegory as aiming “at both clarity and obscurity” at the same time, with unreadable enigmas as “allegory's most cherished function” (73). While allegories work by inviting the recognition of “levels,” “explication, gradual unfolding” in a “sequential” manner, what is perhaps important to remember in the characterization of Coetzee's fiction is Fletcher's assertion that “most allegories of major importance have ultimately very obscure images, and these are a source of their greatness” (73).

Another flaw in reducing allegory to metaphor lies, for Fletcher, in the confusion as to the understanding of the latter: an often confused term cannot really be heuristically productive in explaining another term. While both Cicero and Quintilian understand allegory as metaphor, and for Aristotle, allegory would be the fourth type of his metaphor, there are various reasons why the equation of metaphor with allegory is misguided. The first of these is the criterion of “*surprise*” (75). For Aristotle, metaphor functioned as a “momentary dramatic device” and not as an “organizing thematic principle” (77), something that cannot be said either of *Commedia* or, if one chooses to read Coetzee allegorically, of his novels. In his analysis of the “Ship of State” poem, Fletcher shows how allegory – generally speaking – “proceed[s] toward clarity” and “away from obscurity” and hence, contrary to the Aristotelian formulation, they “display the diminishing of metaphoric surprise” (83). Quintilian's distinction into trope (“play on single words”) and figure (“on whole groups of words, on sentences and . . . paragraphs”) (84) situates allegory in the set of figures, while his discussion of

teleologically controlled tropes: synecdoche and metonymy lead Fletcher to conclude both may, in turn, be part of allegory (87).

Fletcher's analysis of allegory concentrates initially on its epideictic function: it is precisely because *kosmos*<sup>36</sup> implies hierarchy that allegory is able to praise, provide incitement to action or desire, elevate and degrade, influence the reader “to accept given hierarchies” (128). It manipulates ornament to “engage the reader in an interpretive activity” (130). While, for a variety of reasons, allegory might have had its heyday, Fletcher finds traces of it in popular genre fiction, political pamphlets and contemporary culture. The notion of *kosmos* and ornament that gave rise to the idea of propriety seem to operate in contemporary letters as they did in the past, the only difference is the “antiauthoritarian shift in status” (140) and the relative importance of irony that seems to subvert the notions of *kosmos* and propriety. Fletcher sees the lack of overt allegories in contemporary literature as the result of the work of irony which shifted its nature. After Frye, he mentions that literature of the West “shows a steady trend “downward” in that it has become increasingly more ironic in tone and point of view” (142). Thackeray's novel “without a hero” was one of the first steps in the process which later saw Kafka's and Orwell's characters debased and downgraded further. On Kafka, the writer whose influence on Coetzee is palpable, Fletcher writes: “Kafka's allegory . . . elaborates an imagery which we can call “ornamental” in both the strict and the loose sense of the term” (143).

An interesting structuralist and psychoanalytical investigation of allegory can be found in Joel Fineman's “The Structure of Allegorical Desire” (1980). For Fineman,

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<sup>36</sup> *Kosmos* is treated by Fletcher as one of the oldest terms for ornamental speech. The term itself also signifies the world (universe) or hierarchical order.

structure itself “presupposes the same system of multiply articulated levels” (46). Viewing movement psychoanalytically, Fineman sees similarities between allegory and dreamwork (perhaps a reason so many of dream passages in Coetzee seem to invite allegory most poignantly), while he also reads psychoanalysis allegorically claiming it to be the “critical response to allegory” or “the extension and conclusion of the classic allegorical tradition” (46). Both literary criticism and psychoanalysis share “the desire . . . of interpretation” (48). Yet allegory is even more akin to psychoanalysis: in both desire is based on critical reflection and becomes “both [their] theme and a structuring principle” (48). Like psychoanalysis, allegory has “formal reciprocity” between its practice and its theory or “its criticism” (48).

Fineman notes Plutarch's observation that allegory appears in “critical or polemical atmospheres” due to its elusiveness (48) and its “defensively recuperative intention” (49) towards authority and hegemonic discourse. He recalls Quintilian's traditional formulation of allegory: “what happens when a single metaphor is introduced in continuous series” (49), and the resultant view, dominant in the Renaissance that saw in allegory a “temporal extension of trope” (50). Classically understood allegory would begin with a metaphor articulating a proportion and take it further (50).

Fineman distinguishes perpendicular allegories (“concerned more with structure”) and horizontal ones (“temporal extension”) as well as a blend he presents on the example of *Canterbury Tales*. Openly invoking Jakobson, Fineman sees in

allegory “the poetical projection of the metaphoric axis onto the metonymic” (50).<sup>37</sup> Because it does not properly belong to either poetry or prose (51), allegory becomes characteristic of language in general. It is “representative of language employed for literary ends”, while its basis in synchrony and diachrony makes it embody “the definition of linguistic structure . . . developed by Jakobson” (51). Allegory “begins with structure,” and employs elements of signification only to “reinforce the structurality of that structure” (51). Yet, even though signifiers in allegory seem to have no importance in themselves but are “vehicles of a larger structural story which they carry but in which they play no part,” they are nevertheless, “ostentatiously foregrounded by the very structurality that becomes immanent in them” (52). In this, for Fineman, lies the paradox of the structuralist account of allegory, this “most didactic and abstract-mongering of poetic figures” (52). In a detailed analysis of structural linguistics and its application to Chaucer's work *Fineman* attempts to find out “how allegory begins and why it continues” (59). The answer lies in its structure: allegory “initiates and continually revivifies its own desire, a desire born out of its own structuring” (59). Allegory, as “continued metaphor” is never “completeable,” and thus has affinity with obsessional neurosis and psychoanalysis itself (60).

## **7. Conceptual Metaphor and Coetzee**

An important breakthrough for the study of metaphor came with Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), in which the authors presented metaphor as not merely

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<sup>37</sup> Where metaphor is defined as “the synchronic system of differences that constitutes the order of language (*langue*)” and metonymy as “the diachronic principle of combination and connection by means of which structure is actualized in time in speech (*parole*)” (50).

(or even primarily) a feature of language, but as an inherent part of the conceptual system. The conceptual system, in its nature metaphorical, underlies and influences human thought (which is metaphorical to a large extent) and might result in expressions that are deemed metaphorical in an ordinary sense. In short, “[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (5). If concepts are metaphorically structured, so is language, for the use of language is based on the metaphorical understanding of concepts. Concepts are highly systematic and partially culture-specific. Thus, if Western culture views and understands time in terms of limited resource, or argument in terms of battle, that gives rise to a specific metaphorical expression. Various metaphors are linked by a relation of entailment, which “characterize a coherent system of metaphorical concepts and a corresponding coherent system of metaphorical expressions for those concepts” (9).<sup>38</sup> Metaphors highlight some aspects of a concept and hide another, as “metaphorical structuring . . . is partial, not total.” As such, a concept is only “partially structured and . . . can be extended in some ways but not others” (13). Every metaphor is structural in the sense that a given concept is “metaphorically structured in terms of another” (14). While many metaphors are culture-specific (have a social basis), some (orientational metaphors) seem to be universal and derive from bodily functioning in the world (have a physical basis), although the distinction is, in many cases, difficult to make, and the experiential basis for them remains speculative (20).

If spatial orientation can be thought to result in orientational metaphors, ontological metaphors (“ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as

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<sup>38</sup> Thus, as the authors suggest, the metaphor TIME IS MONEY entails a more general metaphor TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE and TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY (9).

entities and substances” (25)), seem to have their source in the experience of one's own and others' bodies.<sup>39</sup> Translating an abstract quality into an entity in space allows the speaking community to “deal rationally” with an experience (26). Lakoff's and Johnson's example, the treatment of abstract 'inflation' as an entity, allows us to “refer to it, quantify it, identify a particular aspect of it, see it as a cause, act with respect to it” and most importantly perhaps, “believe that we understand it” (26), or believe that understanding is possible. Ontological metaphors metaphorically structure abstract concepts into concrete physical identity (the ubiquity of which becomes unnoticed) and most of the time the results of the structuring are taken as “self-evident, direct descriptions of . . . phenomena.” Thus, by analysing the metaphors for the mind in the English language, Lakoff and Johnson uncover a multitude of ways in which conceptualizations of the mind as a machine, container or brittle object are not only expressed in metaphorical everyday expressions that are now taken to be almost literal, but also how the initial structuring influenced thinking (both everyday as well as philosophical and scientific) about the mind. The results of this structuring become “an integral part of the model of mind we have” (29).

As the authors claim, one of the foundational ontological metaphors is that of the container, presumably having as its origin the experience of embodiment:

We are physical beings, bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation. We project our own in-out orientation onto other physical objects that are

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<sup>39</sup> The term ontological is misleading here, and Lakoff and Johnson themselves later admit that all metaphors are ontological in the sense of creating target-domain entities. I use ontological in the sense of concretization, useful for the analysis of Coetzee's novel, to highlight the embodiment of an abstract idea.

bounded by surfaces. Thus we also view them as containers with an inside and an outside . . . We impose this orientation on our natural environment as well . . . even where there is no natural physical boundary that can be viewed as defining a container, we impose boundaries . . . (29)

The basic container metaphor regarding substances, is explained by reference to a bathtub, with the tub being a “CONTAINER OBJECT” and the water being “CONTAINER SUBSTANCE.” This simple characterization of human conceptualization finds, I will argue, a particular literary expression in the work of Coetzee. The characters in his novels are driven by an attempt at understanding reality (body, language, or land, the latter often identified with the body itself) as a container, with a passion for discovering what lies behind its surface or, more pedantically, inside: the container substance. This inside / outside, surface / depth dichotomy, represented by the container metaphor, seems to be extraordinarily prevalent and fans out in all sorts of ways. On the one hand, we have the projection of the container onto the human body. The body as container object becomes a container of something unspecified: the truth, the essence, the reality within which must be uncovered for the full understanding of the other to occur. An offshoot of this is the MIND IS A CONTAINER metaphor, which primarily comes into play when characters engage in intellectual introspection in addition to their usual pursuits of listening to and trying to understand their own bodies and those of others. Language can also be viewed as a container: the standard conduit metaphor does indeed imply that language and writing, form a “CONTAINER FOR MEANING” (11) that can be uncovered after entering (evoked by recurrent images of digging, diving) and reconstructing the message. Most of Coetzee's books employ the container metaphor in a simple way by contrasting



language and the body: while the lack of knowledge of the “container substance” leaves the theoretical promise of the existence of a given truth intact, misleading surface (language) does not. The body itself, by having an outside and an inside, is conceptualised with the same metaphor: the physical surface (Joll, Nechaev) is contrasted with the presumed “meaning” of the body inside it: the projected true kernel of reality and identity. The container metaphor, understanding substances as containers, is presented as basic (30). Similarly universal is personification: making “sense of phenomena in the world in human terms” (34). I would like to suggest that Coetzee's “corporealization” (presenting abstract notions as bodies) achieves the same goal of a concrete, and thus more palpable, understanding.

Metaphor does not need to be consistent (form a unified image), as long as it is coherent. The future and the past, for example, can be conceptualised as preceding or following the subject (41-45), but those conceptualizations function as subcategories sharing a “major common entailment” (44). Their coherence lies in conceptualising time as a moving object. Thus, metaphors are not “defined not in terms of concrete images” but rather in terms of “more general categories” (45). What that means for the understanding of conceptual metaphor in Coetzee's fiction is that, apart from the relative equivalence between body, land, and language, all three of them have outer surface and inner container substances.

Those unspoken “container substances” share the property of being *inside* something else. The two major metaphors in Coetzee's fiction are BODY IS A

CONTAINER and TRUTH IS IN A CONTAINER.<sup>40</sup> When Lakoff and Johnson speak of metaphorical convergence, they show how the understanding of both time and labour as a substance permit viewing the two as almost equal (147). A similar convergence forming part of the conceptual system allows for the rough equation here. If the body is a container, and truth is in a container, then the truth (however understood), *might* be thought of as residing within the body. Given the systematic nature of the motifs, their juxtaposition might yield the BODY IS THE TRUTH, one that Coetzee's characters operate according to. As a result, the body can be treated as a container object (in which case it shields and hides whatever characters attempt to uncover, and in which case its outside form might *also* be misread and misinterpreted), or as a container substance, in which case it can easily be equated with truth and contrasted with language.

Throughout their analyses, the authors maintain that metaphors “partially structure our everyday concepts” and, what follows, that “this structure is reflected in our literal language” (46). Among the multitude of examples they offer, many naturally could easily be found in Coetzee's novels. Thus many would appear in various guises and contexts: IDEAS ARE FOOD (46),<sup>41</sup> IDEAS ARE PEOPLE (47),<sup>42</sup> IDEAS ARE PLANTS (47),<sup>43</sup> LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE (49),<sup>44</sup> SEEING IS

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<sup>40</sup> As Lakoff and Johnson show, both language and land are also conceptualised as containers. In Coetzee's works the two are often equated with the body. In cases where language is *explicitly contrasted* with the body, I propose to see its outside (surface) form, rather than “deep”, irrecoverable meaning, as forming one part of such a contrast: language as container object rather than container substance.

<sup>41</sup> Maximov in conversations with Dostoevsky, Nechaev as an embodied idea, the medical officer on Michael K's food.

<sup>42</sup> Maximov, Nechaev.

<sup>43</sup> Michael K.

<sup>44</sup> Dostoevsky's and the Magistrate's references to desired “electric” women.

TOUCHING (EYES ARE LIMBS) (50)<sup>45</sup> or THE EYES ARE THE CONTAINERS FOR THE EMOTIONS and PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL STATES ARE ENTITIES WITHIN A PERSON (50) which are extensions of BODY IS A CONTAINER and apply to numerous examples: from Friday's and the Barbarian Girl's eyes, guilt resulting in cancer in Mrs Curren, etc. Such images in Coetzee's novels all rely on conceptual metaphorical structuring. This dissertation is concerned not with tracing such metaphorical images in his fiction but, rather, with investigating how Coetzee's meaning (or the invitation to the reconstruction of the meaning accepted by his critics) depends upon such metaphors; on how readings and interpretations of the texts depend and rely on metaphorical structuring.

Lakoff and Johnson consider literary (nonliteral) metaphor or “metaphor” and attempt to draw a line between ordinary and “figurative” metaphor. Apart from three suggested ways of creating figurative / literary metaphor (53) and “metaphorical expressions,” the relative lack of importance attached to literal and figurative distinction is symptomatic of their main interest in metaphorical structuring of concepts (56) primarily in how a “conceptual system is metaphorically structured” (56), that is how one concept is understood through another. A problematic question is whether any concept can be understood non-metaphorically, that is, without recourse to another concept. A primary candidate might be orientational metaphors: concepts directly related to bodily experience (up, down), as well as directly emergent concepts of OBJECT, SUBSTANCE, and CONTAINER which can be grounded “by virtue of *systematic correlates with our experience*” (58, emphasis org.). Such concepts are not

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<sup>45</sup> Magistrate and the barbarian girl, amputee Paul and his blind lover in *Slowman*.

understood in and through themselves, rather, they seem to arise “from the collection of constantly performed motor functions having to do with our erect position relative to the gravitational field we live in” (57). While “direct physical experience” (57) is never exclusively physical, the authors attempt to understand some metaphorical conceptualizations as more basic than others (56-68).<sup>46</sup>

Metonymic relations are more easily accounted for through “experience with physical objects” (59). Various synecdoches and metonymies seem so natural that even Coetzee's narrators identify characters with their attributes (Joll and his glasses, the suit with Pavel, the tongue with Friday etc.). Whether conceptualization is of a metaphorical or a metonymic kind the human mind conceptualizes “the nonphysical *in terms of* the physical – that is . . . the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated” (59), so a physically 'basic' experience need not be conceptualised in a basic and simple way. What that suggests is that it is easier to understand a metaphorically structured concept (love as war, as collective work of art, as journey etc.) than it is for a human mind to deal with abstractions. In what I initially called organic (corporeal) metaphor, Coetzee seems to present abstractions as *embodied* qualities of the human organism. Thus the corporeal metaphor – by suggesting that land can be treated as a penetrable body, for example – invites the interpretation of the images in Coetzee's fictions as allegorical. The abstract, general notions of conquest, colonialism, war, or apartheid become conceptualised as concrete and individual instances: as sexual desire, impotence, cancer. The treatment of the body in Coetzee's

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<sup>46</sup> Some concepts, like causation, are more problematic, and the authors treat them as partly emergent and partly metaphorical, with reference to experiential gestalts and various causations as linked through a network of family resemblances to its prototype of infantile “direct manipulation” (69-76).

novels invites the reader to read the individual body as a sign of the abstract general idea, while, at the same time, treating the abstract general notion as resulting from an embodied individual. Organic (corporeal) metaphor is thus the “embodiment” of abstract notions and the treatment of the body as if its significance and “meaning” were more than just literal and contingent. While I am not arguing that Coetzee creates allegories of abstract notions, I am interested in how the representation and recurrent image of the body might be *read* as necessarily signifying something more than itself when all narrative clues seem to imply its silence, meaning and persistence.

Understanding, in the authors' view happens when a human mind “superimpose[s] the multidimensional structure of a part of [a] concept . . . upon the corresponding structure [of another concept]” (81). Thus, conversation can be understood as war when “the WAR gestalt fits our perceptions and actions in the conversation” (81).<sup>47</sup> Thus, directly emergent concepts (categories emerging from experience) define gestalts of more complex concepts. The basis of such structuring can be participants, parts, stages, linear sequence. Purpose and coherence in experiences is achieved when “we can categorize them in terms of gestalts with at least these dimensions” (82). While experiential gestalts (emergent from experience) structure things and activities to be understood, more complicated “complex gestalts” are “structured partially in terms of other gestalts” (85). Many abstract concepts, such as love, will always be metaphorically structured, as they are “not clearly delineated in our experience in any direct fashion and therefore must be comprehended primarily

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<sup>47</sup> Lakoff and Johnson revise their views in their 2003 Afterword claiming that the general concept of a “struggle” is experientially more basic than the concept of war, and thus it is more useful for the structuring of “conversation” (265).

indirectly, via metaphor” (85). All the 'allegorical' concepts in Coetzee's fiction are abstract ones: colonialism, history or exclusion. The Magistrate's new understanding of humanity and ethics or Mrs Curren's conceptualisations of guilt are such concretizations through embodiment.

However, metaphoric coherence is always partial. Thus a given concept might be understood as journey, war or a container, but each of these structures only a part of the concept. Together, however, they might cohere to give understanding of the concept (89). Often several metaphors will overlap to some extent, which happens if they have “common entailments” (92). Such an overlap provides for coherence, although, as has been mentioned, not consistence across metaphors. In other words, even if they are all combined, they do not form one complete image. Consistency is practically impossible (101): given that one concept can be understood in a variety of ways, there is no single structuring that would exhaust all possible understandings of it. The role of a metaphor, instead of exhaustive explication, is to be a part of a system of metaphors. All of them together “serve the complex purpose of characterizing . . . [a given] concept . . . in all of its aspects, as we conceive them” (105). What remains for the understanding of Coetzee's fiction is that the metaphoric understanding of a concept is primarily the notion of metaphorical embodiment, the structuring of “the less concrete and inherently vaguer concepts . . . in terms of more concrete concepts, which are more clearly delineated in our experience” (112). Understanding in *Metaphors* is primarily based on interactional properties (arising from perception, function, motor activity, purpose etc.) and not properties inherent in something in the metaphysical sense (122). The perceived properties are not grouped in sets, but rather

in “structured gestalts” of categories, where categorization is understood after Rosch in terms of relative closeness (family resemblance) to the prototype (123). Concepts are not understood and conceptualized in a vacuum but rather by the roles they are known to play in experience. At the same time, their open-ended nature requires the use of “hedgies,” modifiers which can extend or narrow a given category at the same time as they define the concept's relationship to the prototypical specimen of a category (123).

Lakoff and Johnson have particularly interesting and innovative ideas about metaphorical spatialization and the way in which syntactic form can metaphorically express meaning – that is, the relation between the “spatialized form of the language and the conceptual system” (138). This brings me to the most important issue: the creation of meaning (or the cognitive value of the metaphor), meaning in fiction, similarity and the notion of truth, all of them related to the question of the analysis of Coetzee's fiction.

In view of the earlier discussion of what has, for centuries, been taken to be the cognitive value, or the lack thereof, of metaphor, *Metaphors* claims that the role of conventional (non-literary) metaphor is to “structure the ordinary conceptual system of our culture which is reflected in our everyday language” (139). By comparison, a literary metaphor provides a “new understanding of our experience” and thus creates “new meaning” (139). Both types are similar in the sense they “provide coherent structure, highlighting some things and hiding others” (139), but a new metaphor may create new meaning (for example, of the concept 'love') by “highlight[ing] important love experiences and mak[ing] them coherent while it masks other love experiences” (142). Apart from their attention to structuring and understanding, the authors go as far

as to suggest that a new metaphor can create both conceptual and physical reality. Although this view finds its fuller expression in Lakoff's later articles and in his *Moral Politics* (1996), the idea of creating a new political metaphor might influence the understanding of a given issue. While words (language) themselves do not change outside reality, "changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions" (145-146). Like Aristotle, Lakoff and Johnson also view metaphor's cognitive value as the creation of similarity. Many similarities that we see in ordinary life stem from the metaphorical understanding of our conceptual system (146). Arguing against Davidson's comparison theory, the authors see metaphor as a matter of thought, based on similarities (some of which, in turn, may be based upon conventional metaphors) and as being able to create new similarities: "The primary function of a metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience. This may involve preexisting isolated similarities, the creation of new similarities, and more" (154).

Lakoff and Johnson presumably have in mind something similar to Moran's analysis of the responsibility of a public speaker (who can hide behind the metaphor and argue without stating something explicitly) when they analyse President Carter's use of war metaphors. The continued use of a given metaphor, according to the authors, leads to the acceptance of its entailments as true (157). Thus by a clever use of language, its user might alter the conceptual system of receivers, and convert them to a way of thinking that would not be accepted if he attempted to argue his case explicitly. The truth in such a situation is true "only relative to the reality defined by the



metaphor” (158). That is to say that the traditional discussion of the truth or falsity of a metaphor seems for the authors misplaced: “In most cases what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it” (158). Truth is “relative to a conceptual system that is defined in large part by metaphor” functioning as a “principal vehicle for understanding” (159-160). What follows is that true statements of human categorization “do not predicate *properties of objects in themselves* but rather *interactional properties* that make sense only relative to human functioning” (164). In a sense then, it would be pointless to ask if Coetzee *presents* the body as being the container for truth, and the embodiment of reality. What is more important is how his obsessive use of the image of (the mutilated) body and representations of the failures of his characters to discover the perceived “truth” result in the allegorical readings in which Coetzee criticism abounds. When the authors speak of the creation of personal metaphors “developed over our lifetimes to make sense of our lives” (269), metaphors that underlie both normal functioning and neurosis, Coetzee's position would be merely to suggest that his characters develop a personal metaphor to understand the abstract “meaning” of their respective situations.

*Metaphors'* rejection of Tarski's and Kripke's definitions of truth prepares the ground for a larger project: “the theory of meaning and the theory of truth” based on a “theory of human understanding” (184). Here, the authors attempt to situate themselves in the philosophical tradition and address some of the authors whose work has paved the way for their research. Rejecting both the “myth of objectivism” of

Anglo-American analytic philosophy (here they invoke Davidson,<sup>48</sup> Frege, Searle and Quine among others) (185-226) and the loosely presented “myth of subjectivism” on the other.<sup>49</sup> Their own work is to be an “experientialist synthesis” (192) of the two traditions in aiming to investigate “imaginative rationality” (235). Against Aristotle’s emphasis on similarity their view on metaphor is based on “cross-domain correlations in . . . experience, which give rise to the perceived similarities between the two domains within the metaphor” (245). Thus, metaphors do not express any metaphysical, objective similarity but use “inference patterns” from one conceptual domain to understand and speak about others. In support, the authors invoke research in the neural theory of metaphor (254-257), and the blended spaces theory interested in “conceptual integration,” namely “how conceptual structures are combined for use in particular cases” (261), where blending corresponds to binding in the neural theory of metaphor.

Lakoff’s work on metaphor was applied to literary analysis in *More Than Cool Reason* (1989), co-authored with Mark Turner. Starting from the same conceptual basis, the authors claim that the understanding of a literary text does not differ from

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<sup>48</sup> In fact the authors do not make much of Davidson’s distinction between use and meaning, limiting their criticism to the fact that the “objectivist account of truth requires that meaning, too, be objective” (201), and stating that he believes that “metaphors are meaningless” (271).

<sup>49</sup> The authors do not specify who they mean by this term (apart from several references to “the Romantic tradition” and to “Wordsworth and Coleridge” (191)). The subjectivist position gets only very limited and clearly dismissive treatment. Other authors working in the same tradition would be more explicit. For Turner the subjectivist position would be exemplified by Derrida and deconstructive criticism whose views are criticised in the Introduction to *Death is the Mother of Beauty*, originally published in 1987 (2000, 10-11). A similar criticism is carried throughout his *Reading Minds* (1991). It is only in the 2003 Afterword that Lakoff and Johnson identify “postmodernist thought” as an example of subjectivism. Turner and Lakoff and Johnson reject postmodernism on similar grounds: Turner by claiming modern linguistics research proves that phonemes do not function as lexemes (what he believes is the biggest mistake of “deconstructive criticism” (10)), while Lakoff and Johnson maintain that the idea of unanchored, “ungrounded” meaning and seeing meanings as exclusively culturally constructed is rejected by all disciplines within cognitive and brain sciences (273-274).

the understanding of everyday speech. Literary or figurative reading relies, as does everyday speech, on the implicit knowledge of the structure of metaphors in a given culture. Many of the commonplace metaphors analysed by Lakoff and Turner are plentiful in Coetzee's fiction: the grave as home and motherhood (Magda), life as fluid (Michael and Anna repeatedly referred to as dry, Matryona as liquid) the understanding of life as bondage etc. Against Davidson's claim that everything is like everything else, Lakoff and Turner provide constraints on the creation and functioning of metaphors, even simple metaphors such as personifications: "we must find – or impose – some correspondence between the ways that a particular agent acts and our knowledge of the kinds of events typical of the target domain" (39). While both conceptual and literary metaphor stem from the same source, ("the relatively small number of basic conceptual metaphors can be combined conceptually and expressed in an infinite variety of linguistic expressions" (51)), poets have at their disposal three ways of creating "literary" metaphor. Using conceptual metaphor, they can either "versify them in automatic ways" or "deploy them masterfully, combining them, extending them and crystallizing them in strong images" or they can "step outside the ordinary ways we think metaphorically . . . either to offer new modes of metaphorical thought or . . . make the use of our conventional basic metaphors less automatic by employing them in unusual ways, or otherwise destabilize them and thus reveal their inadequacies for making sense of reality" (51-52). While conceptual metaphors are often conventionalised to the extent that their metaphoricity goes unnoticed, poetic metaphor involves conscious effort. They are "conscious extensions of the ordinary conventionalized metaphors" (53) and thus they often derive from "different cognitive

resources than the automatic and effortless use of fully conventionalized modes of metaphorical expression” (54). Alternatively, an author might work with a conventional metaphor (which is “normally automatic and unconscious”) only to “manipulate them in unusual ways” (54) by extending or compressing them while maintaining the underlying concept that remains everyday and trivial. Thus, they conclude that the basic metaphors “are not creations of poets; rather, it is the masterful way in which poets extend, compose, and compress them that we find poetic” (54). As a result, the difficulty of interpreting poetry stems from basic metaphors being presented in a compressed way, which, along with the wilful complexity of phonological or syntactical form might render the artifice complex.

The only tenable binary dichotomy, in their view, exists between conceptual and linguistic metaphors. All the other distinctions between poetic and non-poetic remain quantitative as “parameters” along which metaphors may vary (55). One of these parameters is “conventionality” (death understood as a departure, for example), which applies to metaphors regardless of whether they are understood conceptually or linguistically (55). Another is “basicness,” which can be graded: the understanding of life as a journey is more basic than understanding of an evening as a patient on an operating table<sup>50</sup>.

However, one cannot divide all possible concepts into metaphorical and non-metaphorical, for “[p]art of a concept's structure can be understood metaphorically, using structure imported from another domain, while part may be understood directly, that is, without metaphor” (58). We can speak of metaphors (the “profoundly

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<sup>50</sup> The latter metaphor is taken from T.S Eliot’s “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock” (Eliot 13).

conventionalized conceptual metaphors”) solely when “aspects of one concept, the target, are understood in terms of nonmetaphoric aspects of another concept, the source.” Thus a metaphor “with the name A IS B is a mapping of part of the structure of our knowledge of source domain B onto target domain A” (59). The understanding of life as a journey thus depends on our general and rough understanding of journeys (B) and mapping it onto the understanding of a less concrete and delineated life (A). The mapping occurs between various schemas, or pieces of knowledge structured only roughly, in a “skeletal” (61) form with some elements (traveller, route) as necessary, with some (vehicles, companions) as contingent and optional, functioning as “slots” (61) to be filled in by any particular individual in any particular context: “The metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is thus a mapping of the structure of the JOURNEY schema onto the domain of LIFE in such a way as to set up the appropriate correspondences between TRAVELER and PERSON LEADING A LIFE, between STARTING POINT and BIRTH, and so on” (62). The mapping in question thus “create[s] structure in our understanding” for abstract concepts can be viewed in a variety of ways, most of them, in fact, “through metaphor” (62). As we have seen, the effortlessness and automatic nature of conceptual schemas and conceptual metaphor is endowed in their theory with a “*persuasive power*” over the speaking subject, even if this is rarely realised: “To the extent that we use a conceptual schema or a conceptual metaphor, we accept its validity”, and, even conversely, “when someone else uses it, we are predisposed to accept its validity” (63). The persuasive nature of such metaphorical mappings is prevalent in Coetzee's fiction: Mrs Curren's equation of the land and the body or cancer with pregnancy, the medical officer's insistent reading of

Michael as an element refusing to belong to a system, Magda's drive to have a story rather than belong to a story available to her all rely heavily on unconscious mappings. Conceptual schemas thus organize knowledge and “constitute cognitive models of some aspects of the world, models we use in comprehending our experience and in reasoning about it” (65).

Lakoff and Turner distinguish generic-level metaphors like EVENTS ARE ACTIONS (which lack specificity, have no fixed target or source domains and do not possess “fixed lists of entities specified in the mapping” (81)) from specific-level metaphors like DEATH IS A DEPARTURE. Whether generic or specific, in each instance “the mapping preserves generic-level structure” (83)

The difference between image metaphors and image schemas is that the former map one image onto another, while the latter are far more generic: they provide conceptual structures for mental images and allow spatial reasoning (99). Image schemas are active and easily understood as an example of metonymy, where an entire schema is evoked by its part (100) or one element in it is evoked by another (101). Thus, metonymic mapping occurs within one conceptual domain and any given entity making up a schema might stand for the schema as a whole or for another element within it (103). Metaphor, on the other hand, occurs between two domains, one “understood in terms of the other,” with the “logic of the source domain” being mapped onto the logical structure of the target domain (103). Metaphor and metonymy are similar in the sense that they are mainly conceptual, they involve mappings; they can be more or less conventionalised, and both are “means of extending the linguistic resources of a language” (104).

While words evoke schemas in the users' minds, metaphors “map schemas into other schemas.” As such, the power of words lies in their ability to “prompt a metaphorical understanding,” and invoke conceptual metaphors (106). Metaphor is consequently not a “sequence of words,” for in the theory in which metaphor is primarily a matter of thought, only “conceptual mappings” across domains can be legitimately called metaphors (107). When, by metaphor, one might understand both the operation whereby “source domain concepts are mapped onto target-domain concepts” and also words which “express such a mapping” (108), a confusion between metaphor and metonymy may occur, especially if both these understandings rely on the metonymic structure of the term ‘metaphor’ itself (108).<sup>51</sup> What needs to be maintained is the distinction between “the words in themselves” and “concepts they express,” especially in the case of metaphor where words can express more than one concept: “the source-domain concept and any metaphorical concepts that it maps onto” (108). A similar confusion, according to the authors, arises in literary studies if meanings are thought to reside “in the words themselves” (109). In fact, words evoke “conceptual schemas beyond part of the schema that the words designates” in other words, “words evoke in the mind much more than they strictly designate” (109). If this is the case, then the meaning of a literary work, including the “meaning” of the body in Coetzee's fiction, resides not so much in the words on the page as in the mind of the reader, in the “conceptual content that the words evoke” (109). While meanings,

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<sup>51</sup> “The word “metaphor” itself is subject to the metonymy that WORDS STAND FOR THE CONCEPTS THEY EXPRESS . . . When the distinction between the words and their conceptual content is clear, there is no harm in using this metonymy, which is after all part of the structure of our language, and using the term “metaphor” to denote the words that express a conceptual metaphor” (108).

including literary meanings, are to some extent conventionalised, communicable and shared, such meanings also create a limit to what a given text might mean to an individual. Hence a work of literature cannot mean “just anything,” but, since meaningfulness resides in the mind rather than words, “there is an enormous range of possibilities open for reasonable interpretation of a literary work” (109). Within this framework, in which all understanding includes active “construal” of meaning, “[e]very reading is reading in”: “Even if one sticks to the conventional, shared meanings of the words, one will necessarily be evoking all of the knowledge in the schemas in which those words are defined. And in using one's natural capacity for metaphorical understanding, one will necessarily be engaging in an activity of construal” (109). Naturally, various construals differ from one another, and also from the intended construal or intention of the author (110).

Lakoff and Turner refute one contemporary view of metaphor which they term “literal meaning theory” (114). Here, the authors turn to what they call the Grounding Hypothesis. The hypothesis in question, used by the authors to show how “metaphorical understanding is possible at all” and having as its subject mostly concepts (113), is later contrasted with a generalised “literal meaning theory” against which the authors argue. Grounding Theory maintains that “many conventional concepts” are “semantically autonomous”; however, concepts like this “are not mind-free” but are “grounded in the patterns of experience that we routinely live”; that “source domain of a metaphor is characterized in terms of concepts . . . that are semantically autonomous” and that, finally, “metaphorical understanding is grounded in semantically autonomous conceptual structure” (113). Naturally, the hypothesis



does not claim that *all* concepts are metaphorical. The Grounding Theory involves a detailed critique of “Literal Meaning Theory,” a bundle of different theories characterized as one for the purpose of clarity. Most generally, literal meaning theory does not concern itself with concepts, but with language, claiming that “*all* ordinary, conventional language . . . is semantically autonomous, that it forms the basis of metaphor, and that metaphor stands outside of it” (114). In other words, the literal meaning understanding of metaphor claims that, if an expression in a natural language is “conventional and ordinary”, then it must also be “semantically autonomous” and “capable of making reference to objective reality” (114). As such, any ordinary expression would be literal, and no metaphor could be classified as “literal.” For Lakoff and Turner, the literal meaning theory is based on two claims (“Autonomy claim” and “Objectivist claim”) both of which are misguided.

The former (claiming that all ordinary language is “semantically autonomous” (116) is rejected as incapable of explaining “general mappings across conceptual domains” (116). What follows is the inability to account for the use of one word “across conceptual domains” or for the use of “the same inference patterns across conceptual domains” (116). This would not allow to us explain the “conceptual unity” of various everyday expressions that treat life as a journey, to account for the frequent interpretations of road as life in poetic language, or else to see the unity or similarity in both poetic and everyday expressions (116-117). For the authors, their theory of conventional metaphor is able to account for a variety of phenomena which remain unexplained in literal meaning theory. The most pertinent ones are:

how everyday expressions are related by general principles; why the same expressions are used in different conceptual domains and why they mean what they do; how those general principles can explain the way poetic metaphor is understood; and how those principles account for inferences both in ordinary everyday expressions and in the novel expressions used by poets (117).

The objectivist claim (the second assumption on which, according to Lakoff and Turner, Literal Meaning Theory is based) maintains that the world exists objectively and independently of human conceptualization, but also that “conventional expressions in a language designate aspects of an objective, mind-free reality.” What follows is the belief that any statement “must objectively be either true or false, depending on whether the objective world accords with the statement” (117). The Objectivist View sees any expression of natural language as “semantically autonomous” and none as understood via metaphor (mapping across domains) because it denies any reality to mappings (as not existing within objective reality independent of the human mind): “If expressions of a language are defined only in terms of mind-free objective reality, then metaphors cannot enter into the characterization of the meanings of linguistic expressions, since metaphors are not mind-free” (118). The objectivist position is dismissed by the authors as failing to see truth and falsity as “relative to conceptual frameworks” rather than absolute (118). For them, statements can be meaningful “only relative to [their] defining framework” and true or false “relative to the way we understand reality given that framework” (118). When conceptual frameworks are mind-dependent, language expressions remain “not objective in the technical sense,” or “not mind-free” (118). In short, the authors' Grounding Theory differs from Literal Meaning Theory in three significant areas. Firstly, it maintains that “some”

expressions are semantically autonomous, in contrast to literal theory's universal semantic autonomy. Secondly, Grounding Theory does not see semantically autonomous expressions as “direct mirror of a mind-free external reality” or providing direct reference to an “objective, mind-free reality” but, rather, maintains that “semantically autonomous concepts . . . are grounded in . . . patterns of bodily and social experience” (119). Lastly, Grounding Theory is concerned more with concepts, than with the mere analysis of language.

There are various practical consequences, or “spinoffs” (120) of the Literal Meaning Theory that relate to our understanding of metaphor. These include what the authors term “paraphrase position” (metaphor is meaningful when paraphrased, 120), its variant “decoding position” (paraphrase demands decoding into literal language, 122) and “similarity position” (metaphor's only function is to draw attention to already existing similarities, 123). All the various related positions they list are seen as unfortunate consequences of contemporary philosophy of language. All of them, the authors argue, stem from two approaches: “The Failure-to-Generalize Methodology” (which includes both “case-by-case methodology” and “Source-domain-only Error,” 128) and the prevalence of “The Dead Metaphor Theory” (128-130).

To all those various accounts, Lakoff and Turner oppose their own conception of metaphor, seeing it as a primarily conceptual and largely unconscious operation which forms the basis for both poetic and everyday language (136). In their empirical investigations, the authors believe they have shown “general principles” governing metaphorical mappings and their relation to linguistic expression. The central point of departure in the entire theory revolves around the redefinition of the term itself:

We have used the term *metaphor* to refer to such conceptual mappings because they are . . . responsible for the phenomenon traditionally called metaphor. It is the conceptual work that lies behind the language that makes metaphor what it is. Metaphorical language is not something special. It is the language that conventionally expresses the source-domain concept of conceptual metaphor . . . The metaphorical work is being done at the conceptual level. For this reason we have used the term *metaphor* to characterize the conceptual mapping that does that work. (138)

Their analysis of William Carlos Williams's "To a Solitary Disciple" sheds light on the importance of bodily metaphor, although the authors do not explicitly articulate this importance. They are more concerned with global metaphorical structure which, in the presentation of the source domain, a reader is "to map onto some target domain of larger concerns" (146). While the idea behind global structures overlaps to a great extent with that of an organic metaphor (where the source domain is the body), specific examples the authors give show how universal, and mechanical such readings are. In Williams' poem the outside appearance of the church building (source) corresponds, according to the authors, to the target domain, the "essence of religion" (148, emphasis original). In the most straightforward way, the pursuit of truths in Coetzee's fiction conforms to this very simple mechanics: the body is often suggested as not merely the body: it is instead treated as source-domain pointing to some further projected revelatory target. More interestingly, most of the conceptual metaphors used in the analysis of Williams's poem share "sensory mappings" (142), a reference to the body or its functions. Whether this is an inevitable effect of the conceptual grounding of metaphorical thinking in body experience is unclear. For my purposes however, it is useful to notice that previously unmentioned conceptual metaphors SEEING IS TOUCHING (142), and a further pair of IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL / LESS

IMPORTANT IS PERIPHERAL (148) can be extrapolated from the ostensibly non-bodily context of Williams' poem to the bodily world of Coetzee's fiction. The touching of the barbarian girl is naturally both an extension of sight, as well as an exploration of what sight alone cannot examine. Following in the footsteps of Thomas the Apostle, the Magistrate needs to touch after he sees. This touching of the "reality" of the body thus has at its heart the attempt to bridge the gap between appearance (looking at the girl) and her essence (which will be pondered but not grasped after the touching has proved unsatisfactory). The blind girl, on the other hand, never touches the Magistrate. Her physical blinding has left her seemingly emotionally devoid of interest and speculation. In the Magistrate's attempts to see himself through her eyes, he is constantly referred to as a blur on the "periphery" of her vision. His lack of centrality in the world of appearances signifies the (assumed) lack of importance of his essence: his inability to move the girl. To a smaller extent perhaps, the more generic metaphor THE MIND IS A BODY MOVING IN SPACE (158) might point to the popularity of the exploration and journey motifs: the identities of Susan Barton, Michael K, Jacobus Coetzee or the Magistrate are inextricably linked to their experience of journeys undertaken literally or "metaphorically". In any case, the authors' distinction of metaphors into local and global seems crucial, for Coetzee's constant references to body experience cause the texts to be understood and interpreted as about something more (projected target) than just the body (stated source). In this function of metaphor the authors see its significance at the same time as they appear to answer the question of metaphor's conceptual value: "Here we find a power of metaphor that we have not previously discussed, *the power of revelation*. This is the

power that metaphor has to reveal comprehensive hidden meanings to us, to allow us to find meanings beyond the surface, to interpret texts as wholes, and to make sense of the patterns of events” (159).

While the authors' analysis of the Great Chain of Being deals with issues perhaps not significantly connected to the analysis of body image in Coetzee, much in the form and structure of the metaphors discussed is relevant to an understanding of the conceptual operation of organic metaphor. The Great Chain of Being (and other metaphors analysed by the authors) reflect the structure and form of metaphorical mappings where “higher-order questions are answered by lower-order-descriptions: the human place in the universe in terms of ants on a millstone” (161-162). Proverbs and the Great Chain of Being metaphor as a “cultural model” for understanding and interpretation (166) hinge on the generic-level metaphor **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC**. This metaphor “maps a single specific-level schema onto an indefinitely large number of parallel specific-level schemas that all have the same generic-level structure as the source-domain schema” (162). As a generic-level metaphor, this one also has “variable source and target domains.” The only restriction on the source and target is the requirement that “the source be a specific-level schema and the target be a generic-level schema.” (162-163). Metaphorical mappings here are not defined by a “fixed list of elements” but by a rule that applies to every generic-level metaphor and requires that it “preserve the generic-level structure of the target domain, except for what the metaphor exists explicitly to change, and import as much generic-level structure of the source-domain as is consistent with that first constraint” (163):

[T]he constraint on generic-level metaphors becomes, in the case of **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC**, equivalent to requiring that the source and target have the same generic-level structure. In other words, **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC** maps specific-level schemas onto the generic-level schemas they contain. These are the fewest restrictions possible for a metaphorical mapping, resulting in a metaphorical mapping of extreme generality. (163)

Because it is a generic-level metaphor of “extreme generality,” it is “variable;” nevertheless, “it guides and constrains the imaginative construction of a range of specific-level metaphorical mappings” (165). As a result of that, the **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC** metaphor “allows us to understand a whole category of situations in terms of one particular situation” (165). In addition, where the context of an occurrence or an event is lacking, understanding can be achieved metaphorically with the help of the **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC** metaphor: “[I]n the absence of any particular specific-level target schema, the generic-level schema of the source domain counts as an acceptable target. That generic-level schema can fit a range of possible specific-level target schemas” (165). Thus, in the absence of context, “we can muse over a range of particular situations to which it applies” (165). The metaphor, in this framework works and means what it means by “evocation of . . . schema, the choice of which aspects of the schema are relevant, the picking out of the generic-level structure of those aspects of the schema, and the preservation of that structure” (178).

Lakoff and Turner's analysis shows how a specific-level schema that characterizes something includes “the structure of a generic-level schema” (for example, specific blindness and general incapacity, 180) in accordance with the **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC** metaphor. The common knowledge nature of the Chain of Being metaphor allows for further mappings, ones that also apply to the analysis of

literature. This is how the authors link the two conceptual metaphors in the analysis of “Blind blames the ditch” and “Burned lips on broth now blows on cold water”:

of course, we can additionally use the rest of the conceptual complex of the GREAT CHAIN METAPHOR, along with GENERIC IS SPECIFIC to understand . . . We may understand that higher-order incapacities (such as mental incapacities, like prejudice, ignorance, failure to understand, and so on) are to be understood in terms of the lower-order incapacity of physical perceptual blindness. And we may understand that higher-order trauma and habit (such as a painful emotional experience and consequent habitual ways of dealing with emotional relationships) are to be understood in terms of the lower-order physical trauma of being burned and the lower-order physical habit of blowing on food. (180-181)

The same understanding which links the commonsensical cultural influence of the General Chain of Being metaphor with the GENERAL IS SPECIFIC metaphor might easily be applied to the representation of the body in Coetzee's fiction. While many metaphors presented in this dissertation are of a more specific – and more restricted – nature, the overall organic metaphor (seeing the body as indicative of abstract questions) presents us with the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor. Repeated images of bodily trauma seem to invite interpretations and understandings of higher-order, non-bodily, or allegorical nature. Thus rape or sexuality (*Disgrace*, *Dusklands*) are easily seen as political conquest and exploitation; illness, pregnancy and death (*In the Heart of the Country*) are seen as the disintegration of the regime, shame, and a monstrous political progeny of the initial rape; repeated references to blindness (*Waiting for the Barbarians*) can be seen as a failure to understand (Magistrate), or lack of interest and insight (the Girl's peripheral vision), or moral and ethical blindness (Joll). The motive of muteness (*Michael K*, *Foe*) calls for the presence of interpreters, with their belief in the existence of a message that can be truthfully interpreted, and the



product of their efforts: the translation or mistranslation of what often remains just their own projections on dumb and silent reality.

Organic metaphor is precisely such representation and emphasis on the body which, in its overdetermined nature, invites the interpretation of lower-order fictional events in a higher-order (more abstract) way. It uses the GENERAL IS SPECIFIC metaphor to suggest to the reader that a specific instance of suffering has a bearing on a universal plane, and invites the reader to see the generality of issues it raises through the individual. The “meaning” of the body may lie in the abstract domains of ethics, language, or history, while the “meaning” of an abstract concept can only be apprehended in a singular existence – the suffering of an individual body.

*More than Cool Reason* is a further development of the conceptual metaphor theory, an extrapolation of earlier ideas in relation to larger-scale narratives and the Great Chain metaphor, as well as a more focused criticism of other accounts of metaphor.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, after laying the expository foundations, the authors proceed to refuting positions which were only indirectly criticised before. Of particular importance is the authors' rejection of Davidson's claim that everything is like everything else. Against this reduction, the authors posit that mapping needs to preserve “the general shape of the event” including causal links (200). Not everything can be mapped onto everything else. As an example the authors analyse death understood as the workings of a magician where the “shape of the event” is preserved (200):

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<sup>52</sup> The reliance of the ecology movement on the hierarchical Great Chain Metaphor overlaps here with the argument of John in *Elizabeth Costello*. The reliance in question makes it counter-intuitive to argue for the preservation of given species of animals as hierarchically less precious than others (212-213).

The magician causes the disappearance, and therefore, the magician must map onto what causes the death. *Magician* cannot, for example, be mapped onto *the biological expiration of the dying person*. The magician cannot be the dying person's last breath . . . the way a terminally ill patient looks. None of these mappings preserves the general shape of the event, including the causal connections. (200)

Another constraint is the Maxim of Quantity which normally requires us to see “highest-level attributes of the source of target domains” (200). In this way, calling a banker a shark does not suggest their skin colour or a passion for water sports, but the highest-level attribute in a shark (instinctive behaviour) as pertinent to metaphoric understanding. Thus the authors reject the arbitrariness which Similarity Theory sees in “trivial” metaphorical comparisons: “Though generic-level metaphors permit a wide range of inventive interpretations, those interpretations are by no means arbitrary. They must fit the overall system of constraints imposed by the nature of metaphorical mappings” (201). Another challenge to Similarity Theory is the insistence on the idea that metaphor is not a linguistic expression but a cognitive operation of a tripartite structure that further constrains it: “It is a mapping from one conceptual domain to another, and as such it has a three-part structure: two endpoints (the source and target schemas) and a bridge between them (the detailed mapping). Such structures are highly constrained. It is not the case that anything can be anything” (203).

The rejection of Nietzsche as the extreme contradiction of the views on metaphor in analytic philosophy is coupled by the rejection of deconstruction which begins Turner's “Death is the Mother of Beauty” (2000). Metaphor as “fundamental mode of *cognition*” having consequences in both “thought and action” (9) is contrasted with criticism of the view of the unanchored nature of language. Turner

presents the untenability of extrapolating de Saussure's treatment of phonemes on lexemes, and describes the more basic assumption of the lack of grounding of the phonemic system and the resulting free play of signifiers as “discredited by modern linguistic research” (11). The existence of various readings does not, according to the author, mean that texts are “free to *slip* without constraint.” Indeed, all readings would be constrained by “modes of cognition”: “deconstructive criticism, like most literary criticism, is in the dangerous position of potentially pinning its analyses on potentially mistaken presuppositions about thought, knowledge, and language” (12). The rejection of one wing of the debate is coupled by the rejection of the other. The Aristotelian definition of metaphor fails, the author claims, presenting metaphor as an “expression of similarity” which does not “impose structure” but instead relies “on previous structure and do[es] no more than highlight, filter, or select aspects of that given structure.” (18). This definition is rejected on account of its own metaphorical character (18) and because it says nothing about what, for Turner, constitutes true metaphor: “a way of seeing one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” (19). Thus, in his own sentence, Turner employs the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor, analyses the structure of seeing and the structure of understanding and sees in them not “a relationship between two words . . . or concepts” but “a relationship between two conceptual domains . . . with a highly articulated structure” (19). What this metaphor does is to “impose on the concept of understanding the structure that we have for vision” even though, scientifically, vision and understanding do not seem to have common properties (19). The emphasis on properties in Aristotle's definition of metaphor is then a basic metaphor (albeit with no fixed source and target

domains) and “can be expressed as **a thing is what it has salient properties of**” and can be reduced to a variety of other metaphors with fixed target and source domains: “England is my mother” as an example of “**a nation is a person**” (20, bold org).<sup>53</sup> Aristotle's metaphors do not explain how various metaphorical understandings can be deemed creative, and do not explain orientational metaphors which are clearly not based on shared properties (MORE IS UP, for example, 21).

This introductory discussion of Aristotle is used to prepare the ground for the major theme of the book, metaphors of kinship in literature. First, however, Turner discusses two “general conceptual processes” that aid the production and understanding of such metaphors (21). These are “metonymy of associations” and the general and basic metaphor “**properties are persons,**” and they deserve closer attention as underlying the conceptual work necessary for my reading of the body in the fiction of Coetzee. The first, metonymy of associations, is defined as a “cognitive process wherein one thing closely related to another in a single conceptual domain is used to stand for that other thing” (21). Often, metonymy depends on “conventional cultural associations” (22). For example, the Magistrate's disbelief that Joll can see with his glasses can suggest metaphorical blindness. The second is personification of properties. Its ubiquity stems from the fact that abstract notions are easier made sense of when treated as people (22). The most common of personifications is “**an abstract property is a person whose salient characteristics is that property**” (22). What makes the personification possible is the interaction between metaphor and metonymy whereby “[i]f *A* stands for *B* and *B* is *C* metaphorically, then *A* stands for *C*” (22). If

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<sup>53</sup> The last metaphor is pertinent to the understanding of the nation as a person in the *Age of Iron* or colonialism and war in *Dusklands*.

dark glasses stand for a blind person, and blindness can be seen metaphorically as moral blindness, evil or indifference, then Joll's glasses may stand for moral blindness. If Michael K's escaping from camps is a sign of bodily freedom and lack of physical constraint and the lack of constraint can signify metaphorical lack of coercion, then Michael K may become a symbol, a “metaphor” of freedom. If the land is viewed as a (female) body, then its conquest can be seen in sexual terms as a masculine endeavour that is both military / political as it is sexual: both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee obsess about their masculinity and their sexual prowess, both of them feel more masculine praising the weapons of destruction as confirmation of their manhood, where the gun can stand metonymically for a penis, and where the conquest of the land is metonymically associated with rape. If cancer of a female body is its destruction, slow disintegration, as well as the unwanted product of this body, and each of those could be understood metaphorically, then the equation which *Age of Iron* suggests between the death of the body, the end of apartheid, or the moral collapse of the colonial project, the parallels between estrangement from her progeny (daughter) and giving “birth” to a devouring disease becomes clearer. More generally, if the soul is traditionally thought to be located within the body, and culturally, shields what is specific and most important about each individual person, then the discovery of this kernel must involve some sort of piercing, entering, penetrating beneath the surface, deciphering and interpreting: in torture, in sex, in writing or, supernaturally, in possession.

One of the issues raised by Turner in his discussion of kinship metaphors is the basic kinship metaphor (“**an abstract property is the parent of something having**

**that property**” (23)), and the application of that metaphor to language (“language, mother of thought” (56)) specifically regarding property transfer, inheritance, causation, and lineage. It has to be stressed here that the preoccupation with the body makes Coetzee's characters unavoidably gendered beings. Unlike protagonists who could be of either gender without serious narrative consequences (Kafka's K, for instance), much of what Coetzee's characters experience (perhaps with the exception of the Medical Officer) derives from their bodily embodiment as male or female: the experience of rape, pregnancy, motherhood, impotence, desire for a female body etc. At the same time, sexual difference is coupled with language difference. A differentiation into male and female modes of speech is emphasized in Mrs Curren's motherly speech (variously described as flowing from her maternal body) or in masculine competition, lineage, and inheritance as in the case of Pavel and Dostoyevsky, or in Susan Barton's striving to express female experience on her own terms, competing with Foe in the area of masculine story-telling as continually contrasting with feminine voice. In his analysis of various kinship metaphors, Turner concentrates on ascribing gender to language. Mother tongue (Mrs Curren's letter, Magda's striving for the motherly language she forgot) emphasizes “biological generation and nurturing” as feminine traits (53). On the other hand, masculine speech is less obviously embodied: “where beliefs or principles are abstract and rational, particularly in cases of philosophy and politics, mothers are not mentioned” (53). A good example of the exclusion of a woman from male discourse is the political and quasi-philosophical world of Eugene Dawn: his striving to have his writing (and, by extension, himself) accepted by his male superior as rational is coupled with his

rejection of his wife, her women's magazines and pop psychology. Similarly, religious beliefs in possession and artistic genius, even though they are clearly irrational, are, in Dostoevsky's case, a masculine affair, here played out in Freudian terms as competition with the son for the same woman. According to Turner the personification of an abstract quality "leads to understand [this quality] in terms of its purposes, goals, desires and intentions" (53). Whether it is colonialism, evil, exclusion or history, the concrete body of a character in the novel may stand as the easily identifiable embodiment of an idea, quality or abstract notion. This becomes more striking if we consider Coetzee's novels to be primarily about failures to understand, and about the limits of rationality, conceptual and linguistic expression. In that case the mystery which the character attempts to solve is typically identified as existing within the female body.<sup>54</sup> The case of the Magistrate is perhaps the most poignant here with his masculine and rational attempts as a legal and administrative representative of the empire at endowing bodies with significance. Such failures in understanding, Turner claims, are indeed often feminised in language expression: where clarity and rationality is viewed as male, confusion and the failure of the rational mind take place in the understanding of the blurred "female" system:

when this calculus of human intention and decision does not work, does not predict the system, when the system is too complex, or when we can ascribe to the system human traits but no particular motivation for having them – in sum, when the system behaves more like a human than like a consistent and reduced model of a human -, the personification almost always feminizes the system. This fits connotations given to femininity of mysteriousness, of deep,

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<sup>54</sup> There are exceptions to the rule of course: Susan Barton's attempt to solve Friday's mystery, or Mrs Curren's attempt to read Vercueil. Both attempts here however, rely on a de-gendering of the subject: the suggestion that Friday is castrated, and that Vercueil is an infertile virgin. Michael K is often treated like a child.

unknowable, non-reducible inner workings, of holistic and emergent properties, of alternatives to the calculus of rationality. Whatever the anthropology behind these connotations - from the biological marvel of death to the role of women in religions – kinship metaphor reflects it consistently (53-54).

Susan's failure to solve Friday's mystery can be seen as synonymous with his loss of “masculine” identity. One can, like Foe, either accept Friday as irrational and childish and write him into De Foe's story as Man Friday, or, like Susan, fail in striving to achieve the “bodily language” or express the speaking body that the last pages of the novel gesture at. In the course of the novel, his status as Man Friday becomes diminished through the suggestion of his castration, representing him as an unruly child, with the consequent dropping of “Man” from his name.

The already mentioned emphasis on the gendered nature of the body comes into focus in the representation of kinship. Kinship relations naturally are defined along gender lines, where fatherhood (Michael K, Dostoevsky, Eugene, David Lurie, Paul Rayment) forms an important part of human experience sharply contrasted in its uniqueness with the experience of motherhood (Mrs Curren, Susan, Magda). While this division would not in itself be of particular interest apart from highlighting gendered bodily experience further, it becomes vital when seen in parallel with the gendering of language. Where Mrs Curren imagines her letter as a motherly gift springing from her loving body and contrasts this love-filled medium with hate-filled official state propaganda – and where both Susan and Magda strive to express themselves in feminine language while feeling trapped in masculine discourse – men in Coetzee's fiction pursue masculine expression (Eugene). Coetzee thus typically presents the attempts (and often failures) to speak in the “masculine” discourse those



male characters actively embrace: the language of rationality and dispassion (Eugene, Officer), the language of authority bestowed by law, politics, theoretical ethics or artistic craft (Magistrate, Joll, Dostoevsky).

Each of the kinship metaphors analysed by Turner has cultural connotations or “stereotypical pictures of gender distinctions” (51) which also apply to the gendering of the language as the expression of gendered embodiment in Coetzee's novels. On the one hand then, “females are characterized by the distinctions between high and low, standing for ideals or deviousness, for angels in white or daughters of the devil” (51) as can be exemplified by the dichotomy that exists between the angelic Anna and the possessed Matryona. They and their speech often suggests their “remov[al] . . . from society,” being “manipulated and manipulating” (51). The typical male “decoder” of the novels (the Magistrate, David Lurie, Paul Rayment) decodes, typically, female mysteriousness. As Turner notes, “[m]ystical concepts and systems regarded as having deep, unknowable, non-reducible inner workings are almost always female rather than male” (51). On the other hand, in the cases of Nechaev or Jacobus one can see examples of masculine speech. As Turner suggests, “[s]trength and power and strong, active evil are typically masculine” (51). A similar craving for strength and recognition on the part of Eugene Dawn stems from his fascination with male superiors where the father-like figure “connote[s] stateliness and abstraction” yet lacks the “nurturing states” (51) of the mother. Fathers and fatherly authority figures (Dostoevsky, Cruso, Foe, Eugene's superior, Magda's father) lack the nurturing quality: theirs is the stereotypical patriarchal role of guardians of the language, the symbolic order and the law. Children are endowed with “rights by inheritance” and often “inherit beliefs,” but

they also “can mean “lesser cohorts” as in “children of the devil”” (Pavel, Maryona). Magda, as a daughter, fulfils her stereotypical role both in body and language by her “submissiveness and dependency . . . passivity and inaction” and cannot be termed “an individuated socially active agent” (52).<sup>55</sup> A son, like Pavel, while more active than Magda, is endowed with “activity and strength,” but is stereotypically described as brother to Nechaev, whose views his shares (“When beliefs are shared, it is brothers who share them” (52). These cultural associations of kinship relate to the language in which characters speak (or are spoken about by other characters), the ways they view their own speech (as masculine or feminine, anti-patriarchal, fatherly or motherly), the way their language and body -- shaped by gender and kinship -- situate them in narrative.

Turner's book is a further development of both the theory and the application of the conceptual metaphor theory to the field of literature. In examining how cognitive models can underlie utterances, he attempts to “locate the metaphoric inference patterns of kinship terms” (69). His analysis of *Paradise Lost*, for example, analyses mappings between “the target domain of theology and the source domain of kinship” (83) showing how kinship metaphors can “create, structure, examine and unpack components of Christianity” (89), or more generally, “cast[] meaning upon a domain” to be understood (91). In that way he applies practically the theoretical notion of cognitive models as creating understanding (110). If for Lakoff, causation was a

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<sup>55</sup> This is not to say that such stereotypical connotations are reflected in the novels. Indeed, some characters (Susan) actively rebel against their bodily and language determined position. The revolt of others (Lurie's daughter Lucy) is so significant it functions as the major mystery-theme of the novel.

concept that was partly emergent and partly metaphorical, Turner suggests seeing it in terms of progeneration:

the characteristics of **causation is progeneration** match the characteristics of the otherwise unaccounted-for causal statements. It is natural to conclude therefore that we understand these otherwise unaccounted-for causal statements by virtue of the conceptual metaphor **causation is progeneration** (129).

This metaphor is, for Turner, the “basic model of causation” (148), and is prominently employed in the analysis of literary works where causal relations are metaphorically depicted as kinship relations. However, Turner then distinguishes between creative metaphor which requires us to “re-conceive . . . the target domain” and thus “create meaning” and non-creative metaphor which asks us to “locate features or structures already shared in our conceptual models of the source and target domains” and thus does not require us to “revise our mental conceptions” (155).

What makes Turner's work useful in the context of the analysis of Coetzee's fiction is the explanation of the mental process involved in the understanding of creative metaphors. Why, in other words, can readers and professional critics reach conclusions that “land” might be thought of as the body, the body as a container for the truth, truth as the entity within a container, the body as speaking and endowed with language, spoken language as divorced from the body, scars as texts and so on? And what about the painfully stereotypical gender and kinship connotations analysed above? Turner's explanation of the mental process of creating similarities provides a model for the explanation of why certain (specific and contingent) motifs and events in Coetzee's fiction might be thought to have certain, more generalised (explanatory, allegorical) meanings. The notion of stereotypical cultural connotations comes into

play at this point. In the absence of context that might lead our understanding, the reader or listener begins by seeking “to match the two concepts involved in a metaphor noncreatively by comparing the stereotypical behaviors of the two concepts” (156). While behaviour is defined as “how a thing operates,” it is a useful term that implicitly indicates the ubiquity of personification. Most nouns and substantives are “cognitively represented, prototypically, as behaviors” of agents. Sleep then, is presented as “behavior of a sleeping thing” and humility as “the behavior of a humble person” (156). For Turner, the initial procedure is the matching of “stereotypical behaviors,” each endowed with “stereotypical components” (states of being, actions, relations). The “matching of behaviors” consists in comparing “the values of stereotypical components” (156). As an example Turner presents a kinship relation between music and poetry: “since music gives a sequence of notes affecting minds through aural sense and poetry gives a sequence of words affecting minds through the aural sense, their stereotypical behaviors match but for the value of component “material,” that is sounds vs. word. By performing this match, we understand “Music is twin-sister to poetry”” (156). Similarity can thus be understood as “matching behavior” (157). Thus sleep and death might be deemed to be siblings as they share similarities in the lack of activity and lack of consciousness in the behaviour of the body. The data achieved in Turner's analysis of metaphors suggests that readers “seek[] to determine whether the behavior implied for the non-behavioral term is . . . possible and fitting” (157). However, readers typically map “the behavior onto a non-behavioral concept” (157). In other words, the allegorising impulse most often leads to personification in cases where concepts (language, truth, history, race) are not embodied.

Another matter of importance is the fact that “in general” (and this would also hold true for the narrative world of Coetzee), “implication is from the more specific concept to the less specific concept” (157). In a sense then Coetzee's organic metaphor can be explained by reference to one two-way process. The “abstract” notions and “meanings” of his fiction (as analysed by critics) stem from the “more specific” and more concrete subject matter: the obsessively recurring motif of the body and experience of embodiment. Then, by repeatedly suggesting (or, more precisely, by endowing his characters with the belief in) the existence of another, less concrete aspect of existence, Coetzee leads the reader to move from body into the more abstract and general notions which preoccupy critics of his fiction. At the same time, Coetzee's representation of those abstract notions (if he indeed represents them) can be traced to his representation of embodiment and his characters' obsessive attempts and failures to understand their bodies and grasp their projected significance. Once again, therefore, one sees the movement from the specific to the universal: while the universal is “presented” in the example of the individual and the contingent, this individual and contingent experience, in its mysteriousness and vagueness, is suggestively implying a more general and abstract “meaning.” This meaning is naturally pursued by the decoding characters craving understanding, but is also to be found in the secondary literature where Coetzee is not normally read as a chronicler of the body (ageing, sexuality, disease, rape) but as an author concerned with the more general abstract notions of history, language, justice, literature, racial and sexual difference, colonialism and others.

Turner explains in detail how matchings of non-behavioural concepts are at all possible by references to “idealised cognitive models” (158) whereby two concepts stand in five different relationships to one another. He analyses “ten major conceptual metaphoric inference patterns” (164). The analysis of these greatly exceeds the scope of this section. By way of conclusion, therefore, it would perhaps be sufficient to say that his work explicitly argues against what he believes to be the dominant trends in literary scholarship. He rejects meaning as unanchored and argues for its constrained nature by referring the reader to contemporary linguistics and cognitive science research. Among other things, he mentions and provides a bibliography for the “perceptual and motor basis of basic level categorization,” the “biological basis of semantic categorization,” research in word definition “relative to frames,” the “image structure in semantics,” the “cognitive constraints on historical semantic change” or the “physical and experiential constraints on metaphor” (167). All of these are used as a basis for the rejection of Derrida's views on language and signification, which forms the point of departure of Turner's work. It should be stressed, however, that Turner is not uncritical of certain strands of cognitive linguistics as well. Thus he disagrees with Lakoff, for example, on the origins of causation as direct manipulation, while he also admits that much more research is needed in order to establish the validity of certain philosophical assumptions (such as determinism). The importance and relevance of his work for the analysis of Coetzee lie rather in the fact that it takes conceptual metaphor considerations further. Where *More than Cool Reason* attempted to put theoretical insights from *Metaphors We Live By* into practice by applying them to poetic metaphor, and the common understanding of relations in the Great Chain Metaphor,

*Death is the Mother of Beauty* moves even further in this practical direction by investigating larger-scale poetic works and the causal links used to understand them.

How, however, can one move from the understanding of causal links presented as moving from one image as another to the understanding of stories as other stories? How can we see in the story of sexual frustration the story of colonialism? To answer this question one needs to think of metaphor not as a static image, but as a dynamic story. The theoretical basis of such an extrapolation is provided by Turner's *The Literary Mind* (1996) in which metaphorical mappings are extended onto the redefined notion of “parable”. Turner sees narrative as a “basic principle of mind” whose “mental scope” is normally “magnified by *projection* – one story helps us make sense of another” (V). Parable, in this theory, is a basic cognitive operation of the “projection of one story onto another” (V). The process of projecting, or using projection to understand and reason, can be referred to as “narrative imagining” used in any imagining, prediction, explaining or planning (4-5). Understanding events as stories is a “literary” capacity which is at work in everyday experience. For Turner, this is “the first way in which the mind is essentially literary” (5). Next comes the projection “of one story onto another” which, while it seems at first sight “literary,” is also “a fundamental instrument of the mind. Rational capacities depend upon it.” It is a “literary capacity indispensable to human cognition” (5). Parable, as a literary genre, “combines both story and projection,” and, by this means, “condense[s]” meanings into “small space” (5). The understanding of the workings of parable is, for Turner, understanding the “root capacities of the everyday mind” (5). Narrative imagining is then a basic ability to emplot events and understand action, causation and agents as

elements of a story. It is “the understanding of a complex of objects, events and actors as organized by our knowledge of *story*.” Parable then combines this primary capacity with projection whereby “one story is projected onto another.” The understanding of parables involves no special talents or abilities, but stems from this everyday capacity of the human mind: the “evolution of the genre of parable” itself is “neither accidental nor exclusively literary: it follows inevitably from the nature of our conceptual systems” (5).

Where Lakoff redefined metaphor both as a cognitive mechanism and the product of this mechanism, Turner redefines parable as primarily a mental process structuring understanding. Literary parable then becomes “one artifact of the mental process of parable” (5). Parable is akin to metaphor in the sense that in order to understand a “target story” (target domain) we need a “source story” (source domain). Then “we project the overt source story onto a covert target story,” just as with conceptual metaphor, in an unconscious and automatic way. Any vagueness can only be understood when employed, made concrete: we project it “onto an abstract story that might cover a great range of specific target stories and muse over the possible targets to which it might apply” (6).

In this mechanism lies the key to understanding how Coetzee's criticism is so concerned with the “allegories” he presents. In the face of the vagueness, liminality and unresolved conflicts in his fiction, the reader projects the stories in his novels onto other stories which might make the work “understandable.” That procedure seems almost inescapable. As Turner claims:



Even stories exceptionally specific in their setting, character, and dialogue submit to projection. Often a short story will contain no overt mark that it stands for anything but what it purports to represent, and yet we will interpret it as projecting to a much larger abstract narrative, and one that applies to our own specific lives, however far our lives are removed from the detail of the story. Such an emblematic story, however unyieldingly specific in its references, can seem pregnant with general meaning. (7)

If a story of South Africa can be the story of a body, and the story of rape can function as the story of South Africa, one is understood by projection onto another. In those cases where the story is removed from direct relationship with the outside world (*Foe*) it is normally understood as representing *something* abstract in the outside world such as problems of language, gender, or colonialism. What is important, is that parable is seen not as an “inventive literary story, a subcategory . . . of fiction;” instead, it means “*the projection of story*” (7): “Parable, defined in this way, refers to a general and indispensable instrument of everyday thought that shows up everywhere, from telling time to reading Proust” (7). Indeed, Turner analyses the “patterns” and processes of parable and comes up with a list of characteristic qualities of a parable. These are: prediction, evaluation, planning, explanation, objects and events, actors, stories, projection, metonymy, emblem, image schemas, counterparts in imaginative domains, conceptual blending and language (9-11).

Where metaphorical thinking underlies metaphorical language expressions (everyday or literary), the mind constructs stories and projects them on other stories as part of its essential mental activity. Thus one can notice that, similarly, “the same basic mechanisms of parable underlie a great range of examples, from the everyday to the literary” (13). The basic “stories” then are spatial stories: “small stories of events in

space” (13). Once created, such stories can be projected “parabolically” onto others (15). They are created with the use of “image schemas,” the “skeletal patterns that recur in . . . sensory and motor experience” (16). One of the most common and basic ones, relevant for my considerations, is the image schema of a container. Two “most important” containers in human life are heads and bodies (16). According to Turner, simple schemas can be formed into complex image schemas. They are used to “structure . . . experience,” to “recognize objects and events and place them in categories” and naturally are the product of interaction with and perception of the outside world (16). Parable involves the projection of image schemas where “the (relevant) image schemas of source and target end up aligned in certain ways,” or, in other words, one image schema is mapped onto another (17). In such a way, for example, one can map part-whole relationships in the source onto the part-whole relationships in the target. The projection does not result in the “conflict of image schemas” but carries the structure of the source onto the target (17). It is therefore possible to map from the spatial onto temporal, for example. Indeed, Turner suggests that “[a]bstract reasoning appears to be possible in large part because we project image-schematic structure from spatial concepts onto abstract concepts” (18). As an example of such abstract parabolic mapping Turner presents the verb *to force*: it is an example of how “social and psychological causation are understood by projection from bodily causation that involves physical forces” (18).

A recognition of basic spatial stories would not be complete if the mind did not recognize categories to which both objects and events belong and if they were not related by being “structured by the same image schema” (19). Such stories can then be

recognized and the appropriate behavioural response selected. “Narrative imagining” is therefore the “fundamental form” of predicting, evaluating, planning and explaining (20).

Crucial for the understanding of Coetzee's work is the tendency of the human mind to ascribe animacy and agency to inanimate objects (20), even if scientifically or philosophically the projection of self-movement, sensation, causality or intention might be untenable. Turner's analysis of Aristotle's concept of the soul is interesting here, for his survey of various traditions “testifies to the antiquity and durability of recognizing actors as movers and sensors”:

This abstract concept of the soul is created by a parabolic projection. We know a small spatial story in which an actor moves a physical object; we project this story onto the story of the movement of the body. The object projects to the body and the actor projects to the soul. In this way, parable creates the concept of the soul. (21)

Turner's investigations are supported with references to empirical neurobiology. These include Damasio's model of convergence zones and attempts to find evidence for the existence of image schemas in the brain and Edelman's theory of neuronal group selection and its basis in “experiential selection.”<sup>56</sup> He draws heavily on the psychological works of Eleanor Rosch which provide “evidence for the role of image schemas in structuring perceptual and conceptual categories” and on Madler's attempts to investigate the development of image schemas in infants (24). Regardless of the significance and definitiveness of these attempts, Turner advocates the grounding of linguistic and literary concerns in the study of human mind: “narrative imagining, often thought of as literary and optional, appears instead to be inseparable

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<sup>56</sup> This is used to provide experiential basis for the category of containers (24).

from our evolutionary past and our necessary personal experience. It also appears to be a fundamental target value for the developing human mind” (25).

Parable's “projecting simple action-stories onto unfamiliar or complicated event-stories, extends the range of action-stories” (26) corresponds to Lakoff's proposed EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor, and also consists in a personification of sorts by adding an active agent. Each event has an internal image-schematic structure (aspect or “event shape” (28)), as well as a causal structure and modal structure (the relationship between its elements) (29). When the projection takes place from one story to another, for example from action story onto an event story, there must not be a “clash of image-schematic structures in the target” (30) according to the constraint referred to as the “invariance principle.” It does not demand that the initial target should be endowed with the pre-existing structure of the source, but only that “the result of the projection not include a contradiction of image schemas” (31). It is certain that often targets are not action-stories and event-stories are not always physical, as in the case of mental events (36). An idea is stereotypically not spatial and non-physical yet often, in its language representation, people speak of ideas in a way in which “an idea can correspond parabolically to an actor in a spatial action-story” (37). Such “embodiment” of abstract concepts figures prominently in Coetzee's fiction: in frequent reference to words coming “unbidden,” or refusing to “come,” or in presenting Nechaev as the “embodiment” of an idea.

The metaphor of EVENTS ARE ACTIONS leads to “projecting a story of action onto any kind of event-story, whether it has actors or not” where the action is primarily a “bodily” action (38). EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor, as outlined by

Lakoff and Johnson, can be thought as having a subset of ACTORS ARE MOVERS as a very “general” projection from which more “specific” ones could be inferred and – through use – conventionalized. It would thus work as a “dynamic, flexible, self-reinforcing pattern for projecting stories of body motion onto stories of action” (39).

After an extensive list and analysis of both metaphors and their common expressions in everyday language Turner turns to Reddy's study (1979) on the projection of manipulation into communication. The conduit metaphor is significant here, for Coetzee uses it to suggest that truth (the message, language) exists within a container. At the same time, Lakoff and Johnson's work on metaphorical coherence (1980, 87-105) allows us to see shared entailments between the various metaphorical understandings of a concept (argument as both journey and a container, for example). Since “shared metaphorical entailment” is able to establish a “cross-metaphorical correspondence” we can mentally equate “the amount of ground covered in the argument” (JOURNEY metaphor) and “the amount of content in the argument” (CONTAINER metaphor) (96).<sup>57</sup> And indeed, while Coetzee's characters are predominantly concerned with truth as existing within containers, journeys also play a part. That is obvious in the number of journeys they undertake (Mrs Curren is here an exception, unless we think of her journey in temporal terms, as a journey towards death) and in their equation of journey and the pursuit of some truth: in Jacobus's personal conquest, in Susan's travels, in the Magistrate's constant references to being lost on his way or taking a wrong turning. Equating the reading and deciphering of the

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<sup>57</sup> This works if we assume that the “message” Coetzee's characters strive to uncover and decipher is of the discursive, quasi-philosophical nature rather than is a mere piece of information whose content need not necessarily have the same “scope” or “depth” as that of an argument.

message in the novels with the manipulation of a body (of oneself or another person) is also relevant. Turner invokes Sweetser's investigations (1990) of cases where one projects “the action-story of movement and manipulation onto the story of thinking” (Turner, 43). The resulting metaphor THE MIND IS A BODY MOVING THROUGH SPACE suggests the importance of embodiment in the fiction of Coetzee and the attempts to find language messages or intellectual truths *within* the body. In Turner's list of examples a similar equation takes place. His analysis of Dante and Bunyan uncovers how we “interpret the travel story as literally spatial for the body of the traveler and parabolic for the mind of the traveler” (44). In Saint John of the Cross, Turner sees examples of a “projection of a spatial story of movement and manipulation onto a non-spatial story of religious transformation” (45). And in the *ouverture* to Proust's *À la recherche de temps perdu* Turner claims Proust “repeatedly asks us to project the story of a mover in space onto the story of a thinker.” As a result, “[m]ental states are physical locations, and a change from one mental state to another is a change of spatial location” (45). While Coetzee's examples are less explicit than Proust's, the grounding of the intellectual in the bodily, or the abstract in the concrete, is nothing extraordinary. As Turner observes, the “spatial and bodily instances” are “archetypes” for “many abstract concepts” (51). Indeed, he believes it is “plausible” that human understanding of “social, mental and abstract domains is formed on our understanding of spatial and bodily stories” (51).

In addition to a simple case of parable (target-case parable), where “one of the stories is a source and the other is its target” (67), and where the target is conceived through projection from source onto target, Turner presents more complex cases of

parabolic blending. Meaning in this theory arises from “connections across more than one mental space” (57). Blended space (for example, a talking animal in a story) is formed by inputs that cannot come exclusively from either source or target. The blend includes in itself “abstract information that is taken as applying to both source and target, such as schematic event shape and force-dynamic structure” and includes a projection from both source and target (59). In a story told to Shahrazad by her father, the first step is the creation of a blended space (personified animals, their actions and their consequences), and only then can such blended space be projected onto the target (Shahrazad and her plan). Each of the blended spaces has “input spaces” where we see a “partial projection from the input spaces to the blend” (60). Input spaces may exist in a source-target relationship, but this is not always the case. Most importantly “blended spaces can develop an emergent structure of their own and can project structure *back* to their input spaces. Input spaces can be not only *providers* of projections to the blend, but also *receivers* of projections back from the developed blend” (60). Of course, as Turner notices, in this case there is little (direct) projection from the source (donkey) to the target (Shahrazad): she is not to toil on the farm or eat hay. In the blended space (talking, scheming donkey) talking is projected back onto the target from which it was initially derived and the parable is to apply to Shahrazad. The blended space is characterized by a lack of “constraints of possibility” of the input spaces. Yet because of “specifics from both input spaces, the blended space can powerfully activate both spaces and keep them easily active while we do cognitive work over them to construct meaning . . . [and] develop a projection” (61).

Amongst numerous literary examples of blended spaces and their projection analysed by Turner is Dante's *Comedia*, which he describes as a “single monumental synoptic blended space” (63). It consists of a target – “the story of Dante's instruction in theology and philosophy” – and the source, “the story of a journey.” But the projection is not merely from journey to theology. Instead, its blended space “combines all aspects of the story of a journey with all aspects of the story of instruction in theology and philosophy” (64). Parable, thus understood, can be a conceptual construction where one story is the source and another a target, and a target is conceptualised by “projection from the source” (67). However, another possibility is that it uses a blended space, where “the source and target are *inputs* to the blend and . . . the blend can project back to the *source* and *target input spaces*” most often from “the blended space to *the target input space*” (67). It is also possible for input spaces not to be involved in a target-source relation. This may happen in sport, for example, where one boat race or sprint can be compared with another that happened in the past, but one can talk of one agent being behind and another being in the lead in one blended race that unites the present and the past. We project a structure between the old and the new event and create “a blended story of a boat race, where there are two boats . . . That blended story helps us understand the relationship between the inputs . . . gives us a way to integrate the entire situation into one blended story, without erasing what we know of its independent inputs” (68). Neither of them can be called a source or the target of the other, and “neither is conceived by projection from the other” (68). Thus Turner distinguishes input spaces and blended spaces. When different input spaces exist in a source-target relationship, they are called “*source input space*”, and



the “*target input space*” (68). The blended space of a race described by Turner has its own internal structure and is not created merely by “copying all of the inferences in the blend to the input space” (69) as the blended race contains the same elements (route) but also important differences (different teams, boats). Talking of each of those races in relation to the other, one uses selection and projects from the blend to an input space in a way that fits the input space. The same is presented in an example of a story about two Buddhist monks, where counterparts are not blended but the blended space is still able to integrate two distinct journeys (73).

Turner includes narrative commentary (Booth's “intrusions” (1983)) as an example of blended space. This redefinition of the narrative intrusion includes adding to Booth's analysis a third space, one existing, metaphorically, “between . . . the space of a story narrated and the space of narration” (74). Where Booth saw two spaces, Turner stresses that the blended space needs to be recognised as separate for “in general we keep the space of what is narrated and the space of narration separate, while blending them in a distinct blended space” (74). Such blended space is used by Coetzee in “Realism,” the first chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, where a chapter on literary realism formally questions the realism of its content by “skip[ing]” forward in time, by introducing a story with a quasi-meditation on its own opening, or else by analysing the reasons and effects of its own “skipping” and “interrupt[ing] the narrative” on the reader (16).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The narrator claims “skips” to be “not part of the text” but “part of the performance” (16). He also introduces a skip “in text rather than in the performance” (24) the double-entendre relating to the undescribed sex between John and Susan.

Blended spaces occur in everyday speech in counterfactual expressions (“If I were you...”), and in everyday speech and literature as personification (76). On the analysis of the blend of Death the Grim Reaper, Turner shows how there are no quantitative limits on the number of input spaces that create a blend: “A blend can have as many input spaces as can be mentally juggled.” (76). In addition, blends can be recursive, that is take place “in steps, so that a blend can be in input space to another blend” (76). They can use freely “causal tautology” (77) combine metonymic elements (80), and involve conventional conceptual metaphors (81).<sup>59</sup>

In the light of the above, I would like to suggest reading Coetzee's representation of the human body as a blended space. This space is created by input from two spaces. The first one is the level of the body. This consists of experiences of embodiment that Coetzee's characters undergo, experiences that relate both to the fact of embodiment and the embodiment of others: the experience of meeting the body of another person, attempts to understand them, sexuality (both one's own, and the relation it creates between people), ageing, illness, bereavement and the mournful longing for the body, torture, rape, repulsion, the impulse to understand, or to destroy. The second level is one of language and intellect: understanding, expressing in

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<sup>59</sup> Turner provides general principles for creating and developing blends in a parable. This can happen by completion, elaboration and composition (84). There are blends “exploit[ing] and develop[ing] counterpart connections between input spaces,” “[c]ounterparts may or may not both be brought into the blend, and may or may not be fused in the blend”, selective nature of blending, “recruit[ing] a great range of conceptual structure and knowledge without our recognizing it”, the fact that input spaces may be “difficult to discover” in the blend, the possibility of many input spaces contributing to the blend, the fact that blends can be created “repeatedly” and may form “inputs to other blends”, that they can develop its own structure which is not “provided by the inputs”, can use metonymic relations to combine elements, can use conventional metaphor normally in “partial, selective, and transforming” way, as well as the fact that “[i]nferences, arguments, ideas and emotions developed in the blend can lead us to modify the initial input spaces and change our views of the knowledge used to build those input spaces” (83).

language, imagining, deciphering, interpreting, or grasping “meanings.” While they could be expressed in a simple dyadic structure of sign and interpretation, such a reading risks allegorizing the text, finding reductive correspondences between images and the presumption of choosing meanings, where no authorial meanings are given by the narrative. What is necessary then is the blended sphere of the body: the speaking or signifying body, the body endowed with meaning; the body treated as a surface cover for the truth, as a kernel of human identity, as an object that can be read, interpreted, understood and grasped not in the physical but in the intellectual sense. The blend includes in itself several conceptual metaphors, most notably TRUTH IS IN A CONTAINER, and BODY IS A CONTAINER, whose mutual interaction leads the characters to conflate the two and pursue the significance and meanings of the body.

Parable, in Turner's understanding, “distributes meaning across at least two stories” (85). In the case of Coetzee the two stories are one of the body and another of language or of the “meanings” of events described in his fiction. Often, a parable uses another story, the blended space which can have more than two inputs and can be formed recursively. For Turner, a typical parable “distributes meanings over many spaces” (85). What is crucial here is the understanding of “meaning” in Turner's theory. Meaning does not “reside” in the stories, but is to be found “in the array of spaces and in their connections” (85). This understanding of meaning proves useful for understanding the body as blended space. In Coetzee's novels, just as in the theory of parabolic projection, meanings are not “mental objects bounded in conceptual places but rather complex operations of projecting, blending, and integrating over multiple spaces” (86). Coetzee's characters do not project from body onto language. Instead,

their projections can work from the two spaces into a blended space, from the new blended space back onto the two spaces where, redefined, they can be projected further. Thus it is possible for some characters to search for a body in language (Dostoevsky's interest in the materiality of Pavel's handwriting), and for others – more typically – to search for the language (meaning) in the body.

In addition to blended spaces, Turner introduces the notion of generic space in which resides the “abstract structure shared by input spaces” and which indicates “the counterpart connections between the input spaces” (86). Generic space has its own structure, which is created with the projection from “source story to a generic story” (87), and was previously expressed by Lakoff and Turner as **GENERIC IS SPECIFIC** metaphor (Lakoff, 1989). Here, Turner shows how generic-level information (often of an image-schematic nature) is “projected from a specific space to give structure to a generic space: “Of course, this generic space 'applies' to the specific space from which it came. Once the generic space is established, we may project it onto a range of specific target spaces” (87). In such a way, a proverb in its lack of generality, might be used in a variety of contexts. Often, where inputs repeatedly construct generic space, such space can come to structure input spaces as well and even “establish . . . fixed counterparts” (87). Such generic spaces (the structure shared by life and a journey, for example) may become conventionalised to the point where any generic-level structure sharing, or the existence of blended spaces may go unnoticed by the speaker and look more “like projection from one conceptual domain to another” (88). At other times, less conventionalised expressions may actively invoke the existence of blended spaces, as in a “walking encyclopedia” (89). The difference between generic and blended

spaces lies in the fact that the latter have “rich vocabulary” and specificity provided by the source and the target, whereas generic spaces have the structure, and vocabulary derived from their input space (90).

Generic space has a structure which applies to both input spaces. Kövecses (2010) sees its relevance as twofold: “either generic spaces can make metaphoric mappings between source and target domain possible, or two inputs will share abstract structure because a conventional metaphor has established that abstract structure” (271). In the example of the Grim Reaper, plants in the source have death counterpart in the target (dying). The structure has been created by the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS. This includes the notions of being alive and dying as well as being organic. The death of plants and the death of people are both instances of a more general notion of ceasing to live: “This enables us to see counterparts, or correspondences, between the two domains: between people and plants and between death as cause and reaper” (271).

As Kövecses notices, generic spaces are most easily found in proverbs (“Look before you leap”), as these, with their “generic meaning[s],” apply to a variety of situations that can be specified further: “What establishes the generic space between the leap-look domain and these other domains is the metaphors THINKING/CONSIDERING IS LOOKING (for the looking part) and the Event Structure metaphor (for the leaping part), where ACTION IS SELF-PROPELLED MOTION” (271). Turner further distinguishes between an emblem and an analogy (metaphor). An emblem is a parable which “starts from one story and projects from it a generic story that covers other stories belonging to the same conceptual domain” (*The*

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an emblem of a boy's adventure). In a metaphor “or analogy,”<sup>60</sup> “the generic space applies to a story in a different conceptual domain.” (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a story about the loss of innocence, political development etc.) (102). In addition, various parables and emblems may be characterized by varying levels of specificity. More general metaphors have more of the “general capability of projecting one story parabolically onto another” (105).

Such an understanding of metaphor and parable obviously determines the way we speak of meanings, including literary meanings. Parable is not a story whose elements directly match onto their meanings outside of the text. Instead, it involves the “dynamic construction of input spaces, generic spaces, and blended spaces, multiply linked, with projections operating over them” (106). While Coetzee's characters “unconsciously” project their meanings this way, they are, at times, also (and also “unconsciously”) projecting meaning on a “single residence” - the body. Both for them as literary characters and for the readers who “read” them, meaning is “parabolic and literary.” The examples invoked to explain blending point to the fact that “the dynamism, distribution, projection, and integration . . . in blending are actually central and pervasive elements of human thought” (106). This pervasive nature, Turner provisionally suggests, may have its origin in the structure of the mind and brain. In neuroscience, blending seems nowadays to be “fundamental” (110). Edelman (1989) claims that any unitary perception is merely the result of “parallel activity of many different maps, each with different degrees of functional representation” (43). Edelman specifically concentrates on the extra-striate visual cortex and the ability it has to

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<sup>60</sup> Here Turner uses “metaphor” as synonymous to analogy (102).

mediate in various ways form, motion and colour perception. Turner invokes the neuroscientific question of “binding” and Damasio's convergence model which overlaps to a large extent with Edelman's speculations. In Turner's words, in the convergence model, “the brain contains records of combinatorial relations of fragmentary records; the recall of entities of events arises from a reactivation, very tightly bound in time, of fragmentary records contained in multiple sensory and motor regions. Mental evocations that seem . . . unitary and solid are instead always fleeting reblendings of reactivated fragments in a very tight and intricate interval of time” (111). The model of abstract thought, projection, interpretation, and thus the understanding of literature, is for Turner intricately linked with blending. Like other theorists presented here, Turner is always trying to ground his insights in the biological sciences, and thus escape the “ungrounded” nature of the theories he criticizes. Blending is here seen as ubiquitous. It is a “basic process” (112). Meaning is primarily a construct of the human mind. It does not “reside in one site but is typically a dynamic and variable pattern of connection over many elements.” Our conscious experience “seems to tell us that meanings are whole, localized, and unitary” but this view is constantly dismissed: “Blending is already involved in our most unitary and literal perception and conception of basic physical objects . . . and in our most unitary and literal perception and conception of small spatial stories” (112).

One more way in which blending might be useful for understanding Coetzee's fiction is the light it might shed on what I have termed “two-way movement.” The human mind, when faced with inconstancy, and this Turner sees as a “mainstay of psychology, psychiatry, biography” as well as fiction, works “all the harder to rebuild

constancy across these spaces on the view that . . . this kind of constancy must hold” (135). In other words, the human mind is “fundamentally geared to constructing constancy over variation” in order to interpret and predict (136). In this light, it is significant that Booth's narrative intrusions, which break the constancy and are employed by the author to point to the constructed, abound in Coetzee's fiction: in the already mentioned authorial comments in *Elizabeth Costello*, more subtly in the ending passages of *Foe*, or in the use of English idioms in a Russian context (“chalk and cheese”), Magda's experience with planes, the literary references they communicate and the inconsistencies of her descriptions. They also surface in the building of expectations in the reader by presenting a character in pursuit of a goal (and one who has “grounds” to be positive about reaching it), and then denying the satisfaction of the expectation by a statement or an event that thwarts both the characters' efforts and the readerly expectations of a unified and constant meaning.

## **8. Attridge and Allegory**

One of the impulses behind this dissertation was Derek Attridge's *J.M Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Its attempt to bring literary analysis back to the encounter with the text and its encouragement of an “extrapolation” partly inspired this dissertation (xi). Attridge argues for the specificity (or literariness) of literature stemming from its ability to “stage[]” rather than argue, to “perform” and be performed. He foregrounds its active quality of “happening” rather than the passive one of being read, stressing the unpredictability of the “response.” This demands argumentation for literal (and



literary), rather than allegorising reading, one which preserves the singularity of, and gives credit to, the work of fiction without reducing it to a figure in another discursive system. Attridge thus sees literature as an “event” for “both its creator and its reader” (9). Similarly, the meaning of the event lies in the space where the text and the reader (defined as “not a free-floating subject but . . . the nexus of a number of specific histories and contextual formations”) meet: “the reader . . . brings the work into being, differently each time, in a singular performance of the work not so much written but as a writing” (9). In that context, the “meaning” of the text itself cannot be stationary. It is understood more as a “verb rather than a noun”: “not something carried away when we have finished reading it, but something that happens as we read or recall it.” This type of an encounter, and this understanding of meaning, is intimately connected to the understanding of language. It takes place “only because the language is shaped and organized, an active shaping and organizing that we re-live as we experience the literariness of the work” (9). The singularity of literature demands, according to Attridge, a response honouring that singularity which he terms “responsible” or ethical. This response “simultaneously reenacts and brings into being the work as literature and not as something else, and *this* work of literature and not another one”. It “takes into account as fully as possible, by re-staging them, the work's own performances – of, for example, referentiality, metaphoricity, intentionality, and ethicity” (9).

The argumentation against allegorical (by implication reductive) readings, would not make much sense had it not been for the ubiquity of those readings in

commentaries and secondary literature on Coetzee.<sup>61</sup> This approach is not embraced by Attridge who characterizes Coetzee's fiction as driven by a modernist self-reflectiveness. Attridge's emphasis is on the ethical dimension of literary experience. Literature matters not because of a capability of “mimicking our daily existence and the choices it presents us with” but because works of literature are “capable of taking us through an intense experience of these other-directed impulses and acts.” The “inventive literary work,” therefore, should be thought of as “an ethically charged event, one that befalls individual readers and, at the same time, the culture within which, and through which, they read” (xi-xii). The literariness of fiction rests in “stag[ing]” rather than argumentation (at home in other discourses), in the “perform[ance]” of the textual experience (xii).

Indeed, the emphasis on the inexpressibility of certain notions and the critique of language seems to be, for Attridge, one of the pivotal issues in Coetzee's oeuvre. Language is presented as incapable of presenting otherness and thus the novels in question problematize the usefulness of language for expression. Coetzee's formal inventiveness therefore wilfully interferes with the “transparency of discourse.” This formal aspect is also linked to the thematic notion of fictional otherness. Coetzee's use of language is “allied to a new apprehension of the claims of otherness, of that which cannot be expressed in the discourse available to us – not because of an essential ineffability but because of the constraints imposed by that discourse, often in its very productivity and proliferation” (4). While this claim is important as it stands, the inexpressibility Attridge talks about is not a *necessary* logical inference from Coetzee's

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<sup>61</sup> See Sue Kossew's *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee* or Head's *J.M. Coetzee* for an examination of the variety of allegorical readings Coetzee's fiction.

fiction. If language does not represent “otherness”, the idea that language is the object of narrative criticism is only partly true: theoretically, it could be argued that the quality of otherness may be equally responsible for the inexpressibility of this otherness. However, Attridge maintains that the problem does not lie in the “essential ineffability” of otherness, but given that the precise “nature” or “essence” is here never mentioned, it makes as much sense to talk of the “ineffability” of otherness (not necessarily, it must be added, “essential”) as to claim that the tool (language) is unfit for purpose. As will become clear later, I take this idea further while maintaining parts of Attridge's point: language is indeed criticised, but Coetzee's fiction is also filled with suggestions which (mis)lead the characters, and often, readers, to *both* consider the possibility of language failure *and* to see the reasons behind this failure in the ineffability of the body. Coetzee never seems to take sides: putting the blame on the ineffability of the body seems as possible as putting it on the limitations of language. Indeed, both notions seem to be maintained throughout Coetzee's oeuvre, and the tension and interest of his novels may lie precisely in this constant navigation and negotiation between language that might fail due to its own nature and the body which remains inexpressible. And if language's failure to represent otherness is due to the repressive power of discourse, it finds its narrative equivalent in the representation of the bodily repression of characters trapped and dissatisfied with their bodily form.

Attridge characterises Coetzee's “narrative technique” as constantly denying the reader “any ethical guidance from an authoritative voice or valorizing metalanguage” (7). The readers are, by extension, left in the dark as to how his characters are to be viewed or understood; they are “left to make difficult judgements

[them]selves.” This narrative technique is, I think, again reduced only to its expression in language: “At the same time, we remain conscious of these narrating figures as fictional characters, as selves mediated by a language which has not forgotten its mediating role, a language with a density and irreducibility which signals its rhetorical shaping, its intertextual affiliations, its saturatedness with cultural meanings” (7). The effect of this, for Attridge, is ironic: “For both these reasons, we can never remove the aura of something like irony that plays about these representations of human individuals – though by the same token we can never determine its strength” (7).

What appears to be partly missing in his reading is the *bodily* nature of Coetzee's fiction. Attridge acknowledges political readings of Coetzee's fiction as a side effect of South African politics and attempts to reconcile the “subject matter” (that may be political) with literary inventiveness. But even when depoliticised, Coetzee's novels still seem obsessed with the body. There is impotence, killing frenzy, rape, and painful anal boils in *Dusklands*; cancer, pregnancy, medication, alcoholism, and death in the *Age of Iron*. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is primarily devoted to torture, but political readings of its images do not emphasize enough the links of sexuality to aggression, torture and intercourse, desire for impotence, experience of prostitution, and the intricate descriptions of Joll's and Mandel's bodies. Michael K is disfigured by his cleft palate and hunger; Friday by his mutilated tongue, and perhaps by his castration. Dostoevsky searches for the truth inside the bodies he attempts to “read”. He is obsessed by the image of his son's body smashing on the ground; he attempts to find bodily traces of him in the smell of his clothes, and in the stains and marks of his journal. He is troubled by painful ageing, loss of virility, his own body odour, epilepsy

and rotten teeth. He is sexually aroused by the cross-dressing Nechaev, the motherly Anna, the tomboyish Finn, and perhaps by Matryona as well. David Lurie is a rapist of sorts; his daughter gets raped and he is set on fire. Paul Raymond is an amputee; a onetime lover of a blind woman. Magda is sexually frustrated, raped, murderous, and driven by hatred towards her body and its apparent monstrosity. Elizabeth Costello experiences the life of embodiment in various guises: as an object “read” by her son and her audiences; in discussions on essentialism and negritude, on Christian and ancient representations of the body; as an active agent performing oral sex on a dying man; as a victim of sexually charged aggression; as infected by evil upon reading literary depictions of historical violence; in the sentimentality of her animal rights campaign. If Coetzee presents failures of language, he also repeatedly presents bodily mutilation, traumatic bodily experience that this language attempts and fails to express, and with which the characters strive to be reconciled. To shift all importance onto the inflexibility and repressiveness of language is to overlook the inexpressibility and repressiveness of the body and embodiment. Even if not political, the emphasis on bodily mutilation *and* on the failure of language *together* may shed further light on Coetzee's fiction. The lack of authorial guidance is relevant in another way here: the suggestion of the futility of language is coupled with the suggestion of the enormity of physical suffering. The “constructedness” brought by language is counterpoised with the “reality” of the suffering body.<sup>62</sup> And finally, the failures of language are paralleled by the silence and unspeakability of the body. The interrogation of both spheres, rather than a single-handed concentration on the sphere of language, is what seems to me to

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<sup>62</sup> Reality not in the sense of presenting real historical events, but in the material sense of taking mutilation, disfigurement and bodily suffering as the “subject matter” of the novels.

be necessary and does not need to result in a reductionist, allegorizing and political reading. In my reading of Coetzee's fiction I am trying to present both those issues: on the one hand, the authorial problematization of language, a constant encouragement to the belief in language's capacities, and the parallel undermining of that belief; on the other hand, the suggested importance of the body, the role it plays in human life, actions, historical events or literary inspirations, the promise of transcendence and fuller "meaning," and the parallel movement to annihilate those expectations and reduce the body to a mechanism. That which I believe demands further investigation, therefore, is the space between the body and language: the attempts to read the body, and to embody and inhabit language, the craving for bodily understanding, and the inability to translate bodily experience into conceptual thought or language; the contrast between what is lived bodily as a "real" experience and what can be expressed in language; the unreality of the suffering of the other and the language repression that may result in real bodily suffering. It is from those unresolved contrasts that the fiction of Coetzee derives its strength.

Attridge refers to Coetzee's characters as figures "of otherness" (7). Any allegorical reading of this otherness (the author suggests, as an example, readings which equate Coetzee with Michael K) risk "bringing him [the character] within the circle of the same, overlooking the stylistic movements that keep him constantly opaque" (7). Those characters then, are seen as resisting "closure" (7). This is typical of Coetzee: "writing that signals its own limits and its own dangers, while opening itself to a future of unpredictable readings" (8). As noted earlier, seeing an act of reading as an "event," Attridge advocates reading that is "responsive" to the

“singularity” of the work (9). But what precisely is this singularity? The definition once again emphasises reading as a dynamic act: “The literary work is constituted (...) not by an unchanging core but by the singular fashioning of the codes and conventions of the institution of literature, as they exist and exert pressure in a particular time and place” (9). From this, the notion of singularity flows easily: “Its singularity is a uniqueness derived from a capacity to be endlessly transformed while remaining identifiable – within the institutional norms – as what it is” (9). Such singularity demands an ethically responsible reading approach. But how does this singularity relate to the supposed authority of a critical reading?

Coetzee's novels provide Attridge with the perfect field on which such responsible reading can be reenacted. Attridge, as he admits, argues for “an engagement with the text that recognizes, and capitalizes on, its potential for reinterpretation, for grafting into new contexts, for fission and fusion” (10). The singularity in question derives from the text which invites “new possibilities for thought and feelings it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from *inventiveness*” (11). Further, the “otherness” of the text is produced by its “singular inventiveness” relative to context (11). What happens in the process of reading? Attridge offers an interesting answer:

In order to be readable at all, otherness must turn into sameness, and it is the experience of transformation (which is the transformation of the reader's habits, expectations, ways of understanding the world) that constitutes the event of literary work. A reading that does justice to what is literary in a literary work . . . is one that is fully responsive to its singularity, inventiveness, and otherness, as these manifest themselves in the event or experience of the work. (11)

The demand the text makes may thus be deemed “ethical” since inventiveness and singularity can be seen as “a kind of ethical testing and experiment” (11). It seems then that Attridge divides human reading practices into two kinds: one (allegorizing) approach forces the translation of “otherness” into “sameness,” whereas the other, advocated by Attridge, respects the otherness of the text. At the same time, works of literature might be classified as those which make the translation easy and those which resist it. Coetzee's text seems to be one which makes demands and renders such transition difficult, and its results problematic. Coetzee's text is precisely an example of a work of art which, thanks to being “formally innovative,” most “estranges itself from the reader” and thus “makes the strongest ethical demand” (11). It does this, among other things, by “disrupt[ing] the illusions of linguistic immediacy and instrumentality” or by “thematiz[ing]” otherness “as a central moral and political issue” (12).

My claim that Coetzee's characters are mostly disabled and disfigured has its parallel in Attridge's view that they are “figures of alterity” in relation to “language, culture, and knowledge” (12). There is a difference between those two positions which will become obvious in due course. Body does not necessarily imply any alterity, since experiences of disease, sexuality or mortality are perfectly universal. Attridge further sees Coetzee as an author whose work attempts to “convey the resistance of these figures to the discourses of the ruling culture” (13). Once again, my dissertation parallels this idea by attempting to sketch the resistances which the body makes to discourse, although not necessarily in a “ruling culture.” Where our views differ, is over Attridge's claim that alterity is not a question of an “inscrutable mystery of the



unique individual” but an alterity to a universalizing and hegemonic discourse (13). While I agree that Coetzee's figures of alterity resist, or are untranslatable into, discourse, I am more interested in the recurrence of that bodily mutilation and physical suffering with which those figures are marked and how these characters present themselves and their readers with an “inscrutable mystery” which they attempt to understand and express in a language (any language) that is available to them. In other words, this is not only where they attempt to apprehend otherness, but also when they are at a loss about sameness. Many of the characters are not only interested in reading “alterity”; for most of them reading of their own embodiment, their own pain, disability or frailty produces challenges similar to those involved in reading others. For Attridge, the figures are silent and silenced but their alterity makes demands on the reader with its “intensity of its unignorable being-there.” For the author of this dissertation the “unignorable being-there” refers rather to the persistence of bodily experience, its alterity, its importance and its incomprehensibility and inexpressibility.

Attridge further states that Coetzee's success lies in “inhibiting any straightforward drawing of moral or political conclusions” (13). For myself, seeing Coetzee leading his characters in their belief in truth within and revelation through the body, and constantly thwarting their attempts at interpretation, I choose to see him as an author who “inhibits . . . drawing of . . . conclusions” but those conclusions refer more to the relationship of the mind (language) and the body than to the moral or political. The permanent “inhibiting”, termed 'two-way movement' here, refers to the narrative gesture of the author. Through the plot and the characters' obsessive interest in the body, bodily searches and experiences are all endowed with a promise of

meaning whose nature remains unclear. Certain narrative suggestions do indeed place the “meaning” in question within reach, only to deny fulfilment in the next move. Inhibiting of this sort does not present the characters' hopes merely as constructed projections. Indeed, the novels are based on the tension between language and the body: between meaningless and futile language (to this point I agree with Attridge) and suggestions of meaningful yet inexpressible bodily experience; between the suggested existence of other-than-intellectual meaning, and the denial of that notion which seems to point to the constructedness and projection-based nature of this hope. At the same time, while I share Attridge's negative views on the reductiveness of allegorical readings, I shall attempt to explain the ubiquity of such readings by analysing the tension and links between the body and language, and specifically between the character and the importance of the unspeakable and mute body as an overdetermined metaphor easily inviting allegorical readings of various sorts, yet not honouring any of them. The mute, speaking or signifying body, whose muteness and whose “truth” are powerful forces, invites the reader (following the characters) to ascribe significance to the body.<sup>63</sup> This power and influence, coupled with its muteness and emptiness, both invite easy allegorization *and at the same time* reject all allegorical interpretations as a forced translation of alterity into sameness. Where Attridge presents the benefits and surprises of reading literally and responsibly, I am trying to explain the reasons behind *irresponsible* and *reductive* interpretations. These

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<sup>63</sup> Some of Coetzee's novels are described by Attridge as creating the power of reality so strongly that they “enable[] us to be moved by the thoughts and feelings of an imaginary character” and “share” their feelings (25). Much of the ethical approach to fiction implicitly suggests readerly identification, or at least “respect” for fiction that is almost human.

are not merely political. In large part, they stem from the representation of the body in Coetzee's novels.

One of the aspects of this fiction, which I term “two-way movement,” is present in Attridge's book in various guises, but never receives much attention. In his analysis of *In the Heart of the Country*, for example, Attridge presents the emotional outburst of the protagonist followed by an “ironic self-undercutting” (29) when it turns out that the addressee of the words has left some time earlier. Interestingly, Attridge does not extrapolate such instances on a larger scale: they remain instances of speech whose significance is thwarted by the introduction of the mundane.<sup>64</sup> For Attridge, these are “moments at which the character talks himself or herself into a new mental position, a new constellation of thought and feeling, with no guarantee that the addressee will take the slightest notice – with the likelihood, in fact, that the alterity of the addressee will be underscored all the more” (29). Instead of seeing it merely as a matter of speech, I would like to suggest that similar underscoring is present in non-communicative situations (monologue does not “break” against the alterity of the other), but also can be presented in characters' propositional attitudes towards their experience. Their assumptions, projections, and interpretations of the body and its significance are frequently undercut and thwarted by a new insight contradicting them. Often, the contradiction of the initial proposition is thwarted again, leading characters either to a return to the initial proposition, or, alternatively, to another one that navigates between the two impossibilities. This wavering and denial of the validity of their ideas only occasionally manifests itself in dialogue. Indeed, it covers a wider

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<sup>64</sup> He finds similar examples in the *Age of Iron* and one in *Dusklands* (29).

range of phenomena of which the passages quoted by Attridge are merely the dialogue-based examples.

In his rejection of political interpretations of Coetzee, Attridge focuses on language to the extent that the depictions of the body and questions of embodiment remain unanalysed. The alterity he investigates is openly described as “not an otherness that exists *outside* language or discourse” but instead “an otherness brought about into being by language, it is what two thousand years of continuously evolving discourse has excluded – and thus constituted – as other. Not simply *its* other, which would, as an opposite, still be part of its system; but heterogeneous, inassimilable, and unacknowledged” (29). This Derridean insight rests on the assumption that “language . . . has played a major role in producing (and simultaneously occluding) the other” (30). It is not entirely clear what Attridge means by this statement: whether he suggests that feelings of being “the other” were produced in language rather than that language reflects (and later codifies) exclusion resulting from the primary cooperation and competition patterns of organisms within populations, or whether he sees social reality as created on, and derivative from, the model of phonemic distribution. Either way, the choice of language as a “major” agent is symptomatic of his critical emphasis on language and his partial neglect of the body or any pre- or extra-linguistic reality. Linguistic and textual alterity demands, according to Attridge, a special mode of reading. This “textuality” is a “verbal artifact that estranges as it entices, that foregrounds the Symbolic as it exploits the Imaginary, that speaks of that which it has to remain silent” (30). While I find the notion uncontroversial, I believe that further investigation of the complicated interrelationship of the body and language in

Coetzee's fiction might produce an even fuller picture of the ways in which such textualterity is created, and the reasons behind the popularity of allegorical readings of the author.

Allegory is presented by Attridge as “one of the terms in the critical lexicon most frequently applied to Coetzee's work.” The author distinguishes two types of allegory: universal (where “the novels are said to represent the truths – often the dark truths – of the human condition” (32)), and more specific which “translate[s] . . . distant locales and periods into the South Africa of the time of writing.” The second type “treat[s] fictional characters as representatives of South African types or even particular individuals” (33). The fact that allegory is referred to in the text (as when the Medical Officer refers to K as “allegory” etc) is taken by Attridge as “throw[ing] some doubt . . . on allegorical readings of the work more generally” (34). However, such “self-reflexive gesture[s]” are not only “encouragement[s] from fiction,” but are accompanied by also “problematiz[ing]” (35) and constantly “frustrat[ing] the allegorizing impulse” (Attwell 132) which never fully override invitations to allegory. Attridge quotes from Coetzee on literature not “playing games” of “Male Domination” or “Class Conflict” and he characterises his own position as not avoiding all interpretation but avoiding “certain *kinds* of interpretation” (36). Explicitly, Attridge contrasts the allegorical readings and “the urge to allegorize Coetzee” with literal reading characterised by event-shape experience of the text (39):

What I am calling a literal reading is one that is grounded the experience (sic) of reading as an *event*. That is to say, in literary reading . . . I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific

history, go through. And this is to say that I do not treat it as “something” at all; rather, I have an *experience* that I call *Waiting for the Barbarians* . . . It is an experience I can repeat, though each repetition turns out to be a different experience and therefore a non-repetition, a new singularity, as well. (39-40)

It is unclear whether the experience of alterity or otherness is singular and belongs to a specific event or is repeated in various of Attridge's readings. Accepting that his own reading may more resemble J. Hillis Miller's parable and its performative power, Attridge further theorizes his reading practice. What seems striking is that such reading practice here looks like reading without conclusions, without a divorcing of the reading subject from the text. It is an act of reading that – faced with textual ambiguity – refuses to “understand” the work in any way or openly conceptualize it:

I have two choices . . . I can deploy reading techniques that will lessen or annul the experience of singularity and alterity – and this will usually involve turning the event into an object of some kind (such as a structure of signification) – or I can seek to preserve the event as an event, to sustain and prolong the experience of otherness, to resist the temptation to close down the uncertain meanings and feelings that are being evoked. In both cases, I am concerned with “meaning,” but in the first case I understand it as a noun, in the second as a verb. I can, one might say, *live* the text that I read. This is what I mean by a literal reading. (40)

In this heavily metaphorical passage Attridge prizes the experience of reading as such and advocates a return to close reading. At the same time, every interpretation seems to objectify the text to be interpreted, even as it acknowledges its alterity. Attridge places himself in a position where Coetzee's works seem to him representations and performances in “alterity” which should not be made into sameness or interpreted. It is not clear how such a position differs from an unthinking enjoyment of a popular novel and a readerly focus on “what happens” without attempts at extrapolation or any

interpretation of any kind. The question of alterity as an event is problematic as well. What presents an alterity for a reader of Barbara Cartland may not connote 'other' for Attridge. Secondly, is a sweeping conceptualization of Coetzee's oeuvre as dealing with alterity and otherness not an allegory in itself, albeit one that refuses to fill in the blank space and provide it with "meaning"? When Attridge presents Coetzee's fiction as inviting allegorical reading, for example by its "lack of specificity in a work's temporal and geographic locatedness" that "encourage[s] the reader to look for other kinds of meaning" (40) the impulse to allegorize might be resisted in a variety of ways: out of boredom, lack of knowledge of the English language, wanting to learn "what happens next," carelessness in noticing the fact. Do all of those constitute ethical and responsible reading? And how is saying "this book is wilfully vague and invites easy allegory but I shall resist the impulse" different from saying "this book is allegorical and space may stand for a, b, c, d, or many others"? The only difference seems to lie in the fact that Attridge's position is viewed as an informed, professional choice in which ethical reading relates to an experience of reading which is subjectively better than an uninformed reader trying to, for example, read a book in a language they do not know. Attridge's reading practice is akin to the situation of Coetzee's characters in the world of the body. As happens with them when an experience is expressed in language, or they attempt to comprehend it intellectually, it always eludes us as something else. It seems that the bodily 'truth' in Coetzee, and a responsible reading practice, both exist in the sphere of bodily experience that dies when expressed in language that translates singularity into sameness.

There are other complications in Attridge's position. Literal reading is characterized as one which "defers interpretive moves" and therefore is not allegorical but does justice to the singularity of literature (60). At the same time, decontextualised reading is both impossible and unwelcome: "literal reading *fails* if the reader is not possessed of the necessary contextual information. Literal reading needs all the history . . . it can get" (60). The distinction between deferring interpretive moves and not being able to make any interpretive moves is in practice problematic. Presumably Attridge has in mind some kind of return to the text and its close analysis rather than easy allegorizing especially when, as suggested, the development of "critical tools" has taken us away from the text itself and engagement with it (61).

Part of the experience of reading Coetzee can be "*the event of the allegorizing reading*" (61) since Coetzee often "[has] staged the allegorizing process" in his work (62). Thus one "can be doing justice to the singularity and inventiveness of a literary work through the operations of its meaning – irrespective of whether we arrive at some stable allegorical scheme." The advocated response, it seems, is to "become conscious of the power and allure of allegory, of the temptation to generalize or codify meaning, and at the same time gain heightened awareness of the specificity and contingency of language and human experience as these resist such generalizations and codifications. In fact, a responsive reading . . . will always be alert to the possibility of allegorical meaning" (61-62). In the light of this it seems that the mistake readers can make is to unthinkingly allegorize and thus succumb to the invitation provided by the novel. Such readerly response is then akin to the biggest mistake characters in Coetzee's fiction make in unthinkingly allegorizing the body as the seat of truth. The mistake lies not in



the interest in the body and its valuation but in the attempt to *interpret* the body at all costs, an attempt that results in mistranslation and does no justice to bodily experience.

Partly presenting Coetzee's novels as allegories of otherness, which stage both otherness and their own allegorical character, Attridge advocates the value of “openness of the moment and to the future, of the perhaps and the wherever” (64), the unknown possibility of literature rather than known actuality of reductive allegory. Thus when Attridge argues *against* allegory he seems to be arguing against the *result of allegorical readings*: the forced translation of the text into “meaning” that does away with the particularity of the work, and brushes over and assimilates the irregularities of the text. He, therefore, argues against the practices undertaken by some of the characters. At the same time Attridge does not argue against recognizing the work as having the potential to be allegorized, as long as the “allegory” as a final and definitive “product” of allegorical reading, a product with pretensions to closure, is not produced. Taking my cue from this position, I would like to analyse *what precisely* makes Coetzee's works so pregnant with the possibility of allegorization (which I identify with the image of the body), and to present it as a reason behind so many allegorical readings varying in their degree of specificity. At the same time, neither Coetzee, nor Attridge, nor myself will fill the figure of the blank body with meaning, but will rather present the potential for meaning. What I hope this dissertation offers is an analysis of the narrative strategies and human thinking processes that result in readings and interpretations of a particular kind, but equally result in the elusiveness that is one of Coetzee's greatest strengths.

## Chapter 2

### Metaphor and Truth: Reading the Body.

#### *Waiting for the Barbarians and Life and Times of Michael K.*

In his book, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson suggests that the disabled body in fiction is “easily assimilable to an allegorical reading,” and that its representations carry with them the “potential for immediate allegorization” (173). I would like to analyse how such allegorization happens on the example of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K.* Both novels share the theme of reading of another person's body, both present the reader with well-intentioned interpreters, and both show these interpreters as seeing in disability and mutilation the “ciphers of a metaphysical or transcendental meaning” (173).<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the novels invite the reading of both themselves, and their characters, as “ciphers” of “meaning.” Their use of the image of the body presents the interpreter with a “potential for immediate allegorisation” that seems to be evidenced by the number and variety of allegorical readings of Coetzee's fiction.

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<sup>65</sup> The two novels differ in that the Medical Officer explicitly presents his final interpretation, while The Magistrate does not.

*Waiting for the Barbarians*

“Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.” (5)

“I must be tired,’ I think. ‘Or perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put.’ . . . ‘Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through.’ I stare at this last proposition . . . The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning” (70).

*Waiting for the Barbarians* is the story of a man troubled by doubt living in a place and at a time where doubt is synonymous with treason.<sup>66</sup> Doubt and the will to understand are his defining features. His failures to understand the regime, the identity of the oppressed and the oppressors, history, and himself are the leading themes of the novel. Much of the quest for truth is inspired by the body: the real suffering he encounters as a witness, victim and metaphorical torturer, and by the reading of his own sexuality and ageing. The novel interrogates the effects of torture suggesting the significance of embodiment for personal identity. Inscrutable and unrepresentable, the body is contrasted with language. For the Magistrate, it represents true history against misleading language accounts. It invites his reading as both a container for, and a veil over, personal identity. It uncovers the emptiness of abstract theories of ethics and justice. In its capacity to induce “mystical” states, it offers a promise of transcendence.

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<sup>66</sup> This lack of specificity has invited allegorical readings. For Dovey, the novel “clearly represents a particular phase of South African colonial history” (209) whereas the Magistrate’s actions “should be read as allegories of the attempts, the limitations and the failures of this discourse [liberal humanist] itself” (213). For Head, the text is an “extended moral parable” (4). While often read as “ethical universalism” Attwell sees here a “strategic refusal of specificity” (73).

For the protagonist, it stands as a figure of truth. While the novel does not assert the existence of truth or stable identity, the Magistrate invites the readers to see these as accessible through the body, as if pain stripped the subject of cultural and social constructs. The two way movement invites to see what is inside as fundamental and inexpressible, but undercuts it by suggestions of the projection upon the mute body which is all that exists.

My aim is to analyse the images of the body in the novel and the suggestions of “body knowledge” gained through sentient experience. I first present the Magistrate's readings of the torturers' bodies. Later, my focus is on the bodies and identities of the victims. The Magistrate occupies the liminal position: he is simultaneously an accomplice (a figurative torturer), a witness, an opponent, and a victim. I shall try to show how the text invites reading his experience as inspired by the body, and his body as having ethical and political consequences. Extended treatment will be given to torture where the narrative suggests that body-limit experience allows for the “glimpse” of “meaning,” but simultaneously rejects any positive identifications, or even existence, of such meaning.

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) provides a theoretical background for the reading of torture. Her account of the distance between victim and torturer, between pain and language underwrite my analysis. For Scarry, pain is a paradigm of the metaphysical distance between human subjects; it signals “the absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons” (4). One's own pain needs no proof and is a paragon of “what it is to “have certainty.”” The pain of another is impossible to grasp. Unavailable to confirmation, it exists as “the primary

model of what it is “to have doubt”” (4). The gap between the certainty offered by one's own body and the doubt existing outside of it is exacerbated by pain's resisting language or “actively” destroying it. In torture one can observe a permanent or temporary “reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). This gap is also widened by pain's non-intentionality. In opposition to other mental states, the “capacity to move out beyond the boundaries of . . . [one's] own body into the external, sharable world” (5), does not exist for pain.<sup>67</sup> Thus, pain is not “*of or for anything*”: “It is precisely because it takes no object that it . . . resists objectification in language” (5). Any description of pain necessarily entails the use of the language of metaphorical agency (“feels as if”). The body is thus often experienced as the “agent” of its own pain. The non-intentionality equates “my body hurts” with “my body hurts me”” (47). This figurative “self-betrayal” is used in torture: forced exercise makes “the prisoner’s body an *active* agent, an actual cause of his pain”<sup>68</sup> Solipsism and withdrawal within oneself is evident in the Barbarian girl's refusal to discuss her experience and exists as a residue of the “shrinking” of the world in torture: “It is the intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe” (Scarry 35). As the prisoner’s world is shrinking, the torturers' world is

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<sup>67</sup> Scarry's is not a universally held position. For arguments in favour of treating pain as intentional see: Armstrong (1968), Tye (1995), and Crane (2001) among others.

<sup>68</sup> In the novel, exercise is forced only on the Magistrate. On this issue Scarry writes: “Part of his sense of body as agent comes . . . when his failure to sustain the prescribed posture or exercise brings from the torturer another form of punishment; but, for the prisoner . . . the most emphatic and direct exhibition of self-agency comes from the exercise itself” (47).

expanding. They are endowed with reasons, motives, selfhood and occupations outside the torture room (37).

The disintegration of the prisoner's world is often accompanied by destruction of language. This might lead to the collapse of the mental, and expressible, sense of self. For Scarry, torture "make[s] emphatic the ever present but, except in the extremity of sickness and death, only latent distinction between a self and a body." Thus "the goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it" (49). This institutes the split between language and the body. In the novel, bodies are "emphatically . . . present" to the point of being seen as containers for truth. With their capacity for speech destroyed, the Magistrate's descriptions imply the existence of bodily "consciousness" and "language" emergent from pain. But as they remain inexpressible, pain and its "language" are appropriated by the regime which organizes its own existence in a narrative of inflicting pain and protecting itself from it.

David Attwell sees history in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as no longer "an absolute horizon of consciousness" but "a structure of ideas . . . that has *failed*, moreover, to transform the terms of discourse" (*J.M. Coetzee* 72). I would like to suggest that what allows such failure, prohibits closure and the possibility to "figure" the historical process (unless as "an ideological resource . . . in the hands of the Empire" (72)) is the image of the inexpressible and mute body that contrasts with "history-as-myth" available in language. Imperial history relies on the body in order to construct its myth. Mistranslating and misrepresentating it in its hegemonic discourse,

the Empire uses Scarry's "analogical verification" (13) that relies on metaphorical structuring of an abstract idea as a body. In Scarry's example "the sheer material factualness of the human body" is "borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of "realness" and "certainty"" (13-14). In the novel, the Empire substantiates itself by the "reality" afforded by the suffering body. Pain created by the Empire, endows its creator with "incontestable reality" (27). Yet, torture is used precisely because "the reality of that power is so highly contestable" and "the regime" is "so unstable" (27). Thus, as the Empire needs barbarians to sustain its existence, it uses their pain in "compensatory" torture (328) to prove the "realness" of the threat they pose. The suffering body exists in imperial history as a structural element: its pain forms the foundation on which the Empire is built.

### **Reading Torturers:**

#### **Joll and Mandel**

The Magistrate's reading of the torturers uncovers the gap between language and the body. Their language misleads and misrepresents; the promise of truth offered by the reading of their bodies is unfulfilled: the Magistrate is left with fruitless speculation, and his intimations of meaning are immediately mistranslated when conceptualized and expressed.

The unreliability of language begins with his reading of the official register in which Joll's arrival on "emergency powers" (1) as a "Warrant Officer in the Third Bureau" is paraphrased: "what does that mean? At a guess, five years of kicking and

beating people; contempt for the regular police and for due process of law; a detestation of smooth patrician talk like mine” (85). Those “guardians of the State, specialists in the obscurer motions of sedition, devotees of truth, doctors of interrogation” investigate the barbarian threat which, according to the Magistrate, exists only on paper (9). The unreliability of language is carried further when Joll's “procedures” lead to a death of a clearly innocent prisoner (4, 6).

By contrast, the Magistrate's lesson on certainty offered by the body endows it with the ability to speak. Where “[p]ain is truth” and “all else is subject to doubt” (5), the prisoner's mutilated body constitutes physical proof against the lies in the official report in which his death is described as accidental. The Magistrate's visit to the cell uncovers falsifications in Joll's language as does the later sight of a tortured boy whose forced confession of “guilt” becomes official “truth” codified in language. Similar discrepancies surround the arrest of members of the wrong tribe.

When language misleads, the Magistrate hopes to successfully read the body. Here, the first obstacle is provided by Colonel Joll's prototypical sunglasses which metonymically define him: “they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them” (1). Like the Empire, Joll, the agent of pain, protects himself from suffering: the “glare of the sun,” “squinting,” “headaches” and “wrinkles.” Never taken off,<sup>69</sup> the glasses come from the capital (“[a]t home everyone wears them” (1)) and function as an alliance symbol. The erroneous suggestion of Joll's physical blindness (1) has been often allegorised by the critics who read him as “ethically blind, as is the empire”

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<sup>69</sup> The exception of his last appearance in the text does not dispel his unreadability: “sitting in the dim far corner, rigidly averting his face” (159).



(Penner 77). The glasses conceal Joll's identity placing him in the privileged position of seeing but not being seen. They allow an inexpressible, unreadable, face (“[b]efore prisoners, it appears, one maintains a certain front” (3)), and mind (14). His “cryptic silences,” and the “paltry theatrical mystery of dark shields” (4) shield him from being read and maintain the aura of authority.

Joll's obsessive care of his body (“skin of a younger man” (1), “tapering fingernails,” “mauve handkerchiefs,” “slender feet in soft shoes” (5)) presents his body as carefully performed (“hands clasped before him like a woman” (4), sitting “carefully uptight”) and his behaviour as purposefully staged (“[Joll] knows how much his affectations irritate [the Magistrate]” (25)). The theatre references are not surprising in the light of Scarry's analysis of torturers' “display of agency.”<sup>70</sup> Being forced to look at the instruments of torture or old blood stains, being treated to the theatrical display of the torturer's body, the display of agency is a calculated “grotesque piece of compensatory drama” producing an even stronger “illusion of power” (27-28).<sup>71</sup> Theatre references are even more explicit in relation to Mandel who looks at others like “an actor looks from behind a mask” (84). During the interrogation of the Magistrate he is dressed up in conspicuous insignia of his office, continues “his pretence of reading the documents” (84) in a staged performance: “He is trying, though somewhat too theatrically, to make a certain impression.” His behaviour, looks, and his office “are all meant to say something” (90). This something is both power (“he is in charge”) and the need for acknowledgement: “he knows how to comport himself in an office, knows even how to introduce a note of functional elegance” (90). Their

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<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere he is imagined “murmuring to his friends in theatre corridors” (5-6).

<sup>71</sup> Old soot stains in the cell function as part of such a display in the novel (86).

artificiality and “theatrical” performances deny the human body its “natural” subjectivity in which the Magistrate believes: “I picture him sitting up in bed beside a girl, flexing his muscles for her, feeding on her admiration. The kind of man who drives his body like a machine . . . ignorant that it has its own rhythms” (84). Theatricality is here equated with vanity: Mandel spends more time “polishing his straps and buckles” (127) than torturing prisoners.<sup>72</sup> Even in torture his display of agency is narcissistic. Where Scarry describes torture victims “made to examine the size of the torturer’s fist” (27), Mandel demands that his body be admired: “‘Do you see this hand?’ . . . He holds his hand an inch from my face. ‘When I was younger’ – he flexes the fingers – ‘I used to be able to poke this finger’ – he holds up the index finger – ‘through a pumpkin-shell’” (129).

While Joll's glasses hinder reading, Mandell's eyes are endowed with the promise of meaning of his inner self: “I look into his clear blue eyes, as clear as if there were crystal lenses slipped over his eyeballs. He looks back at me. I have no idea what he sees” (129). The Magistrate's reading of the two bodies yields no result: the existence of “depth” is repeatedly posited (“clear eyes, windows of his soul . . . the mouth from which his spirit utters itself” (137)), but the reading fails to penetrate the container reducing the Magistrate's speculations to projective guesses. When the body is treated as readable surface, evil is imagined as a “mark” on it (129) thus sharing entailments of both text and uncleanness: “I find myself wondering . . . whether he has a private ritual of purification . . . behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully . . . or change all

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<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere he is rendered as “[v]ain, hungry for praise . . . A devourer of women, unsatisfied” (92).

his clothes” (13). Evil is structured as a lethal illness: “I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day . . . If I were he . . . my hands would feel so dirty that it would choke me” (138). In the face of the intellectual failure, the Magistrate's attempt to “grasp” the truth residing in the torturer's body is embodied in the literal grasping of his arm, but, in its two-way movement, the narrative frustrates expectations of closure when Mandell shakes the Magistrate off, and the passage introduces the mundane contrasting with the emotional intensity that precedes it (138). Thus, while the body remains the “key” to understanding the torturers, such understanding is never achieved.<sup>73</sup>

The results of such readings are expressed in the final meeting with Joll. Here, the characteristic failure of language renders the Magistrate's painfully trivial and his theory of “latent” crimes remains a guess as good as any:<sup>74</sup>

I have a lesson for him that I have long meditated. I mouth the words and watch him read on my lips: ‘The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves,’ I say. I nod and nod, driving the message home. ‘Not on others,’ I say: I repeat the words, pointing at my chest, pointing at his. He watches my lips, his thin lips move in imitation, or in derision, I do not know. (160-161)

The failure of the mind to understand, and of the language, to express the nature of Joll are accompanied with foregrounding of the body. The Magistrate's “body language,” however, expresses little else than the understanding of the mind and morality as metaphorically inside the container of the body.

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<sup>73</sup> Later, the Barbarian girl is, similarly, “the only key . . . to the labyrinth” of understanding (95).

<sup>74</sup> Penner suggests that the Magistrate manages to “overcome his hatred by envisioning in Joll the child who became the murderer” (86). The ambiguity of the scene certainly invites a multitude of other speculative reading.

## Reading Victims

### The Barbarian Girl

The girl's blindness situates the Magistrate in Joll's privileged position of seeing but not being seen (28). Whereas she has the “look of something that knows itself watched” (36); he is “only a blur, a blank,” “a voice, a smell, a centre of energy that . . . falls asleep washing her feet and the next day feeds her . . . and the next day – she does not know” (31). As Joll's glasses, her blindness invites metaphorical reading: while she is of central interest to him, he remains “on the periphery of her vision” (31).<sup>75</sup>

The hope of successfully reading her identity and the past is offered by the scars on her body: “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (33). The attempts to recover the girl's pre-torture body or the “image of her as she was” (36) before “the doctors of pain began their ministrations” (51) fails. The project is not helped by conversations with witnesses and visits to the torture scene (“What signs can I be looking for?” (38)). When expressed, the story is insignificant and partial (“I am tired of talking” (44)). The Magistrate is overwhelmed by the intimations of mystery, “something [that] has fallen in upon [him] from the sky, at random, from nowhere.” This feeling is unrequited: to her it is “all one whether [he] lie[s] down beside her and

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<sup>75</sup> Blurred vision characterizes his inability to “read” her later: she becomes a “featureless . . . figure,” while his interpretations are frustrated with a “reluctance” and “resistance” to remember her or attempts to “obliterate” her from his memory (50).

fall[s] asleep or fold[s] her in a sheet and bur[ies] her in the snow” (47). Her indifference renders projective hypotheses concerning her unverifiable; her submission “may be nothing but indifference” (60).

The Magistrate's fascination with her identity coexists with treating her as embodied history. The two fascinations demand two approaches: seeing the girl as a container and as a surface. The former is frustrated by the latter, although the container imagery is frequently juxtaposed with the surface and depth imagery sometimes combining the two into a single image. Thus recurrent images of the girl featureless or veiled can become three-dimensional: “face filming over with skin. Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry. I shudder with revulsion” (45). Elsewhere, as when trying to recall her face, the Magistrate summons an image that wavers between surfaces and containers: “a faint sense of the presence of the girl, an aura begins to emerge . . . I make out her shape . . . It is like caressing an urn . . . something which is all surface” (52). The body functions both as a surface (the text on which the Empire wrote its history) and as a container for identity, impenetrable insofar as the girl does not allow entry to her “centre.”

The reasons for the Magistrate's desire for the girl remain “obscure” (70). His interest “has confounded [him] from the beginning” (77), and remains unexplained by “raptures she may promise or yield” (70). Quayson sees the girl's disability as producing “a structure of impossibility” wherein an “erotic encounter” with the disabled is impossible (226). This confusion is counterpoised by repeated references to the girl's meaning and the significance of their relationship. In the scene of their

parting, for example, the sense of finality promises unspecified revelation: “This is the last time to look on her clearly face to face, to scrutinize the motions of my heart, to try to understand who she really is: hereafter, I know, I will begin to re-form her out of my repertoire of memories according to my questionable desires” (79). Such expectation built by the text is immediately thwarted in the logic of the two-way movement and the girl's body remains only the body devoid of deeper meaning: “There is only a blankness, and desolation that there has to be such blankness . . . I see only too clearly what I see: a stocky girl with a broad mouth and hair cut in a fringe across her forehead staring over my shoulder into the sky; a stranger” (79). The description rephrases the Magistrate's initial impression of the girl: “black hair cut in a fringe across the forehead . . . broad mouth” and “black eyes that look through and past [the Magistrate]” (27) suggesting the lack of progress in his search. He appears to understand more in torture, although the ephemeral “insight” remains visceral and the intimations of meaning, expressed in language, amount to little. His speculation concentrates on the effects of pain on her identity:

Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her. I too, if I live long enough in this cell . . . will be touched with the contagion and turned into a creature that believes in nothing. (88-89)

The anti-Cartesian belief that extreme suffering alters one's identity to the point of no return sees embodiment as central to identity. Non-falsifiable, the Magistrate's hypothesis might merely continue his “swoop[ing] and circl[ing] around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her” (89). Soon all that remains is the memory of his “oiled hands sliding over her knees, her

calves, her ankles” (94-95) while the girl's body gets forgotten: “[f]rom her empty eyes, there always seemed to be a haze spreading, a blankness that overtook all of her” (94). While her identity is inexplicable (“Not from the moment when I stopped before her at the barracks gate and elected her have I known the root of my need for her; and now I am steadily engaged in burying her in oblivion” (95)), his ambiguous dreams invite allegorical readings. She appears in them as “two shapes” which “arouse horror”: “massive and blank, they grow and grow till they fill all the space in which [he] sleep[s]. [He] wake[s] up choked, shouting, [his] throat full” (95-96).

### **The Magistrate: Complicity and Opposition**

The Magistrate's reading of himself places him in the position of being simultaneously the Empire's reluctant accomplice and its reluctant opponent. As Joll's opponent, the Magistrate is not a heroic man of conscience consciously opposing barbarism. He never pursues moral perfection. A victim of circumstance, he gets “embroiled” (8) in history and is forced to make choices without willingness or conviction. Critical of Joll's incompetence (18-19), he is repulsed by Joll's cruelty: “Once I thought him lazy, little more than a bureaucrat with vicious tastes. Now I see how mistaken I was. In his quest for truth he is tireless” (23). Set in his parochial ways (2), he is aware of the persona he projects. The torturers, described as full of “the arrogant candour of . . . graduate[s] of the War College,” see in the Magistrate, presumably, “a minor civilian administrator sunk, after years in this backwater, in slothful native ways, outmoded in his thinking, ready to gamble the security of the

Empire for a makeshift, insecure peace” (54). He is critical of their ignorance and its consequences. Their refusal to see the problem of water supply is the case of misguided loyalties; their burning the bush is counterproductive (“the wind begins to eat at the soil and the desert advances” (89-90)); and their “general offensive against the barbarians” (53) is self-defeating when the enemy’s tactics consists in flooding the fields: “What is the use of textbook military operations . . . and punitive raids into the enemy’s heartland, when we can be bled to death at home?” (110). Despite his resentment and opposition, he is still the man of the Empire and sees its superiority: the “barbarian way” remains for him “intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death” (56). His opposition to the Empire results from laziness, dislike of change, and an attachment to steady routine (8). Driven by a desire to be undisturbed (56) and live and die “in ease” (82), he finds himself carried along rather than making conscious moral choices.

Such involvement is precipitated by the signifying mutilated body: the sight of the beaten boy’s “angry” wounds (4, 10), the corpse of the old man who, officially, “fell heavily against the wall” (6), which tells a different story: his “lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken” (7), and the girl’s reluctant mention of “a kind of fork with only two teeth,” of the torturers “putt[ing] it in the coals” and of blinding (44). Finding himself unable to return to the state of ignorance, the evil observed “infects” him: “I would like to be able to stop my ears to the noises coming from the



yard below . . . I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering” (22-23).<sup>76</sup>

This complicity of being a passive spectator “stop[ing] [his] ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary” (9) is never actively resisted.<sup>77</sup> Atonement is metaphorically expressed as washing and cleaning: the attempt to restore the town to its previous state. Such “obliteration” full of “new intentions, new resolutions” is seen as a prerequisite of a “new start” after which “there would be no more injustice, no more pain” (26). Inspired by guilty conscience (“I cannot deny it, the memory leaves me sick with myself”), the attempt is futile and misunderstood: “The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble” (26).<sup>78</sup> His hope for meaning “reveal[ing]” itself is as passive as is the break of his alliance with the Empire and his 'atonement' forced upon him after a false accusation and his arrest. Being recognized as an enemy of the state partly cleanses his conscience (“There is a spring in my walk as I am marched away to confinement . . . my alliance with the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition . . . I am a free man” (86)) as does later accusation of Joll (“there were no border troubles before you came”) and the Magistrate's expressed wish to see this “obscene torturer” hung (125).

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<sup>76</sup> Knowledge as infection by evil is directly analysed by Elizabeth Costello, and indirectly as knowledge as possession by Dostoevsky. It is also analysed later in this chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Apart perhaps from the unsuccessful “pleading” for the wounded boy (4).

<sup>78</sup> While Dovey (1988) sees the Magistrate as the “conscience of the society” I think it is a mistake to claim that he sees himself as “the blameless one” (223) and “assuming himself . . . to be free of guilt” (236). In fact, she contradicts herself when she claims that the Magistrate seeks to “expiate[] his . . . guilt” (223) which is often “incapacitating” (209).

### **The Magistrate reads himself: Torturer or witness.**

Similar inconclusiveness characterises the Magistrate's reading of himself in relation to the Barbarian girl: "I behave in some ways like a lover . . . but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate" (46). He is simultaneously "enslaved" by her and "responsible" for her (46, 47). He functions both as a torturer in the private sphere, an owner of a sex slave, and carer striving to make reparations. The first role implies minimal distance from Joll, even if "full" distance is even theoretically impossible: "[W]ho am I to assert my distance from him? I eat with him, I drink with him . . . I afford him every assistance as his letter of commission requests, and more" (6). During the encounter with the tortured boy, the Magistrate's charitable gesture is clouded by such lack of "distance": "I cannot pretend to be any better than a mother comforting a child between his father's spells of wrath. It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive" (8). For the boy, they both represent the same power.

Such political affiliation with Joll threatens to become personal in his relationship with the Barbarian girl. Indeed, there are suggestions of the impact of politics on the Magistrate's sexual life and of sexuality on his political stance. His offer of a place to sleep and of work ("to . . . tidy, to see to my laundry") as a replacement for the "not satisfactory" cleaner (28) is a badly disguised proposition that is thus understood: "She understands what I am offering. She sits very stiff, her hands in her lap" (28). Her understanding of his language does not get reciprocated in his

understanding of her body: her gesture, a bodily self-definition of herself, escapes him: “‘You do not understand. You do not want someone like me’ . . . ‘I am ...’ – she holds her forefinger, grips it, twists it . . . ‘Can I go?’” (29). On his second attempt, the sexual nature of his proposal is clearer:<sup>79</sup>

‘This is not what you think it is,’ I say. The words come reluctantly. Can I really be about to excuse myself? Her lips are clenched shut, her ears too no doubt, she wants nothing of old men and their bleating consciences. I prowl around her, talking about our vagrancy ordinances, sick at myself . . . The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible; I shudder. (29)

Their relationship consists in attempts to read her body, endowed with the hope of learning the truth. The hope that it can be uncovered is, however, repeatedly thwarted.

The girl's mutilation is of main interest: “Show me what they have done to your feet” (29). Her passivity allows the Magistrate to explore her body: “I work at the thongs and eyelets of the coat . . . pull the boots off . . . Inside them her feet are swaddled, shapeless . . . They are broad, stubby, the nails crusted with dirt” (29-30).<sup>80</sup> The examination of her feet (“That is where it was broken. The other one too” (30)), is followed by washing:

I wash slowly, working up a lather, gripping her firm-fleshed calves, manipulating the bones and tendons of her feet, running my fingers between her toes. I change my position to kneel not in front of her but beside her, so that, holding a leg between elbow and side, I can caress the foot with both hands. (30)

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<sup>79</sup> Some critics disregard the Magistrate's sexual motives altogether. Penner, for example, sees in the Magistrate nothing more than an “essentially benevolent master” of the girl (79).

<sup>80</sup> For a theoretical account of torture-induced passivity see: R. B. Ullman and D. Brothers *The Shattered Self: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma* (1988) or Shirley Spitz “The Psychology of Torture” (1989).

Biblical imagery mingles with sexual undertones: *caritas* and sexuality are simultaneously suggested, but neither motivation is dominant. Her “large, puffy, shapeless” feet with the “skin scarred purple” (31) are examined in what becomes a daily “ritual of washing” (32) that later extends to her whole body:

I wash her feet, her buttocks . . . I wash her armpits. I wash her belly, her breasts . . . I rub her body with almond oil. I close my eyes and lose myself in the rhythm of the rubbing . . . [I]n the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body, and wake an hour or two later dizzy, confused, thirsty. (32-33)

The girl's passivity (“she is patient,” “yields to everything,” “slips off to sleep before I am even finished” (32-33)) does not contrast with the Magistrate's activity: his lack of desire (“My soapy hand travels between her thighs, incuriously, I find” (32)) and charitable impulse (“I spread a blanket over her, and a second blanket” (32)) do not escape his attention.<sup>81</sup> His fetishism invites allegorical reading as a psychosomatic revolt against the Empire.<sup>82</sup> In Freud, fetishism stems from castration anxiety, whereby a fetish functions as a “substitute for the woman's (mother's) phallus” which the subject “once believed in and does not wish to forgo” (Freud 199). Originating in a denial designed to protect from the possibility of loss, fetishism involves the construction of an imaginary unconscious compromise:

In this world of psychical reality the woman still has a penis in spite of all, but this penis is no longer the same as it once was. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed as its successor . . . and now absorbs all the interest which formerly belonged to the penis. (200)

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<sup>81</sup> The closest they get to a sexual intercourse in this part is when the Magistrate “rest[s] [his fingers] on her sex . . . and begin[s] to caress her.” She soon “push[es] [his] hand away” and the Magistrate “experience[s] no excitement” (47). See 32, 35, 36.

<sup>82</sup> Given that, for Dovey, the Magistrate represents “the liberal humanist writer” (216), his “ministrations to the . . . girl” are seen by her as an “allegory of an act of writing” (239).

In a fetishist, the fear of castration is “ward[ed] . . . off” by “creating the fetish” (201). If so, the Magistrate’s fear of castration, successfully overcome and latent, resurfaces upon his encounter with the Barbarian girl. While the “normal prototype of all fetishes is the penis of the man” (204), the Magistrate’s fetish becomes the girl’s feet, her scars, and her entire body that is denied fully human status: “The thought of the strange ecstasies I have approached through the medium of her incomplete body fills me with a dry revulsion, as if I had spent the night copulating with a dummy of straw and leather” (50). As Freud relates sexuality to violence, the girl bears the mark of two mutilations: once as a woman, in the unconscious, and as a victim of torture. The Magistrate’s lack of desire is suggested as a result of an unconscious equivalence of penetration and aggression: it is thus an act of differentiation from Joll aiming at widening the distance “between [himself] and her torturers,” that is once seen as “negligible” (29).<sup>83</sup> According to Quayson, the fact that disability “short-circuits desire” happens precisely because the origin of the girl’s mutilation is “traceable to the regime of state-sponsored violence and torture to which the Magistrate has inadvertently subscribed” (226). The feelings of guilt are metaphorised as repulsion towards the dehumanised “obstinate, phlegmatic body” (45)) and “resentment” against the “bondage to the ritual of oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into

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<sup>83</sup> Dovey invokes Girard to present the Magistrate’s desire as mediated by Joll, and his failure to recall the girl’s body prior to torture as a result of his failure to have his desire “unmediated by the oppressor” (239). While this is a useful reading, I suggest reading his actions not as mediated but equivalent and the public sphere (torture) as having its equivalent in the private sphere (sexual slavery). Dovey claims, the Magistrate has “*explicit* recognition of the way in which he has allowed his desire to be mediated” (240) and she sees his “*complicity*” only in “the way in which his desire has been mediated by the oppressor” (244). This does not account for his clear admission of complicity (“envy, pity, cruelty, all masquerading as desire”) and his “confused and futile gestures of expiation” (*Waiting* 135).

oblivion . . . I become withdrawn, irritable . . . I shudder with revulsion” (44-45). The impotence (not knowing “what to do with the woman in his bed” (63)) is initially overcome through “reassuring experiment[s]” (47) with a prostitute, although the effect of the barbarian girl is soon overwhelming: “The evening has been a failure, the current of renewed desire is broken” (50). The “bird woman” carries no guilt of complicity in mutilation. With her “odour of orange-blossom,” the world of “soft bird-like flurries” and “suave pleasures,” the “elegance of her tiny body” contrasts with the “incomplete” (45) Barbarian girl.

The equation of sex and torture, and of himself and Joll, are expressed in a passage navigating between container and surface imagery: “with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back to and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was?” (46).<sup>84</sup> Seeing in her “as much a prisoner as ever before” (60) the Magistrate accepts his guilt:

‘What do I have to do to move you?’: these are the words I hear in my head . . . Does no one move you?; and with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me. (47)

The recognition of the lack of distance between the “dark cellars” and his bed (47-48) is made more complex when the Magistrate factors in his charitable motives:

I gave the girl my protection, offering in my equivocal way to be her father.  
But I came too late, after she had ceased to believe in fathers. I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation: I will not deny this decent

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<sup>84</sup> Such equivalence is highlighted by the suggestiveness of the language: the Magistrate “interrogate[s] [his] desire” and penetration (“pierc[ing] the surface”) is followed by descriptions of torture as “burn[ing],” “tear[ing]” and “hack[ing]” one’s way “into the . . . body of the other” (46). Another is the location of the torture chamber in the granary, a place of sexual liaisons (13).

impulse, however mixed with more questionable motives: there must always be a place for penance and reparation. (88)

The Magistrate's role in relation to the girl remains unreadable: it is never clear whether he is her “guardian albatross” or a “coward crow afraid to strike while its prey yet breathes” (89).

### **The Magistrate reads himself: victim.**

In pain, the Magistrate interrogates his identity, politics, and ethics. Yet, despite numerous suggestions of the centrality of body-limit experience, pain and its effects fail to translate into communicable discourse. The novel wavers between the suggestions of the body's meaningfulness – where the Magistrate's failure to read it is individual and has with no wider 'metaphysical' significance – and the suggestions that the body means nothing beyond itself, in which case his failures stem from the allegorical, and projected, nature of the “meaning.”

His arrest results from the wilful mistranslation of his visit to the barbarians (85), of his advice to Joll (12-13) and his criticism (54). Solitary confinement in darkness dehumanised him: he “shield[s] [himself] against the light when . . . the door is flung open” (86-87). Dirt reduces him to the body: he attracts cockroaches “lured by . . . this fountain of flesh giving off its multifarious odours of life and decay” (87). Voice becomes alien (“lips feel slack and useless”) and he turns into an animal “guzzl[ing] [his] food like a dog,” feeling “bestial life” turning him “into a beast” (87). While the cries of past victims “beat[ing] from wall to wall” do not “materialize” (87),

the physical proximity to them brings renewed attempts at understanding. Without the “freedom to make of the girl whatever [he] felt like . . . at whim, because [he] had no duty to protect her save what it occurred to [him] to feel from moment to moment” (86), he feels more empathetic: he imagines her as a child “brought in here and hurt before her father’s eyes; who watched him being humiliated before her, and saw that he knew what she saw,” but he still “shrink[s] from the details of what went on in here” (88).

The Magistrate's identity dissolution begins with being turned into a “beast or a simple machine” (93). Clinging to humanity involves desperate action: pacing, counting, “rush[ing] around the cell jerking [his] arms about, pulling [his] beard, stamping [his] feet” (93). The reduction to the body is implied through descriptions of the stench and diarrhoea. Abstract concepts are traced to their origin in bodily experience: “What freedom has been left to me? The freedom to eat or go hungry; to keep my silence or gabble to myself or beat on the door or scream . . . I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (93). Animalised, his stomach rumbles “like a cow’s,” the guard attends to his “animal needs” (97). In this “misery of being simply a body” (96), there is a constant emphasis on the body: “I smell of shit . . . The flies follow me everywhere, circling around the appetizing sore on my cheek” and on animality “movement of my hand has become as automatic as the flick of a cow’s tail” (127). The body also brings relief: when he “rest[s] [his] hand on his [the boy’s] shoulder” (94) at times he is fed, he feels the “healing power of the touch run through a body grown stiff with unnatural solitude” (101). After two months, the short-lived escape to the bird-woman is motivated more by the craving for touch



than by hopes for freedom (105). Feeling “the faint afterglow of her warmth” on her bed, “bury[ing] [his] face in the fragrance of her clothes” (101) provide a metonymic closeness to the body.<sup>85</sup>

The transition from an observer to a participant in pain is occasioned by the “patriotic bloodlust” (114): the public flogging of new prisoners.<sup>86</sup> The sight inspires bodily reaction: the spectators “drink in the sight of these big naked men being beaten,” their faces respond with “curiosity so intense that their bodies are drained by it and only their eyes live, organs of a new and ravening appetite” (115), they “press forward to take a turn” at beating (116).

The notion of evil as infection is raised when both the spectators' gaze and the Magistrate's non-involvement (“stop[ping] [his] ears to the noise”) result in being “contaminated by the atrocity” (114). While the avoidance of being “poison[ed] . . . with impotent hatred of . . . perpetrators” might suggest remaining “in his heart . . . not a barbarian” (114), it is a repetition of the Magistrate's earlier failure to hear cries of torture. His confused intervention results in pain: though insignificant, it symptomatically triumphs over words and renders his views on morality inexpressible. His attempt to breach the gap between language and bodily experience and represent the moral implications of inflicting pain fails when the Magistrate utters disconnected phrases (117) and is silenced: “What I wanted to say next I cannot remember . . . I pursue the thought but it eludes me like a wisp of smoke” (118). Pain destroys language (“Words fail me” (117)) not allowing the expression of his visceral “twinges

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<sup>85</sup> This fetishistic metonymy is repeated in the the *Master of Petersburg* in the smelling of the white suit.

<sup>86</sup> Coetzee does not refrain here from the representation of suffering describing the “loop of wire [that] runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (113).

of doubt” (118). More significantly, it destroys his beliefs: even later his ethical position does not account to more than the “archaic code of gentlemanly behaviour towards captured foes” and opposition to “the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees, confused and disgraced in their own eyes” (118).

While confinement reduces the Magistrate to animal, bodily, existence,<sup>87</sup> pain provides invitation to allegorise the body through suggestions of its essential “certainty” against doubt. Thus, abstract notions of ethics and justice disappear when the “head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it.” The irony (“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” (126)) can be partly dispelled when his words are read as foregrounding embodiment, and highlighting the primacy of what the Magistrate and barbarians have in common (suffering body), rather than their contingent differences. Their humanity (the “essence” of being human) consists in embodiment; the fullest understanding of this fact is gained in pain, in Mandel's inhuman “lesson in humanity” (127).

Mock execution takes such lessons to the extreme. Drawing on castration symbolism (the Magistrate, wearing a “woman’s calico frock” is told to “behave like a man” (128)), it reduces him to his instinctual core: his bowels “turn to water” (128-129), his heart is “hammering,” he breaks down and his last words express a basic idea: “with the nausea of cowardice in my mouth, I say: ‘I want to live . . . To live and live and live. No matter what’” (130).

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<sup>87</sup> The animal metaphors used here echo previous descriptions of the girl thus uniting them in pain. Her scar “as though a caterpillar lay there with its head . . . grazing” (33) is akin to his: “The wound on my cheek . . . is swollen and inflamed. A crust like a fat caterpillar has formed on it” (125).

Up to this point, the Magistrate's abstract theorizing has turned to nothing when pain uncovered the gap between language and the body. This time, the text invites allegorical interpretation by including a vision whose ambiguity uncovers the practical difficulty of literal reading. Part illumination, part hallucination, the vision arrives at the moment of expected death. It begins when the primacy of body has been established, and the language destroyed. It suggests unmediatedness and immediacy of truth as the vision stems from the blended space of the speaking body:

I try to call out something, a word of blind fear, a shriek, but the rope is now so tight that I am strangled, speechless. The blood hammers in my ears. I feel my toes lose their hold. I am swinging gently in the air, bumping against the ladder, flailing with my feet. The drumbeat in my ears becomes slower and louder till it is all I can hear. (131)

In the moment of imminent death, Coetzee suggests the language of the body speaking the “truth” through a vision:

I am standing in front of the old man, screwing up my eyes against the wind, waiting for him to speak . . .  
I watch his lips. At any moment now he will speak: I must listen carefully to capture every syllable, so that later, repeating them to myself, poring over them, I can discover the answer to a question which for the moment has flown like a bird from my recollection . . .  
The girl . . . too is waiting for him to speak.  
I sigh. ‘What a pity,’ I think. ‘It is too late now.’ (131-132)

After situating him “face to face” with “truth,” and intimating an imminent revelation, the novel breaks any expectations by the intrusion of the mundane: “I am swinging loose. The breeze lifts my smock and plays with my naked body. I am relaxed, floating. In a woman’s clothes” (132). The eyes of the barbarian chieftain turn into the “blue eyes of Mandel,” and another ordeal begins:

I feel a terrible tearing in my shoulders as though whole sheets of muscle are giving way. From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow . . . the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright. (132-133)

This suggestion of the body as only literal, which breaks the vision, is in turn rejected by the suggestion of the partly figurative notion of “body language.” For Scarry this is the “destruction of language,” “the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans” (Scarry 6). The ironic comment treating the screams as “barbarian language” (133) can be taken as true. Dominic Head states that “[b]y Joll’s logic . . . this would make the barbarian language the language of truth, since it is heard, here, as the tone of pain” (*J.M. Coetzee* 82). The dismissal of such language “as Other” can be true as well, but the ‘Otherness’ Head posits is not merely “barbarian,” but relates to the otherness of language and the body (82). The Magistrate experiences true history inscribed on his body and unmediated by the official discourse. Crucially, there is no record of his ordeal: “you are not a prisoner . . . How can you be a prisoner when we have no record of you?” (137). His ordeal is officially non-existent with only his body bearing proof. While Gallagher points out that Coetzee “suggests the power of the written record to obscure the origins of oppression” (*A Story* 120), it has to be remembered that he also suggests reading the body as resisting language and bearing its own immediate record.

## Body knowledge: morality

There are problems, however, in reading the body as trustworthy and unmediated, and physical evidence as resisting misreadings. Indeed, while language originates in the body and every language record partakes in the body's materiality, the truth of the body is silent without language. That the two are not entirely opposed is clear on the example of ancient slips which are both immediate and mediated. In the scene of interrogation, his deciphering of the script is analogical to his reading of the girl's scars. The "translation" uncovers both the absurdity of the charge and problems inherent in language accounts. Interpreted as letters describing a situation akin to recent events in the fort, they are presented as allegorical: they can be read "as a domestic journal," "as a plan of war" or "turned upside down . . . as a history of the last years of the Empire" (122). Individual signs are similarly ambiguous: "It is the barbarian character *war*, but it . . . can stand for *vengeance*, and . . . it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended" (122). While this 'translation' problematises misreadings in language, it does so on the example of physical evidence, suggesting the inescapable mediatedness of expressing physical experience, the potential for misreadings, and the ephemerality of physical evidence (the slips fall apart). Those problems become central in the Magistrate's life post-torture, in his attempts to verbalise his experience.

Regaining freedom, the Magistrate moves from the life of a "filthy creature who . . . licked his food off the flagstones like a dog" (136) to slow acceptance: people are soon eager to hear his story ("[a] fool in love is always laughed at but in the end

always forgiven”), allowing him to “sing[] for [his] keep” (139). His scars make them “surreptitiously fascinated” (140), but the expressed story of pain (141) fails to do justice to his experience. The listeners’ failure to grasp pain renders his a narrative of “half-truths” (139).

The first “lesson” concerns food: hunger becomes his main fear after the stay in prison where all his thoughts were directed “to food”: “I lived from one mealtime to the next. There was never enough . . . I bolted my food like a dog and wanted more” (140). The change is lasting: he spends his days thinking of food, wanting to be fat, “never to know hunger again,” “woo[ing]” and “flatter[ing]” to secure it (142). This is a recognition of the fragility of the body and the priority of its needs.

The second change concerns the Magistrate's attitude to sex. During his ordeal he foregrounded the soothing quality of touch: dreams of women were dreams of “someone who would come . . . and take the pain away” (140). The bird woman offered “sympathy” and “kindness,” comfort beyond what language can express (“what can I possibly say?”), and a haven “away from the empire of pain” (24).

The initial spells of impotence coincide with the appearance of the Barbarian girl and while they are not seen as age-related, their cause escapes him: “It is not that something is . . . happening to me that happens to some men of a certain age . . . but time has broken, something has fallen upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere” (46-47). The continued interest in the bird-woman (“I drift into erotic reverie, grow hot and swollen . . . linger over her body” (48)), leads him to the examination of his sexual history: from the times when “easy morals of the frontier” turned him into a “well-fed prize boar” through the increased interest in “work . . .

hobbies . . . cartography” (48) to the obsessive marvelling at the oddity of sex (50).

David Attwell has offered a Barthesian reading of the Magistrate's two relationships:

The “bird-woman” is readerly, giving herself over to the agency of the Magistrate; the barbarian girl is writerly, admitting no access to an imagined, fecund essence. So the barbarian girl will simply not be delivered up to the Magistrate’s probings; her otherness cannot be domesticated. (*J.M. Coetzee* 79)

However, the bird-woman can also be thought of as writerly and admitting no access to her “essence.” The Magistrate remains on the level of her “playacting” and her “performance;” he is interested only in “[his] own pleasure” (50). He enjoys “be[ing] lied to” (45), and does not care if she “believes in the role she plays” (49-50). She offers him not a readerly body, but the illusion of readability: his reading does not concern her “essence” but a surface appearance of a show staging of its own “authenticity.” The Magistrate’s surprise at her departure “with her fellow” (140), making him feel “as if something had struck [him] . . . in the breast. A blow” (141) comes from the realization of having been denied access to her true identity. I would like to suggest that most bodies in Coetzee's novels are “writerly,” all thwart attempts at appropriation even if they are suggested as readerly.

The bird woman is sometimes a distraction and sometimes a creature allowing “floating into . . . oblivion,” a “whip[ing] out” of “senseless hesitancy.” Their liaisons leave him with the “mind washed . . . blank,” having to “reinsert [himself] into time and space” with “a deliberate effort” (69-71). The Magistrate sees his later lack of interest as a “matter of age, of cycles of desire and apathy in a body that is slowly cooling and dying” (49). This explanation overlooks the role of the Barbarian girl, the

suggested links between sexuality and aggression, or the envy at being unable to “engrave [him]self upon her [the barbarian girl] as deeply” as Joll (148).

With time, sex with the bird woman brings “guilty feelings” (60). This is followed by taking the Barbarian girl back to her people. The ambiguity half-invites reading this as somatization of the Magistrate's refusal to participate in the crimes of the Empire, but such reading appears to be both rejected and supported. On the one hand, an accidental bumping into the girl in his dream is too weak to hurt her and is followed with “I need not have been anxious after all” (149). On the other hand, there is a repeated self-interrogation of himself as a torturer driven by sadistic impulses.

Similarly ambiguous is the Magistrate's attitude to his body. Desire is seen as a non-intentional burden (163). His erections are “an irritation” or “like rheumatism” (164). His visit to a herbalist and figurative herbal “castration” might be read as a moral rebellion against the Empire and a refusal to participate in its scheme. Ironically, as evasion, the act is reminiscent of the passivity of closing his ears in the previous position of non-involvement. But such reading is immediately questioned: the Magistrate drinks the concoction “half-heartedly, aware that [he is] misinterpreting the signs” (164).

### **Body knowledge: The Empire and Politics**

Torture brings an increased awareness of history. His meditation begins with a vision of immersion, part of surface and depth imagery: “I wade deeper, parting the reeds with my hands, feeling the cool slime between my toes; the water, holding the



warmth of the sun longer than the air, resists, then gives away, before each stride” (145). The vision receives an immediate reading: “I am not unaware of what such daydreams signify . . . Without exception they are dreams of ends: dreams not of how to live but of how to die. And everyone, I know, in that walled town sinking now into darkness . . . is similarly preoccupied” (146). With the exception of children,<sup>88</sup> everyone inevitably shares the imperial understanding of history:

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. (146)

The structure of the Empire involves, as in Cavafy’s poem, the existence of an enemy to justify and sustain it. The Empire is thus built on the “pyramid of bones” (146), its officers “reach the top only by climbing a pyramid of bodies” (92). The metaphor becomes literal when the inhabitants find that the fort is built on old graves, perhaps poisoning their water (162-163).<sup>89</sup>

The recognition of one's role in history is more confused. On the one hand, the Magistrate perceives himself more as Joll's double: “I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold and rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of Imperial rule, no more, no less” (148-149). The lie of the belief in

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<sup>88</sup> According to the Magistrate, children believe in the order and never-ending cycles of nature. His Barbarian lover is repeatedly referred to as a “girl” in his story and appears as child in his dreams. The recurrent image of a barbarian child shaping the unpopulated Empire, and the Magistrate's attempts to see her face, invite non-literal readings in their ambiguity.

<sup>89</sup> This is a change from the opening passages of the novel where the Magistrate claims “There are no human remains among the ruins. If there is a cemetery we have not found it” (16).

peace contrasts with the truth of colonialism; the belief in peaceful border relations with a clear demarcation of who is of the empire and who is barbarian. His lie is made more pronounced by the suggestion that his dislike of Joll makes him downplay the threat of barbarian attack. But his lesson is one of confusion: “I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into a heart of the labyrinth” (149). The lessons of pain do result in learning: he sees in an “unteachable” core at the centre of each human being (157):

No one truly believes . . . that the world of tranquil certainties we were born into is about to be extinguished. No one can accept that an Imperial army has been annihilated by men with bows and arrows and rusty old guns who live in tents and never wash and cannot read or write. (157)

Confusion characterises the Magistrate’s relation to justice. He admits to some form of ethical intellectualism in the past: “We cannot just do as we wish . . . We are all subject to the law, which is greater than any of us. The Magistrate who sent you here, I, myself, you – we are all subject to the law . . .” (152). The Platonic dichotomy of the “world of laws” and the “world of second-best” (152), previously went unquestioned: “I had no doubt . . . then, that at each moment each one of us, man, woman, child, perhaps even the poor old horse . . . knew what was just: all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice” (152). He also understands evil as uncleanness and infection, but also believes in visceral and instinctual recognition of what is good and evil bad (138). From this perspective, however, Joll and Mandel remain inexplicable, and he admits how devoid of conviction his past occupation was: “‘When some men suffer unjustly,’ I said to myself, ‘it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it.’ But

the specious consolation of this thought could not comfort me” (153). It is forever unclear whether he reads his ordeal as “bearing the shame” for the suffering of barbarian prisoners.

One other effect of torture is the strengthening of his love for the land. The novel repeatedly suggests meaning in nature. The lesson provided by pain is thus of a visceral and emotional link and connection to the land, reminiscent of the cord experienced by K (145). Such connection offers protection (“I have walked this road . . . and come to no harm”), while the body has the power to detect possible danger: “If there were strangers [barbarian soldiers] here I would feel it in my bones” (145). Such love of the land constitutes a return to an untenable philosophy of peaceful coexistence (“peace at any price” (15)) questioned earlier. It naturally contrasts with rational knowledge of the Empire or recognition of its precariousness on barbarian land. The Magistrate oscillates between his self-professed naivete and a more rational assessment of reality, never really choosing one position over the other, disregarding their incompatibility, lost and confused as ever.

### **Voice of Illumination**

The Magistrate actively searches for an unmediated illumination of the truth that lies beyond his reasoning. The “answer” to the unspoken question are often felt to be immediate and present, and because they are never expressed, they disturb literal reading and invite allegorical interpretations. During his stroll in the desert, musing on history, he is described as “waiting for spirits from the byways of history to speak to

him” (17), trying to find in the “vacuousness of the desert a special historical poignancy” (18). This hope is akin to the medical officer's waiting for “transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning” (*Life* 158), and K's anticipation of the voice. In the Magistrate's case, the voice refuses to appear in the analysis of the ancient script, through proximity to barbarian ruins, and the torture chamber. Several passages, however, suggest potential for non-literal meaning without specifying it. During a hunting excursion<sup>90</sup> when he comes upon a waterbuck, it is not literal hunting but the potential for the grasping of the suggested mystery that is foregrounded:

With the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things, time even to turn my gaze inward and see what it is that has robbed the hunt of its savour: the sense that this has become no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim; that for the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things. (42-43)<sup>91</sup>

The precise meaning of the invited allegory in which “events” are not to be read literally but as “stand[ing] for other things” is never explained. The meaningful yet inexpressible experience induces visceral feelings of “of not living [his] own life on [his] own terms” (43). The Magistrate's body experiences something “significant,” whose significance does not extend beyond the fleeting moment of corporeal experience. This suggests the dichotomy between the world of the experiencing subject and the world of the onlooker, the metaphysical gap or rupture between them.

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<sup>90</sup> The Magistrate's reverence for nature is contrasted with its lack in Joll: “thousands of deer, pigs, bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcasses had to be left to rot” (1). The image also invokes the “pyramid of bodies” of the Empire's enemies (92).

<sup>91</sup> Compare with K's lesson that there is “time enough for everything” (*Life* 182-183) analysed later in this chapter.

It also suggests the constant movement towards the ultimate knowledge, and away from it. The repeated suggestion that the meaning is “out there” and can be viscerally felt and the constant refusal to verbalise its content function as invitation to allegory and an accompanying refusal to accept any particular reading. Such tension is achieved suggesting the gap between language and body, or surface and depth, an event and its “deeper” meaning, where the narrative progresses in the logic of two-way movement promising the revelation of truth and constantly deferring it. Coetzee's fiction is thus allegorical (in that it cannot be read merely as literal) without being specifically allegorical (in that it invites an infinite number of interpretations without supporting and but rather suggesting incompleteness, misreading and reductionism inherent in each of them). Further, it is self-consciously allegorical by staging an allegory, and by self-reflexively addressing the question of metaphors, allegories and meanings hidden in “containers” and written on “surfaces” of people, events, and ideas.

The gap between language and the body is obvious in the emphasis on the former's misleading nature: torture is rendered as “*investigations*” (9), Joll's escape is described as a “temporary measure” or a “general cessation of operations” (154-155). In his search, what the Magistrate learns concerns only the body: its incompatibility with language, its primacy, its capacity for meaning that remains inexpressible other than through metaphor (evil is infection etc.). In particular, the Barbarian girl's muteness protects her from misreadings.

The ancient script has the attributes of both the body and language. Its materiality offers the hope of intimacy and, consequently, the truth (16). Its language medium thwarts this hope by suggesting the misleading mediatedness. Being the “last

magistrate” in a starved town anticipating barbarian attack, the Magistrate finds the falsity of language inescapable (168-169). His record for posterity fails to express the “lived” truth and turns instead into “disingenuous formulas of colonial pastoralism:” (Atwell *J.M. Coetzee* 76). The truth, as Joll suggested, is to be told in the last extremity: “Perhaps by the end of the winter . . . when hunger truly bites us, when we are cold and starving, or when the barbarian is truly at the gate, perhaps then I will abandon the locutions of a civil servant with literary ambitions and begin to tell the truth” (169).

The Magistrate's self-definition, like that of K's, comes at the end, and like that of the medical officer's, expresses the hope of living “outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects” (169). While as its “lost subject[.]” he might acknowledge the superiority of the Empire's civilization (“new bread and mulberry . . . gooseberry jam,” its agricultural knowledge (169)), he has no comprehension of his role: he “lived through an eventful year, yet understand[s] no more of it than a babe in arms” (169). As the wooden slips turn to dust when touched, and mislead when translated, the Magistrate’s bodily intimations turn to nothing when expressed: “There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it” (169).

Dick Penner reads the Magistrate as “hyperconscious” characterised by the profound self-consciousness and a “will to the truth that saves [him] from an endless cycle of double-thought and self-recrimination” (Penner 81). I would like to suggest that, on the contrary, there seems no end to the endlessness of his double-thought. The pastoral sight of children building a snowman, suggestive of joy and peace, is immediately questioned by the Magistrate’s “double-thought”: “This is not the scene I

dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (170).<sup>92</sup> Such figurative use of the word “road,” and the inexplicable lack of appreciation of this return to normality are an invitation to allegorical reading,<sup>93</sup> as is the contrast between what the text does (presenting his dream vision) and what it says (denying it is his dream vision). The novel thus constantly invites interpretation, and, in its two-way movement, permanently escapes it.

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<sup>92</sup> Both the snowman and its lack of ambiguous “arms” could be read in a variety of different ways: as an acceptance of embodiment, the foregrounding of body metaphors, the Magistrate’s pacifism or nothing at all beyond the literal. Dovey sees it as “standing for the self . . . objectified in the narrative” and “transient” identity (Dovey 257). Atwell sees the “limited possibility” that the children might represent “the future community” (*South Africa* 87). Gallagher sees in this scene “[t]he final affirmation of hope for the future,” where the “sense of hope associated with the next generation is . . . suggested by Coetzee’s dedication of the novel to Nicolas and Gisela, his own children” (Gallagher 132-133).

<sup>93</sup> For Dovey such road allegorically signifies “the impasse with which the liberal novel frequently terminates” and “an *aporia* . . . a feature of a liberal discourse” (257).

*Life and Times of Michael K*

“Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it.” (166)

“It did not seem impossible that whoever it was who . . . might be tired of life . . . and want to take a holiday in the country if he could find a guide who new the roads. They could share a bed tonight . . . and in that way . . . one can live.” (183-184)

The narrator of the second part of the novel shares a lot with the narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*: his sympathy for the Other, the fascination with the body, and the attempts at solving its “mystery.” The difference lies in the fact that the medical officer takes a step further in expressing his projected interpretation and, presumably, believing it. The interpretation of K's body is given expression in a vision of K as a hero of resistance.

Michael K is marked by a speech impediment.<sup>94</sup> His mute body suggests a “mystery.”<sup>95</sup> K lives in the social sphere as a body. The novel's opening concentrates

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<sup>94</sup> This device is taken further in *Foe*.

<sup>95</sup> K is easily allegorised precisely because of his muteness. For one critic a “figure like Michael K makes it possible to say something by saying nothing” (Dovey 268). In her own interpretation, K stands for a “mode of writing that would relinquish control over meaning” (296), his story “constitutes an allegory of Coetzee's act of writing” (278), while all characters “function only to *re-present* the unconscious self” (277).



not on him but on his disability. Referred to as “it” (3), K's contact with people is marked by his cleft palate. They refuse to “look him in the face” (32), avert their eyes (180), or view him “critically” (29) and “with distaste” (33) fearing his touch (126). Others cannot “shift [their] gaze from K's bad mouth” (60), eyes flicker towards his face in fascination (172) making it difficult to keep eyes off him (47). Their attention is directed at the surface: “the thin moustache and the naked lip flesh it did not hide” (20). The dehumanisation also takes the form of animal and bodily metaphors used to describe him and his life (“intestines of war” (135)). The animal metaphors and his silences that make K “amenable to allegorical interpretation” and facilitate his “dissolution into the form of fable, parable, and allegory” contrast with the emphasis on his body, hunger, and disability, in other words, his embodied “historicity” (Quayson 172). The medical officer who attempts deeper reading aiming to resolve this contradiction matches the reader's position through first-person narration, but also because K's idiosyncrasies, mental capacity, and third-person objectification hinder identification.<sup>96</sup> The medical officer's reading of K yields ambiguous result. While the novel partly rejects his allegorical reading, such rejection is further undermined. The novel thus defers meaning, renegotiating what is true and what is projected, what is literal and what allegorical.

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<sup>96</sup> Ato Quayson reads K as exhibiting features of the “autistic spectrum” (147-173).

## The Medical Officer reads himself

The medical officer shares the Magistrate's lack of belief in the “cause” (134).<sup>97</sup> He admits responsibility “to [his] patients” (131) but life in the camp consists in turning “enemies into friends” (134), having “their thinking set right” (132) and “effect[ing] a change in men's souls” (134) through “flag-raising exercises and educative chanting” (159). Descriptions of his job express the tension between the body and language, between his profession and the role of the camp. Not being “experts on the soul,” medics are expected to “assum[e] cautiously that it has some connection to the body” (134). The “curing process” is effected through language (singing) and through disciplining the body (“pushups and marching back and forth” (134)). The linear closure of imminent defeat (“the camp commandant at his desk with . . . a bullet through his head” (143)) contrasts with the cyclic pointlessness of the present (“the camp will not close down even then, camps with high walls always having their uses” (147)), and both visions of history, linear and cyclic, contrast with short periods of a-historicity: the “holiday-camp atmosphere” between cargoes of prisoners (152), the cricket matches played and planned “if we are still around” (153).

The Medical Officer's problem is being trapped in history and discourse that do not fit reality. Life outside history, being forgotten by “the Castle” and left “to play out the duration of the war in quiet oblivion behind [the camp's] walls” (152-153) is a

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<sup>97</sup> None of the characters believes in it. Visagie, a deserter, believes deserters will soon outnumber the soldiers (64-65). The guard in Jakkaaldrif camp considers himself lucky to be diabetic and also aims to desert: “They'll never see me again. It's not my war.” His experience is made bearable thanks to alcohol and visits from camp women “starved for sex” (86).

fantasy undercut by reality: its peacefulness is followed by a description of the camp changed into an internment camp, suggesting that “[r]ehabilitation . . . is an ideal that has failed to prove itself” and that history lacks optimistic closure (154). His feelings of “living in suspension,” “alive but not alive” while history hesitates “which course to take,” are contrasted to Nurse Felicity's for whom history is a “childhood catechism” of facts (158). The desire to understand is unfulfilled: he imagines “currents of time swirling and eddying” about him, “tending towards a moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning.” He is “marooned in a pocket of time, the time of waiting, camp-time, war-time” (158). By contrast, for the “Felicity” projected by him, time is full and filled with work. Initially K is read akin to Felicity: “too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history” (158-159), but his unreadability yields different readings to which the Medical Officer's belief in transfiguration and meaningful patterns born out of chaos contribute.

The medical officer's dissatisfaction is awakened by contact with K, develops after K's escape, and culminates in an emotional monologue. His doubt prepares the ground for the influence of K who, in his passivity and silence, cannot be classified according to the enemy / friend dichotomy. The Medical Officer becomes obsessed with this mysteriously mute body and the story he believes lies inside. He attempts to give voice to K's by producing an interpretation he believes expresses K's identity.

## The Medical Officer reads Michael

The officer's attention is first gripped by the gap between the immediacy of the emaciated body ("prolonged malnutrition: cracks in his skin, sores on his hands and feet, bleeding gums. His joints protrude, he weighs less than forty kilos" (129)), and the misleading language in which K is described as an "arsonist," an "escapee from a labour camp" who ran a "staging post for insurgents," and fed the "local guerilla population" (130). The gap widens since K looks old for his age, claims to be named differently, refuses to eat being "not hungry" (130), and answers in an irrational manner.<sup>98</sup> The initial reading makes him into not "wholly of our world" and not an insurgent: "likely someone came along . . . asked him to look after a gun, and he was too stupid or too innocent to refuse" (130). Such interpretation does not explain his identity: "They have mixed him up with some other Michaels. This Michaels is an idiot. This Michael doesn't know how to strike a match. If this Michael was running a flourishing garden, why was he starving to death?" (131).

The medical officer's interest develops when K rejects help ("Why fuss over me, why am I so important?" (135)) continuing his irregular statements: "I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch out my arms and think I was flying over the fences and between the houses. I flew low over people's heads, but they couldn't see me" (133)). The interest is soon more than just medical (136). His description of K as a stone "enveloped in itself and its interior life" (135) suggests a container to be explored.

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<sup>98</sup> On his mother: "She makes plants grow" (130). On not eating: "They woke me in the middle of my sleep . . . I don't need food in my sleep" (131).

K's unwavering refusal to testify (137-138) and his confusing answers<sup>99</sup> lead the medical officer to further involvement: "So, Michaels, the long and the short of it is that by my eloquence I saved you" (142).<sup>100</sup> The eloquence consists in wilfully mistranslating K's body along the lines expected by the police and the falsification of documents to keep them "off [their] backs." It satisfies the staff's desire for peace, and the police's desire for interrogation: "It's not a lie . . . There is probably more truth in the story I told you than you would ever get out of Michaels if you used thumbscrews on him" (141). The agreement between Noël and the officer that there is "no story to be had" leaves the Officer free to investigate the mysterious body. His investigation searches for the truth, whereas any police interrogation would search for a proof of guilt. He wants to hear language of bodily immediacy, the "substance" (140).

The medical officer's reading is based on K's attitude to food. Fed through a tube, K's first conscious act is to pull it out with "It's not my kind of food" (145), and "I can't eat camp food" (146) as explanation. The void created by the ensuing silence is filled by the medical officer's questioning leading him to the assumption of "a protest fast" (145). Despite hopes to uncover K's "core," his readings highlight the medical officer's own state of mind, metaphorically expressing his captivation as captivity: "You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weigh of you" (146). Soon the officer's reading concentrates on the projected spirit of freedom: "Maybe he only eats the bread of freedom" (146). Such an attitude implies the respect

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<sup>99</sup> "I am not in the war" (138), "I am not clever with words" (139). Pressed about feeding the insurgents he replies: "What grows is for all of us. We are all children of the earth" (138).

<sup>100</sup> This involvement is denied in conversations with his colleague Noël ("I am not protecting him").

of treating K as a free man: “It would be easy for me to tie you down and strap your head and put a tube down your throat and feed you, but I am not going to do that. I am going to treat you like a free man, not a child or an animal” (147). However, there is no reciprocity: K smiles his “repulsive, sharklike” smile and fails to communicate thus allowing no conclusions but inviting a multitude of speculations. Often, such speculations disappear with the failure of language in the confrontation with the immediacy of the body: “There was something more I had wanted to say, but I could not speak. It seemed foolish” (148). This surrender grants importance to K and his silence.

The medical officer's interest in K concerns his history,<sup>101</sup> while his interpretation verges on the literary and mythical (“There is nothing we can do to rehabilitate you from the vengeful mother with flaming hair who comes to you in your dreams” (149)). The explanation of Michael's lack of independence begins with the physical and literal but soon turns into metaphorical: “when I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight . . . I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating out your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Death” (150). This literary excess continues in the image of K as “a stick insect . . . in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain” who “raise[s] [his] slow fragile stick-legs one at a time . . . inch[es] about looking for something to merge with, and there is nothing.” Images like these express K's non-belonging: “Why did you ever leave the bushes . . . ? That was where you belonged. You should have stayed all your

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<sup>101</sup> Most notably, “how it happened that you of all people have joined in a war . . . in which you have no place” (149).

life clinging to a nondescript bush in . . . an obscure garden . . . doing whatever it is that stick insects do . . . nibbling a leaf here and there . . . drinking dew” (149-150).<sup>102</sup> Metaphorical images are coupled with religious symbolism. The innocent “Am I to believe that you lived for a year on pumpkin?” (150) turns into the ambiguous (sarcastic or religious) interrogation: “Did manna fall from the sky for you, and did you store it away in underground bins for your friends to come and eat in the night? Is that why you will not eat camp food – because you have been spoiled forever by the taste of manna?” (150-151).

The demand for a story has its parallel in the demand for K to eat. The medical officer's “Give yourself some substance” (140), applies equally to his attempts to save K's body (by making him eat), and saving his story (by making him speak).<sup>103</sup> Force-feeding is rejected as it requires treating K as a “child or an animal,” not a “free man” (147) and would be an assault on what the medical officer believes is an admirable political stance, life outside history: “only you . . . evading the peace and the war, skulking in the open where no one dreamed of looking, have managed to live . . . drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does” (151-152).<sup>104</sup> His hope of bridging language and the body aims to preserve both and requires K's opening his mouth in two senses: “You

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<sup>102</sup> While there is a universal agreement that the medical officer's interpretation is a projection, both the insect imagery and identity based on the relation to his mother are confirmed by K. Michael. The later rejection of Officer's version is not complete, and is further undermined.

<sup>103</sup> A similar polisemy exists in *Foe* where “substance” is granted through representation in language, but refers equally to being a “real-life” person (rather than a fictional character) and to embodiment, life “as a substantial body” (*Foe* 126).

<sup>104</sup> Nadine Gordimer sees in Michael K “[a] revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions.” Indeed, she sees K as a figure representing Coetzee: “I don't think the author would deny that it is his own revulsion” (qtd in Dovey 53).

are going to die and your story is going to die too, forever . . . you are going to perish in obscurity and be buried in a nameless hole . . . and no one is going to remember you . . . unless you yield and . . . open your mouth” (151-152).

The meeting of the two men, as imagined by the Medical Officer begins with the description of K's body:

With Michael it always seemed to me that someone had scuffled together a handful of dust, spat on it and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes (the mouth . . . the contents of the head), omitting one or two details (the sex),<sup>105</sup> but coming up . . . with a genuine little man of earth, the kind of little man one sees in peasant art emerging into the world from between the squat thighs of its mother-host with fingers ready bent for a life of burrowing . . . (161)

It develops into the comparison of the two bodies and their potential for freedom (“Whereas . . . I am the kind who would be snapped up by the first patrol to pass while I yet stood dithering over which way lay salvation”), and soon gives way to regret: “The truth is that the only chance I had is gone, and gone before I knew. The night Michaels made his break, I should have followed. It is vain to plead that I was not ready. If I had taken Michaels seriously I would always have been ready” (161). The officer claims he would “never have let him out of sight” (161), and, despite difficulties of the road and Michael's suspiciousness (162), the two would meet: “Suspiciously, angrily even, you would have waited in the middle of the track for me to approach and explain myself” (162).

The address to Michael expresses the medical officer's desire for guidance. K, the only person able to defy war, is believed to be capable of finding a place outside

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<sup>105</sup> Compare with Friday's sexuality in *Foe*.



history, in areas that “lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of the camps” (162). Initially seen as a “figure of fun,” incapable of being rehabilitated,<sup>106</sup> K becomes a “hero of resistance” (163) whose resistance lies in passivity:

In fact you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When . . . you . . . collapsed in a heap . . . we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. (163)

The medical officer reads K's body as an active, conscious, agent: his body “refuses” to accept anything but freedom: “Your will remained pliant but your body was crying to be fed its own food and only that” (163-164). If the officer's medical training taught him to believe that “the body contains no ambivalence,” that suicide is not “an act of the body against itself but of the will against the body,” meeting Michael, he is not faced with the body from medical textbooks (one which “wants only to live”) but one that possesses a “nature” independent of the mind: “here I beheld a body that was going to die rather than change its nature.” Its idiosyncrasy lies in the fact Michael's stance is not an expressible intellectual strategy: his fast has no “principle,” and no “idea” behind it (164). K's body is interpreted as organically incapable of accepting oppression.

The feeling that K's body has “meaning” beyond being “another casualty of the war, another brick in the pyramid of sacrifice that someone would eventually climb . . . announcing himself emperor of all he surveyed” (164)) comes when the medical

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<sup>106</sup> “I thought that putting you through . . . rehabilitation would have been like trying to teach a rat or a mouse or . . . a lizard to bark and beg and catch a ball” (163).

officer detects a “gathering meaningfulness” (165), “a thickening of the air, a concentration of darkness, a black whirlwind roaring in utter silence above your body, pointing to you, without so much as stirring the edge of the bedclothes” (164). The recognition endows K's body with meaning: he is more than “a skin-and-bones man with a crumpled lip” (165). The objectivity of such reading is problematic. On the one hand, the medical officer strives not to read anything into K, “seeking by the last means [he] knew” to “detect the germ of dishonesty at the heart of the conviction” (165). He believes objectivity to be possible: “I was not deceiving myself, I was not flattering myself, I was not comforting myself . . . it was the truth, there was indeed a gathering, a thickening of darkness above one bed alone, and that bed was yours” (165). On the other hand, his desire is to tell K “what you mean to me” (166) suggests this meaning is to be contingent and private.

According to Attridge, the medical officer's talk of projections and allegories undermines his credibility and “throw[s] some doubt” both on his reading of K and on allegorical readings of the novel (*Ethics* 34). Yet how much “some” is remains a crucial question. His use of the term “allegory” and his introspection might be read as implying critical distance, an awareness of the mediated nature of language, even as it strives for immediacy. In short, they do not justify the total rejection of his interpretation, which would have been the case if the use of “allegory” had remained unrealised by the character. Further, even if the novel partly “undermine[s] . . . the medical officer's attempts to interpret K” (34) in presenting K as devoid of political consciousness, this undermining is itself undermined when K expresses a wish for a friend with whom to share his life. While the Medical Officer's and K's ideas may not

entirely overlap, there appears to be a partial overlap between the former's desire for political peace and the latter's desire to be left in peace.

The final definition concerns Michael's freedom, and his body's inability to conform: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (166). It is unclear what the subsequent image of an "escape artist" signifies: whether it implies reading Michael politically or whether it self-consciously refers to K's inscrutability and his refusal to be allegorised in the medical officer's conceptual "system." The first reading would naturally support Attridge's idea of the novel undermining the medical officer's interpretation. In the second reading, however, K undermines the officer's *particular* interpretation, but supports it on a structural level by staging or "performing" an allegory by being a mute body shrugging off all readings and thus all allegories. Such body cannot be talked about, and its silence, whatever it signifies or refuses to signify, always stands at variance with signification in language.

A similar problem lies with the medical officer's understanding of K's garden:<sup>107</sup>

Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is

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<sup>107</sup> Such ambiguous passages invite easy allegorisations. For Dovey, the "escape artist" is a metaphor of "that which eludes the conscious meanings of both writer and reader" (310) whereas the garden and areas outside camps are "the nonrepresentable unconscious, which resurfaces and undermines the conscious meanings of each successive reading" (311). Head sees in K an "enactment of the poststructuralist idea of infinitely deferred meaning" (4).

another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way (166).

The realization of entrapment in allegorical language and metaphorical thought does not preclude the belief in K's "depth." While the idea that Michael "knows" what he himself stands for is proven wrong later, the medical officer's distance from his interpretation is suggested by his questions: "Am I right? . . . Have I understood you?" (167) and his request of a bodily gesture. The novel's epigraph from Heraclitus invites the interpretation of the characters along the free / slave dichotomy.<sup>108</sup> For the officer, K represents freedom from history and from language. The medical officer sees himself as slave to history, trapped in the mediatedness of language. His allegorical readings are continually doubted, interrogated and questioned and hence cannot be easily dismissed. His language fails to bridge the gap between language and the body: anything said about K would necessarily be allegorical and lack the body's immediacy.

### **Michael reads himself**

Michael K experiences the gap between language and the body, and he too strives to bridge it by repeated self-definitions and attempts to read his body. The immediate foregrounding of the body characterises his first appearance: "The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K . . . was that he had a hare lip" (3). The mark leads to his isolation in childhood (3), and in adulthood ("because of his face" K does not have "female friends" (4)). His "disfigurement" and the fact that "his mind

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<sup>108</sup> "War is the father of all and king of all . . . Some he makes slaves, and others free."

was not quick” (4) means that his education consists in watching his mother “polish other people’s floors” and “learning to be quiet” (4); or attending a special school where he spends time “in the company of other variously afflicted . . . children learning the elements of reading, writing, counting, sweeping, scrubbing, bedmaking, dishwashing, basketweaving, woodwork and digging” (4).

His initial self-definition is inspired by the body, the “torment” (5-6) of his mother’s pain. The question of purpose, “why he had been brought into the world,” is tentatively answered: “to look after his mother” (7). It is hoped the definition is to receive further elaboration, that as other “reasons[s]” throughout “all those years” this one “would in the end become clear” (8-9). His silent acceptance of his mother’s plans (9) parallels the silent acceptance of the definitions that visit him and overlaps with the picture projected by the Medical Officer.<sup>109</sup> His mother’s death leads to the crumbling of this inner identity by depriving K of the source of self-knowledge and the justification of his existence. The created void (“his mind blank” (33)) precipitates the failure of language making conversations with the hospital staff impossible.<sup>110</sup>

Such suggestion of emptiness, however, is soon questioned when homeless K is presented as having reasons for disregarding the curfew (“[h]e did not believe that any harm would come to him; and if would come, it would not matter” (34)) and meditates about using the surface of his body to his advantage: wondering whether “with his filthy clothes and his air of gaunt exhaustion, he would not be passed over as

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<sup>109</sup> While the narrative variously tries to render him a passive “simpleton,” (141, 155, 182) it also suggests agency: he talks his mother into leaving early and to use the vehicle he builds.

<sup>110</sup> “‘Do you want to make a phone call?’ said the doctor. This was evidently a code for something, he did not know what.” (30-31).

a mere footloose vagrant . . . too benighted to know one needed papers to be on the road, too sunk in apathy to be of harm” (39). Thus he unsuccessfully tries to fake stupidity: “If I look very stupid . . . perhaps they will let me through” (40). The period of forced labour continues the novel's interest in K's body but does not yield any self-definitions. These come when K abandons the roads and begins a life “off the land” (46), the foundation of his new identity.

The descriptions of the growing new identity variously invoke the silent body. K is described as *drinking* in the landscapes and needing no words: “Nothing would happen, everything would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say” (46). His muteness contrasts with language: the experience of the farmer's charity does not lead to the verbalization, or the understanding, of the 'meaning' of the experience. The farmer's “lesson” (“People must help each other, that's what I believe”) is met with silence.<sup>111</sup> Although his heart is “full,” and although he wants to “utter his thanks,” the words “would not come” (48). This mental separation of the physical, immediate experience from its abstract, conceptual interpretations results in K's experience of the fragmentariness in language and in thought (“[h]is memories all seemed to be of parts, not of wholes” (49)), and consistent with the novel's contrasting of the body and language, or the literal and the figurative.

K shares with the medical officer the striving for the understanding of meaning, for wholeness, and for conclusive definitions. In K's case, this bringing together of the body and language is more passive and exists as intimations of some yet undiscovered

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<sup>111</sup> This silence is in contrast with K's earlier conviction regarding the inherent goodness of the people: “People are decent. People would stop and give them lifts” (18).

meaning. These appear as “epiphanies” and lead the reader to expect further elaboration. They are experienced by Michael as the voice of matter endowed with the ability to explain and to define. Such expectation of meaning appears first during his attempt to build a cart: “Something will come to me, he told himself” (16). The second occurrence takes place upon his arrival in Prince Albert where his mother wished to die:

he began to be aware of a man's voice rising up to meet him in an even and unending monologue without visible origin. Puzzled, he stopped to listen. Is this the voice of Prince Albert? he wondered. I thought Prince Albert was dead. He tried to make out words, but though the voice pervaded the air like a mist or an aroma, the words, if there were words, if the voice were not only the sweet lulling or chanting tones, were too faint or too smooth to hear. Then the voice ceased, giving way to a tiny faraway brass band. (49)

The voice is expected during his mother's burial:

He . . . concentrated, hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that what he was doing is right – his mother's voice, if she still had a voice, or a voice belonging to no one in particular, or even his own voice as it sometimes spoke telling him what to do. But no voice came. (58)

Another reference to the voice occurs when K builds his new identity. Having arrived on the farm, his initial the sense of belonging (“Now I am here, he thought. Or at least I am somewhere” (52)) is disrupted by his body's reaction to the unnatural act of killing.<sup>112</sup> The feverish delirium brings mysterious visions merging images of illness, childhood and his mother. Bordering on supernatural, these provide ample material for interpretation and preclude it at the same time: upon recovery K offers no metaphysical or ethical knowledge that the visions suggested. The two-way movement introduces the mundane and K's “lesson” denies any validity to figurative readings of

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<sup>112</sup> By “unnatural” I mean opposed to his “true” nature he assumes later: that of a gardener, protector of life.

his illness: “The lesson, if there was a lesson, if there were lessons embedded in events, seemed to be not to kill such large animals” (57). In short, after suggesting some “inner self” of the body, almost palpable in extreme experience of disease and giving rise to ambiguous visions (which cannot be interpreted literally) the text rejects any invited figurative readings by returning to the mundane: killing smaller animals. However, a rejection of the mundane is also suggested since K's mental capacity might portray him as oblivious to suggested “meanings” and undermine the validity of his “lessons.” The narration's “the lesson, if there was a lesson” self-reflexively refers to its two-way movement: its invitation to interpretation, the rejection of it, and the further ambiguity undermining the rejection. The reader can either follow in the medical officer's footsteps and read K figuratively or read him literally and see any “meaning” of him as projection. It is also possible to accept K as incomprehensible and Other, but this approach is similarly invited by the novel's suggestions of the existence of deeper meaning and brought about in the navigation between the literal and the figurative.

The voice is a specific variant of the more general hope of illumination. The hope for meaning to emerge is expressed, for example, when K buries his mother's ashes unsure of whether he is in the right place:

He fetched the box of ashes from the house . . . and sat down to wait. He did not know what he expected; whatever it was, it did not happen. A beetle scurried across the ground. The wind blew. There was a cardboard box standing in the sunlight on a patch of baked mud, nothing more. There was another step, apparently, that he had to take but could not yet imagine. (57-58)



In the absence of illumination, K's discovers his "identity" by chance. His life "as a cultivator" is inspired by the burial, "distribut[ing] the fine grey flakes over the earth . . . turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful" (59). The planting and watering of the seeds fills him with "deepest pleasure" and serves as a foundation of identity: "It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature" (59).<sup>113</sup> Such self-recognition produces a "sense of exultation," while his work allows him to live "by the rising and setting of the sun" and "in a pocket outside time" (60).<sup>114</sup>

The second loss of identity is also marked by the failure of K's language: faced with Visagie Michael "stumbles" "trying to bring out words," and feels the "old hopeless stupidity invading him" (60). Unlike earlier, however, K formulates a lesson ("I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth" (61)) and is also able to reason: "He thinks I am truly an idiot . . . who sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on . . . lizards and does not know there is such a thing as money" (62).<sup>115</sup> The crisis of language relates to the misleading nature of language which fails to express bodily truth. In the sphere of language, Visagie's perception of the farm is similar to K's.

I am speaking to you as one human being to another. There is a war on, there are people dying. Well, I am at war with no one. I have made my peace. Do you understand? I make my peace with everyone. There is no war here on the farm. You and I can live here quietly till they make peace everywhere. No one will disturb us. Peace has got to come one of these days. (64)

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<sup>113</sup> This watering of the field, according to Dovey, "is meant to be read as a metaphor of . . . copulation" with the pump "enact[ing] a form of penetration and climax" (293).

<sup>114</sup> The Medical Officer feels himself in the painful "pocket of time" (158) he wishes to escape, presumably into K's "pocket outside time."

<sup>115</sup> Indeed, his insight and irony is clear: "A soldier without a gun. A boy on an adventure" (63).

While their objectives expressed in language are the same, in lived experience K becomes the slave and Visagie the master.<sup>116</sup>

The separation from gardening is rendered by the blended space of an emotional “umbilical cord” a “cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut” (66).<sup>117</sup> The cutting of his link to the land by the arrival of Visagie leads to the loss of humanity (66) and the return to fragmented identity. Without any stable identity K cannot overcome the fragmentariness of his experience. The impulse of the medical officer and the reader to “construct” Michael into a meaningful whole produces an image absent in K's self-perception. In fact, the narrative negotiates between suggestions of emptiness and literal meaninglessness of his life, and the suggestion of a figurative meaning.<sup>118</sup> The latter is suggested through the juxtaposition of the soil and K's body and in the synchronization of their respective changes (67) and by endowing him with “secret” attributes of internal, evolving life:

I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. (67-68).

Similarly to *Waiting . . .* the novel presents dehumanisation when the body takes primacy and, similarly, descriptions of this state waver between suggestions of figurative meaning and deeper significance, and the returns to the literal and mundane. Initially, K lives on roots and ant-eggs. He sleeps most of his time, “too tired to move,

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<sup>116</sup> Visagie's “I am at war with no one” is later rephrased by K: “I am not in the war” in hospital (138).

<sup>117</sup> Exactly the same metaphor is used in *Master of Petersburg* (23).

<sup>118</sup> “He did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life has never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait” (67).

or perhaps too lackadaisical” wondering if his state is “what was known as bliss” (68). Soon images of deteriorating health waver between the literal: pointing to nothing but themselves and foregrounding K's body and the figurative, where the account of suffering culminates in a vision:

The smell of peach-blossom enveloped him. There was a voice too, coming from all sides, the calm even voice he had heard the first day he saw Prince Albert. He stood at the head of the High Street among the verdant gardens, unable to make out a word, though he listened hard, of the distant monotone that after a while blended with the twitter of the birds in the trees and then gave way to music. (69)

This almost spiritual element is broken by the mundane, the arrest and descriptions of K's physicality: “the skeletal figure that sat with its back to the wall rubbing its exposed calves,” his dirt, leaving the police “repelled by his smell” (70). The gap between language and the body is evident when the police reading finds “debilitation and incoherence” attributed to “alcohol poisoning” and issues charges (70). Provided with a partly misleading police definition,<sup>119</sup> K enters the hospital, the sphere of the body (“a place for bodies, where bodies asserted their rights” (71)) and exits that of language: struggling with words and incapable of communication (72). Transported to the resettlement camp, Jakkalsdrif, K's body receives further attention, while his language regresses.<sup>120</sup> Asked about his story Michael does not speak “[t]here was a silence” and the described thought process is not uttered: “Now I must speak about the ashes, thought K, so as to be complete, so as to have told the whole story. But he found that he could not, or could not yet” (79).

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<sup>119</sup> This definition, however, provides insight into K's ethnicity (70).

<sup>120</sup> The regression is suggested by his muteness, and by his figurative references to childhood: “I am back in Huis Norenius, a second time . . . too old to bear it” (74), “It is like going back to childhood . . . it is like a nightmare” (77).

The camp further separates language from the body and provides further 'education'. The gap exists between what he sees and what he hears about camp's comparative leniency (79). It can be found in the disparity between praise and the real life of prisoners (80). It lies in the "welfare" offered by the camp that apparently everyone wants but no one can refuse: "You climb the fence and I'll shoot you . . . No hard feelings. I'm just telling you" (85). The camp provides further 'education': in language (through his friend) and in the social sphere.<sup>121</sup>

The stay in the camp contributes to Michael's education about the body. Forced labour leads to physical and mental exhaustion, manifest in dreams about the body as an abyss into which, losing consciousness, Michael plunges.<sup>122</sup> He also learns of the pleasure afforded by the body. It is derived from both the acceptance of his links to the earth and develops through touch akin to that experienced by the Magistrate:

They clambered over him and fell upon him as if he were part of the earth. Still hiding his face, he rolled over and found that he could doze even with little bodies riding on his back. He found unexpected pleasure in these games. It felt to him that he was drawing health from the children's touch. (84)

Another development is a fleeting and unclear interest in a woman from the camp making him wonder "whether he was at last in love" (89), and meditations on the persistence of the body. The latter meditation is consciously analysed as organically growing out of his body, although it might be attributed to another's influence (95). It

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<sup>121</sup> K is initially stared at (73), but at one point the guards's gaze leads K to interrogate how he is perceived: "What does he see? thought K. What am I to him?" (82). This question is repeated later (likely by K): "I ask myself: What am I to this man?" (148)), and by the medical officer: "What am I to this man?" (149).

<sup>122</sup> "Sitting . . . he closed his eyes and felt as if he were hurtling through endless empty space" (87). Such imagery is common in descriptions of Dostoevsky's epilepsy.

is, finally, the sight of death and of a mourning mother, strikingly similar to that in *Waiting . . .*, that provides another intimation of a unified “meaning”:

Is this my education? he wondered. Am I at last learning about life here in a camp? It seemed to him that scene after scene of life was playing itself out before him and that the scenes all cohered. He had a presentiment of a single meaning upon which they were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not know yet what that might be. (89)

The identity of a gardener is regained upon his return to the farm, his “home” where he feels he belongs: “I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived” (99). The return involves the return to animality (“What a pity that to live in times like these a man must . . . live like a beast . . . in a hole and hide by day”) and dehumanisation of being one with nature: he comes to life bathing in the dam “turning his face up like a flower” (99). While K’s is repeatedly referred to as part of nature, nature itself is frequently anthropomorphized: the hills are “like plump breasts, curved towards each other” (100), while the seeds are his “children” (101). K knows edible plants “as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants have not died in his soul” (102), and ecstatically experiences “a deep joy in his physical being” that involves the feeling of unity: being “both body and spirit” (102).

The unexplained arrival of insurgents forces him to greater wariness in concealing himself and his “children,” exacerbating his nocturnal, and animal status. The earth offers the only protection: he “slither[s] towards [his] hole” “like a worm” with one thought: “Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me” (107). The arrival does not, as previously, destroy his identity but strengthens it. A

short-lived fantasy of making contact with the men, to “sit with them . . . drinking in their words” (109), because “[t]he stories they will tell will be different from the stories I heard in the camp” (109) is soon dismissed and Michael restates his self-definition:

Yet at the same instant . . . K knew that he would not . . . 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 once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why (109).

This passage, repeating the earlier mention of the “cord of tenderness”<sup>123</sup> is in accordance with the image of K as essentially a gardener but its undermining of his conflicting desire for language is not complete. His mention of the “idea” of gardening parallels the medical officer's use of the term “allegory”: it self-consciously foregrounds textuality rendering K much much more than a simple gardener. Secondly, the conviction of being a gardener is weakened by the gap between K's language and his body making this definition as prone to error as the medical officer's. The emphasis on the language character of K's thoughts might reduce his definition to another mistranslation of the previously suggested inexpressible truth in the container of the body or might render any of his definitions false constructions. The gap appears to be experienced by K himself:

Between this reason and the truth that he would never announce himself, however, lay a gap wider than than the distance separating him from the firelight. Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it

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<sup>123</sup> “It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many time before it would not grow again” (66).

was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (109-110)

Such suggestion is again undermined by descriptions of K's as a gardener treating his plants as his children, of the happiness clear in eating the fruit "the firstborn" (dignified by a grace directed at the earth (113)) and felt bodily as a "gush of warm water," "tears of joy" (113), aching with "sensual delight" (113-114). Such unity with the natural world comes at the cost of humanity and expressibility: he becomes a "creature of twilight and night" unaccustomed to daylight (115). The unity is suggested by the animal metaphors describing him, and the anthropomorphisms used to describe his surroundings (115-116). Such unity annuls the previous gap between the body and language: thinking stops, and all that exists is the body.

But if readers are willing to accept that K's body is only literally itself just as "rust [is] merely rust" (115) and all other reading as projective, the novel's double movement frustrates this position by suggesting figurative meanings. The word used by the police about the camp ("a nest of parasites hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back") is now appropriated by K to refer to his "parasite" life, making "it [] no longer obvious which [is] host and which parasite, camp or town" (116): "If the worm devoured the sheep, why did the sheep swallow the worm? What if there were millions . . . creeping away in corners to escape the times, too canny to put out flags and draw attention to themselves . . . ?" (116). K's bodily silence (and literalness) is thus broken by figurative language. The feasibility of a political interpretation of this meditation may or may not be evident to K, but the

image easily lends itself to allegorical interpretations which see in K body something more than physicality: a potential for signification without words.

This emphasis on figurative meanings is undermined again when the focus shifts onto the body (“parasites too had flesh and substance” (116)) and the text foregrounds literal and painful embodiment: “There was a continual taste of blood in his mouth. His bowels ran and there were moments of giddiness when he stood up . . . his stomach felt like a fist clenched in the centre of his body” (117). But this return to the body ‘as the body’ is not complete and is frustrated by the use of figurative language (heartbeat “as if in another country” (118)) and ambiguous visions (“trains of images so rapid and unconnected that he could not follow them,” “the swimming in front of his eyes” (120)). Suffering brings feelings of disembodied strangeness (feeling like a “ghost,” (120)), affects his self-perception (his arm becomes a “stick protruding from his body” (121)), and life as merely a body becomes unsustainable: “I have woken too early, he thought, I have not finished my sleeping. He suspected that he ought to eat . . . but his stomach was not ready” (120). The lapse into figures is magnified with an increased ambiguity of his dreams and visions, and suggestions of spirituality induced by suffering.

K's garden, physical evidence of his life, is misread. In *Foe*, the passage of time is to erase the imprint of Barton's body in the place she slept; K expresses the same sentiment: “There will be not a grain bearing my marks, just as my mother has now, after her season in the earth, been washed clean, blown about, and drawn up into the leaves of grass” (124). Where Susan fears misreadings of Cruso's terraces as cannibal ruins, K's garden is misread as the outpost of the insurgents. His arrest prompts



attempts at self-definition. While K's initial definition was centred around his mother's body, now it has its incarnation in the figurative image of the mother-earth. Indeed, both are intermingled in a passage that supports the medical officer's idea of an overprotective mother:

So what is it, he thought, that binds me to this spot of earth as if to a home I cannot leave? We must all leave home, after all, we must all leave our mothers. Or am I such a child, such a child from such a line of children, that none of us can leave, but have to come back to die here with our heads upon our mother's laps, I upon hers, she upon her mother's, and so back and back, generation upon generation? (124)

### **Body knowledge**

K's return to Cape Town offers the promise of a new self-definition that would determine the appropriateness of the medical officer's interpretation. As K's first appearance is marked by physicality, his return begins with a narrative focus on the body: eating and sex. Both are contrasted with language: the first leads to illness preventing the recounting of his story.<sup>124</sup> The second is treated as insignificant and inexpressible: "all words had begun to escape him" (179). This twofold re-entry into society is repeated when physical hunger and sexual desire meet in his observation of the two bathers (180).

His story remains inexpressible; it is treated as "paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge" (176). Again deprived of the source of identity, K attempts to find one in his body "listening to the

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<sup>124</sup> Asked about his story, "K was about to reply when without warning his stomach contracted and the wine came up in a neat golden stream" (173), later cannot talk due to a "wave of sickness" (176).

ringing mount in his ears, the sound of blood running in his veins or the thoughts running through his head.” These meditations concern the body, but rely on figurative language: “He had the feeling that something inside him had let go or was letting go. What it was letting go of he did not yet know, but he also had a feeling that what he had previously thought of in himself as tough and rope-like was becoming soggy and fibrous, and the two feelings seemed to be connected” (177).

K's position rests on the rejection of charity. But if, as a child, it would have been enough for him to utter “a stammer of thanks in return” he is now expected to provide a story of hardship: “I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons . . . . When my story was finished, people would have shaken their heads and been sorry and angry and plied me with food and drink; women would have taken me into their beds and mothered me” (181). The lack of story is sometimes interpreted by Michael as a result of his mental capacity: “I have not been clever, and come back to Sea Point full of stories . . . I was mute and stupid at the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end” (182). The novel's double movement consists here in contrasting what K's words *claim* and what they *do*: his diagnosis of his mental capacity is to be distrusted if it produces highly articulate observations: “They were locking up simpletons before they locked up anyone else” and conclusions: “How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too” (182).

K's lack of development sees him not travelling from the state of oblivion to the state of awareness. One of his final self-definitions is symptomatically anticlimactic: “Whereas the truth is that I have been a gardener, first for the Council,

later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground” (181). The “truth” of this definition is, however, immediately, and metaphorically, questioned: “I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence. But a mole or an earthworm on a cement floor?” (182). The objection functions as another rejection in the logic of the two-way movement: the “final” definition is rejected and this rejection is itself undermined. The final lesson begins by K presenting himself as a simpleton and continues:

The mistake I made, he thought . . . was not to have had plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket . . . Then my mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch, I should have planted them one at a time spread out over miles of veld in patches of soil no larger than my hand, and drawn a map and kept it with me at all times so that every night I could make a tour of the sites to water them. Because if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything. (182-183)

The “moral” is unlike the medical officer's allegory. Instead, its mundane nature threatens any figurative readings of K by denying the existence of any “deeper,” non-literal, significance. On the other hand, the mundane reality is itself undermined given that K's “lesson” invokes Ecclesiastes (Ecc 3:1 – 3:10), and thus questions the mundane nature of Michael's “knowledge” and rejects the rejection of allegory. Interesting in this light is the critical consensus of the novel's “undermining of the medical officer's attempts to interpret K” (Attridge *Ethics* 34), for the novel appears to undermine and support it at the same time. K's final vision of a man wanting “a holiday in the country if he could find a guide who knew the roads” (183) directly echoes the medical officer's monologue where he speaks of his desire to be led by K

(163) to the place to which “only you [K] know the way” (166). The image shakes the foundation on which the rejection of the medical officer's interpretation rests, while it may also support it given the medical officer's ambiguity when he claims that “no road leads to it that is merely a road” (166). While K's imagined companion is not explicitly the medical officer, the suggestion is that their wishes overlap and that their searches are in part complementary. But while they may share the same visceral impulse, they communicate in the mediated way trapped in language where true, non-mediated, and 'bodily' communication is impossible.

Coetzee's novel negotiates and oscillates between extremes: equating the human body with the self and contrasting it with language (and mind). It rejects allegorical readings of the body, yet also constantly invites them. It moves between the mundane (literal) and the ambiguous (metaphorical); it destroys allegory by introducing the mundane, as it allegorizes and suggests reading the mundane metaphorically. If K's and the officer's (spoken and thought) self-definitions are contrasted, their bodily impulses are similar. Coetzee's strategy in creating an open-ended and overdetermined world which invites allegory relies on introducing characters marked by disability, while devoting considerable attention to bodily experience (needs, suffering, ageing, sexuality). Thus endowed, his characters are placed in the position of a search for truth, for ultimate reality or meaning beyond the surface. Transposing the surface / depth dichotomy onto the body and being at his most ambiguous in descriptions of the physical, Coetzee leads the reader to expect what is actually a constantly deferred revelation of meaning. And when a “meaning” or a “lesson” is finally uncovered, it is necessarily a mundane one undermining the

readers' expectations. Thus, these narratives problematise the boundaries between what is “read into” the text, and what is inherently there; between what can be said about the text and what is an over-interpretative, projective construction. The readers are witness to attempts at uncovering the truth and accompany characters in their search for meanings and definitions, while the readerly hopes are shattered by being shown how much of what they assume is their own creation resulting from unfulfilled expectations created by the text, but the novels cannot be read entirely in a literal way, even if such a way were theoretically possible. What, for example, to make of the voices heard by Michael? Of the fact that he miraculously survives? What to make of his meditations, dreams, visions? Can they be attributed to Michael's fever, or are they, as the readers are led to expect, glimpses of the “truth” and inaccessible in other ways. Coetzee purposefully leaves the boundaries between what is in the text and what is an extra-textual projection blurred and herein lies his repeatedly applied narrative strategy.

### Chapter 3

#### Organic Metaphor: Embodied History or the History of the Body

##### *Dusklands and Age of Iron*

The two novels I would like to analyse in this chapter, also deal with the problems of reading and interpreting the body. In both novels, the body functions as a site of history: a site from which historical processes derive and the site which such processes affect. In these works, Coetzee employs what I would like to call an 'organic metaphor', the structuring of an abstract concept in terms of the human organism. It allows him to present the universal through the image of the body, and to structure the body in terms of the universal. The intersection of the two spheres allows for the understanding of Mrs Curren's cancer as 'caused' by apartheid (or as representing apartheid) just as the Vietnam War could be understood as the result (and a representation) of the psychosexual problems of the likes of Eugene Dawn. Both novels rely heavily on gender symbolism: they structure the land as a passive female body, and the gun, warfare, and conquest as expressions of masculine sexuality.

In short, *Dusklands* and *Age of Iron* explore history and politics from the perspective of an individual, gendered, body. Problems with such body may inspire political action but also stem from political oppression. Both texts contrast language and the body to present the textuality of what is more commonly seen as bodily and the embodiment of what is more commonly rendered as textual. *Dusklands* is a story

of masculine beginnings: Eugene Dawn's New Life Project suggests the dawn of a new era as much as the early colonization of South Africa in the story of Jacobus. *Age of Iron*, presents the end of the era by depicting a dying country and a dying female body.

## **Part I: *Dusklands***

### ***The Vietnam Project:* Masculinity and war**

“Most of the trouble in my life has been caused by women” (44)

In the story of Eugene Dawn, the body is structured both as a container and as a surface. It exists as a container when he discusses secret 'true' selves and bodily 'centres', and as a surface when he speculates about others' two-dimensionality. Such structurings allow him to speak of 'reading' others and being 'read' by them. They also allow reading his body as a text akin to, and in line with, the myth he studies. The novel thus invites the reader to read Dawn's life as mirroring the Vietnamese myth; his writing as a metaphorical expression of his insecurities, and his writing's conclusions as inspiration behind his action in family life. Dawn craves pure language and feels imprisoned in his body. He navigates between the masculinity he craves (here associated with language and nurture) and the femininity he wishes to destroy (associated with the body and nature). His relationships with masculine authority are marked by feelings of inferiority and a longing for acceptance, whereas his relation to his body is part of a larger project of the annihilation of the feminine. The suggestion that the Vietnam War is a product of insecure masculinity lacks the ambiguity of

Coetzee's later work and is challenged only by Dawn's insignificance in the larger military enterprise and by the unreadable nature of his superiors.

Dawn's ambivalent relationship with masculine authority betrays a mixture of narcissism and feelings of inferiority. Passive self-effacement and a hunger for acceptance and recognition, mingle with hatred and contempt towards his superiors. This appears to be learned behaviour: "I was always a clever child. I ate my beans, which were good for me, and did my homework . . . Everyone praised me. It is only recently that I have begun to falter" (5). The feared Coetzee remains unknown even if he is powerful enough to replace unspoken hostility:

I have always obeyed my superiors and been glad to do so. I would not have embarked on the Vietnam Project if I had guessed it was going to bring me into conflict with a superior. Conflict brings unhappiness, unhappiness poisons existence. I cannot stand unhappiness, I need peace and love and order . . . (1)

Faced with a "type before whom [his] first instinct is to crawl" (1), Dawn's self-worth is maintained by employing the container metaphor and projecting a 'centre' to himself: "I am an egg that must lie in the downiest of nests under the most coaxing of nurses before my bald, unpromising shell cracks and my shy secret life emerges." Another strategy is diminishing his superiors: "Once upon a time a creative person himself, he is now a failed creative person who lives vicariously off true creative people . . . he has been put in charge . . . knowing nothing about Vietnam or about life" (1). At other times, Coetzee's rejections are attributed to his fear of Dawn's intellect: "when one ceases to be the pupil . . . one must expect one's teachers to feel betrayed and strike back in envy" (5). These rationalizations are juxtaposed with admissions of dependence on his superiors:



The petty reaction of Coetzee to my essay is to be expected in a bureaucrat whose position is threatened by an up-and-coming subordinate . . . This . . . does not . . . make his insults any easier to swallow. He is in power over me. I need his approval. I will not pretend that he cannot hurt me. I would prefer his love to his hatred. Disobedience does not come easily to me. (5)

Dawn's opposition against male authority is clandestine: he does not complain about the lighting in the office for he cannot do it “without opening [himself] to counterattack” (7). Feeling himself weaker (“I will not win”), he craves acceptance: “I would do almost anything for his respect. I know I am a disappointment to him, that he no longer believes in me” (15). His self-confidence comes only from outside recognition: “when no one believes in you, how hard it is to believe in yourself!” (15). A meeting presents the struggle between deference and striving to be assertive:

I am bad at confrontations. My first impulse is to give in, to embrace my antagonist and concede all in the hope that he will love me. Fortunately, I despise my impulses . . . People who doubt themselves have no core. I am doing my best to fashion a core for myself, late though it be in life. (1-2)

Such core, as container substance, is the sign of masculinity Dawn claims to be lacking: “[Coetzee is] the kind that eats steaks . . . who drinks coffee, I the kind who with caffeine in his veins begins to quiver” (2).

In confrontation with Coetzee Dawn feels himself a readable surface: “I wore my straight shoulders and bold gaze for the interview. Coetzee may know I am hunched and shifty – I cannot help these eyes – but I wished to signal him that today I was formally accreting myself around the bold and the true” (3). But being “possessed of a high degree of consciousness” (5) is no help in making his body unreadable. Thus reading Coetzee's container body uncovers merely Dawn's own obsession with inferiority: “A certain configuration of his mouth and nose so subtle as to be

perceptible only to me tells me that the hectic toxins chasing in my blood and wafted in my sweat afflict his expensive senses with distaste” (3). His body becomes an artificial performance against readings that might uncover his sensitive core.

Dawn's pursuit of perfection in language (2) has an enemy in the body that needs to be kept in check. This control involves the management of gestures in accordance with the views of a published “authority” on body language: “I am careful to create opportunities for my fingers to busy themselves. While I am reading, for example, I conscientiously flex and unflex them . . . when I talk to people I keep my hands conspicuously relaxed” (4). The disciplining of the body suggests a deeper lack of acceptance: “I am vexed by the indiscipline of my body. I have often wished I had another one” (5). The body's functions (“masticating”) are “disgusting” and form a sad reminder of unwanted embodiment: “I am a thin man, as you will have guessed: my body voids all nutriment half-digested” (11). His body stands between himself and the desired masculinity.

Contrasted with the body is reason and language: “I am the embodiment of the . . . struggle of the intellect against blood” (27-28). Convinced of his intellect (“under the fire of my intellect mountains crumble” (27)), Dawn sees himself as a “thinker, a creative person” (1). Work brings “the highest happiness, intellectual happiness” and offers the sense of belonging (“we in mythography are of that cast” (6)). This “genius of the household” (14) treats his work with religious reverence: “I say a grace, holding the finished chapters to my exulting breast” (13). At the same time, work is to endow him with the authoritative masculinity he lacks: “transposed into print”, the “authority” of his words is to be “binding” (15).

Where the first “continual battle” is “to keep [his] poise of mind against the pressure of [his] enemy body,” his second battle is with his wife's “hysterical assaults” (8). Denied language and never speaking, she functions as an embodiment of embodiment. Dawn's sexual “connection” with her is a failure:

Though like the diligent partners in the marriage manuals we attend to each other's whispers . . . though I plough like the hero and Marilyn froth like the heroine, the truth is that the bliss of which the books speak has eluded us. The fault is not mine. I do my duty. (7-8)

This appeal to another published authority further endows her with the responsibility for the lack of passion:

Before the arrival of my seed her pouch yawns and falls back, leaving my betrayed representative gripped at its base, flailing its head in vain inside an immense cavern, at the very moment when above all else it craves to be rocked through its tantrum in a soft, firm, infinitely trustworthy grip. The word which at such moments flashes its tail across the heavens of my never quite extinguished consciousness is *evacuation*: my seed drips like urine into the futile sewers of Marilyn's reproductive ducts. (8)

His rejection of her stems from her “emptiness,” she is not a container: “She . . . wishes to be filled, yet her emptiness is such that that every entry into her she feels as invasion and possession” (8). Dawn's personal appropriation of Henley's 'unconquerability': “I am still the captain of my soul” (10) contrasts with her shallowness woven from television and women's magazines: a wife “out of a novel . . . in a library in provincial America” (15). This “simple nature” who is “not equipped to understand correctly the insights into man's soul” does not understand his work (9), nor is she able to read him: “I articulate Marilyn and her friends better than they do themselves. This is because I understand them as they do not understand me” (10).

Indeed, he claims to know her better than she knows herself, “having contributed much to her making” (12).

The metaphor of evil as infection<sup>125</sup> has its first occurrence in Marilyn's reading of Dawn: “Marilyn and her friends believe that everyone who approaches the innermost mechanism of the war suffers a vision of horror which depraves him utterly” (10). While her belief that Dawn's preoccupation with violence takes its toll is mocked, the novel's two-way movement invites precisely such a reading of Dawn's disease. His own words suggest such toll when he admits that “relations between [his] own and other human bodies have changed” although he does not attribute this to the “pictures of human bodies” that he “carr[ies] around with [him] all day” (10).

Dawn's rejection of Marilyn's ideas requires the reformulation of the understanding of the body. It is now seen as a surface, and all that exists is immediately readable:

She believes I have a secret, a cancer of shameful knowledge. She attributes it to me for her own consolation, for to believe in secrets is to believe the cheery doctrine that hidden in the labyrinth of the memory lies an explanation for the haphazard present . . . I would explain it all to Marilyn were she not so full of their low dogged poison. There are no secrets, I would tell her, everything is on the surface and visible in mere behavior, for those who have eyes to see . . . I have no secrets from you, not you any from me. (10)

Dawn's rejection of psychoanalysis is incomplete: a similar idea expressed by a male professional authority in hospital is accorded greater dignity (48). Furthermore, the belief in the existence of “dogged poison” as a response to the “moral cancer”

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<sup>125</sup> This motif recurs throughout Coetzee's fiction. It often takes the guise of problematization of depicting evil in fiction as well as performing such representations. A similar “road” is travelled by Elizabeth Costello, who devotes one of her lessons, “The Problem of Evil,” to the ethics of representation.

attributed to him implies treating his wife's body as a container, while seeing hidden intention in outward behaviour undermines Dawn's adherence to behaviourism by contradicting his earlier rejection of inner "secrets."

Treated as a surface (a "smiling honey-blonde with long brown legs" (11)), Marilyn's problems are taken as a nuisance. Her therapy "deprives her of all appeal," her problems are viewed as responsible for the lack of passion: "the . . . tears, the red nose . . . anesthetize my most powerful erections and leave me plying grimly at her with only the dimmest epidermal sheath" (11). Marilyn's worth is negotiated in the social sphere and is relative to the desire of other men. But whether it is Lacan's desire of the Other or Girard's mimetic desire,<sup>126</sup> Dawn's arousal at the thought of her infidelity, in the light of his erectile dysfunction, is a joy at a vicarious acknowledgement of his social status and his masculinity: "If Marilyn is unfaithful she is so much the dearer to me, for if strangers prize her she must be valuable, and I am reassured" (11).

While Marilyn is seen as "by character a masturbator" with "fantasies of enslavement," Dawn's own fantasies are rife with both masturbatory elements ("highest pitches of ecstasy" could be achieved only with Marilyn "sleep[ing] through the sexual business" (12)) and sadistic interests: "When . . . I convulse your body with my battery-driven probe, I am only finding a franker way to touch my own centers of power than through the unsatisfying genital connection" (10). Dawn's phallic insecurity is clear when Marilyn's photo is set in contrast with those of "great fashion

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<sup>126</sup> On the influence of Girard's thought on Coetzee's fiction and scholarly work, see Leist and Singer (2010).

models” who “mock[.]” him: “I emerge from the passages of *Vogue* trembling with powerlessness” (13). This feeling, induced by the “passages” of the female body imagined as a container, is absent when looking at Marilyn's photograph, seen as a surface representing a surface.

The photographs used for his work cause instead an empowering “electric impulse” by representing the male body in contrast to “incomplete” body of others (13). The first depicts a sergeant “copulating with a Vietnamese woman . . . tiny and slim possibly even a child” (13) and suggests the understanding of war in terms of sexual activity, reflected in Dawn's description of his work as facilitating “penetration” (20). The second photograph contrasts American masculinity (“glowing wellbeing” of “strong young bodies”) with the dismembered corpses of their victims (15). This celebration of masculinity makes Dawn “giggle” due to the grotesque character of the victim (15-16). The pictures vicariously endow Dawn with desired masculinity imagined to be attainable via a rite of passage involving sex and violence:

I find my hand creeping toward the briefcase at the foot of my desk as toward the bed of my existence but also, I will admit, as toward an encounter full of delicious shame. I uncover my photographs . . . I tremble and sweat, my blood pounds, I am unstrung and fit this night only for shallow, bilious sleep. Surely . . . if they arouse me like this I am a man and these images of phantoms a subject fit for men! (15)

War is also a pursuit of metaphysical wholeness, filling an unspecified “void” and forming a “tragic reach for transcendence” (18). It offers the hope of “substantiality” allowing one to experience oneself as real. Winning confers both reality and masculinity, while a lack of retaliation is read as a castrating lack of

acknowledgement. The suggestion that the aggressors need their enemies due to an internal “lack” is consciously analysed in a passage on the gun as a metaphor:

Why could they not accept us? . . . 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. We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew between ourselves and our objects. (17)

The lack of such acknowledgement fuels further cruelty, as in this passage equating violence and sexuality:

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 . . . We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies, tearing out their livers, hoping to be washed in their blood; but they screamed and gushed like our most negligible phantoms. We forced ourselves deeper than we had ever gone before into their women; but when we came back we were still alone and the women like stones. (17-18)

The Vietnamese myth that Dawn studies at work has a parallel in his personal life. The sons' attempt to appropriate the land requires “overthrowing the sky-god . . . identified with the old order of power (foreign empire, the U.S.),” the cooperation of the mother, hiding her sons “in her bosom, safe from the thunderbolts of the father” and leads to the “unman[ning]” the father (25).<sup>127</sup> To Dawn, the myth presents the father as vulnerable and surrender as a “fate worse than death” (25-26). The failures of the American tactics (the “well-directed radical blow” (25)) result, in his view, from the misunderstanding of the castration symbolism: “The blow that wins the war against the tyrant father is not a death-thrust but a humiliating blow that renders him sterile . . .

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<sup>127</sup> Similarly, in the *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren's body is paralleled with the land (country), thus turning her into an “earth-mother” sheltering Bheki and John set to overthrow the old political system, a male creation.

His kingdom, no longer fertilized, becomes a waste land” (26).<sup>128</sup> Dawn's proposed solution (the “winged dream”) is to attack from within the structure of the myth in an “assault upon the mothering earth herself” (28). His passion for “total war” (28) equates the land with the female body and war with masculine sexuality: the “spraying” in an “orgasm of the explosion” (29).

What follows is the loss of mental control and the revolt of the body: “I am in bad health . . . My health is poor. I have a treacherous wife, an unhappy home, unsympathetic superiors” (29-30). The implied rejection of his report signifies the end of his career but also of the craved subjection to Coetzee and seeking to replicate him:

I was going to do my best, to show him all I was capable of . . . If he had taken notice of me as I really wanted to be noticed, if he had offered any sign of acknowledging his election, I would have given myself utterly to him. . . In Coetzee I could even immerse myself, becoming, in the course of time, his faithful copy . . . (31)

This lack of recognition leads to the return to the container metaphor. This allows for the protection of the inner self by projecting the blame onto the unwanted, “tyrant body” as the external constraint to his “true” core. His “metaphor of the dolorous wound” presents his “core” as a blended space of the corporeal and the cerebral: separate from the body, existing “[i]nside [his] body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape [him]” it is capable of figurative “bleeding” (32). Dawn's mention of an unexplored continent “two hundred years ago” not only provides a link with the second novella but further equates the body and the land. It invites metaphorical

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<sup>128</sup> Because “impotence and sterility are mythologically indistinguishable” (26), the reference to the latter is made when Dawn tells the reader the only thing he successfully cultivated was his “crystal garden” and that he had no success with organisms: “the beans rotted. So did the hamsters, later on” (30).



structuring of the former in terms of the latter suggesting that his words about the absence of “vertiginous freedom” and the lack of space “to beat [his] wings” (32) refer as much to history as to his unwanted body.

Dawn's 'entrance' into the myth happens not only in writing but through the abduction of his son and the attempts to bring him up in a world without women.<sup>129</sup> This eradication of the “effect of his mother” (35), and her “unstable, hysterical character” reflected in the boy's “irrational behaviour” of a “ninny” is to make Martin into “what [Dawn is] not, a happy man” (38). This exercise in masculinity soon concerns only Dawn trapped between the body and language. While his writing is to lead him to the disembodied ideal of the “endless discourse of character, the self reading the self to the self in all infinity” (38) it is permanently undercut by the body and pain. The previously rejected “cancer of shameful knowledge” (10) is rendered as a monstrous pregnancy, the image repeated later in the *Age of Iron*:

Since . . . 1965 their war has been living its life at my expense. I know . . . what it is that has eaten away my manhood from inside, devoured the food that should have nourished me. It is a thing, a child not mine, once a baby squat and yellow whelmed in the dead center of my body, sucking my blood, growing by my waste, now, 1973, a hideous mongol boy who stretches his limbs inside my hollow bones, gnaws my liver with his smiling teeth, voids his bilious filth into my systems, and will not go. (38)<sup>130</sup>

Such image relies on the understanding of the body as a container and evil as a (personified) disease or pregnancy. The feminising connotations of this metaphorical pregnancy suggest the failure of his attempts at achieving masculinity. That failure

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<sup>129</sup> This action of “cut[ting] ties” (36) is consistent with that required to preclude the father's castration in the myth.

<sup>130</sup> Mrs Curren's cancer and pregnancy as embodied guilt or dissolution of the country has its prototype in Dawn's cancer-pregnancy and a wish of a “deliverance” (38).

culminates in the scene of the police raid that deprives him of adulthood and masculinity. Not “used to violence” (39) or to “dealing with force” (44), Dawn pleads in a “tinny” voice, weeps and tries to “be brave” (39-40). With characteristic egocentrism, he takes his wife’s screams as concern for him, rather than the wounded child: “She need not worry, I am all right” (42). Dawn's behaviour displays here his typical passivity towards masculine authority and a desire to please: “Nothing would please me more than to please this heavy man” (40). He is “coming to love” their voices, wishes to learn from the officers (“Perhaps I will be a man yet” (41)) and even admires the blow he is dealt (“amazing” (42)). In all this, he fails to become a disembodied voice and is, instead, reduced to a mute body: “I am aware, if that is awareness, of two cold parted slabs that must be lips, and of a hole that must be the mouth itself, and of a thing, the tongue, which I can push out of the hole, as I do now” (40). This image is complicated by the description of his loss of consciousness “shooting backwards, at a geometrically accelerating pace, according to a certain formula, out of the back of [his] head” (42).

This passivity continues in hospital: “I agree with my doctors . . . They have my welfare at heart, they want me to get better. I do all I can to help them” (43). Such cooperation requires revision of his behaviourist position: “[a]ll faults of character are faults of upbringing” (44). This absolves him from guilt (“a sterile disposition of the mind unlikely to further my cure”), but also prevents engagement with reality: “my health is too precarious . . . to dwell on [Marylin]” (44). In this ideal world of an “all-male institution” (43) women pose a threat: “Most of the trouble in my life has been caused by women, and Marylin was certainly my biggest mistake” (44). Dawn’s

ambition still remains the recognition and acknowledgement: he admires the guards as embodiment of his childhood masculine ideals (46) and tries to be “appreciat[ed]” as a “model” patient (45). Feeling different from other patients (he presents himself as not a “mental case” and with a “better case history”), and active in the “enterprise of exploring the self,” Dawn hopes for an “illuminating” explanation of his breakdown that will not reduce it to the mundane “overwork” or “stress” (46). He hopes his doctors will read his report when he recreates its words “erect with the power of their truth” (46). The continuous craving for the acknowledgement of his masculinity still centres on language.

Dawn feels himself read (“How is it, they must ask themselves, that a fellow in a not uncreative line of work . . . should suffer fantasies of being bound in a prison of flesh . . .?” (47), but maintaining medical interest in himself relies on picturing his body as a container and, perhaps, acting accordingly:

My secret is what makes me desirable to you, my secret is what makes me strong. But will you ever win it? When I think of the heart that holds my secret I think of something closed and wet and black, like, say, the ball in the toilet cistern. Sealed in my chest of treasures, lapped in dark blood, it tramps its blind round and will not die. (48)

The reading of his illness as a somatisation of guilt, and a 'revolt' of the body (48) are taken more seriously than when they were suggested by Marylin. But while Dawn purports to argue with the interpretation offered, he supports it by structuring guilt as bodily infection:

I do not want to see the children of America poisoned by guilt. Guilt is a black poison. I used to sit in the library in the old days feeling the black chuckling through my veins. I was being taken over. I was not my own man. It was insupportable. Guilt was entering our homes through the TV cables. (48)

Such guilt is always the work of others: speculations on the role of the Vietnamese, his mother (“spreading her vampire wings”), or his father (“away being a soldier”) serve as a hope of learning “whose fault [he is]” (49). However, when the novella ends, Dawn remains trapped in his body: where his actions were inspired by it, their consequences are also bodily.

### **“The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”**

The second part of the novel is composed of three parts, none of which functions as a reliable source, presenting different versions of events, each with its own internal inconsistencies.<sup>131</sup> This chapter concentrates primarily on Jacobus's narrative, as here again Coetzee presents the interrelation of universal and personal history, showing the individual body behind a historical event and suggesting bodily inspiration for the conquest of South Africa. Throughout, the novella invites and questions allegorical interpretations by creating the tripartite world in which “everything ha[s] three meanings” (75).

### **Reading Others**

Jacobus's readings of ethnic others begin with the contrast between African 'savagery' and European civilization. This suggestion of otherness prepares the ground for his sexual humiliation where the reversal of positions is the more acute for this

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<sup>131</sup> For an analysis of historical sources used in the novel see Attwell (*Politics* 44-48).

emphasis on otherness. Such 'othering' is expressed in language which equates Africans with animals. Thus the Bushman woman's faithfulness is read as a survival instinct ("no chance alone in the veld") that disappears when other instincts dominate (she needs to be locked up when other Bushmen males are in the area) (60). Jacobus suggests that they "do not breed off white men," although it is profitable to breed them with Hottentots (61). In instances like this, 'others' are subjected to the reductive gaze of dehumanising ethnography.

The perceived inferiority is read in African sexuality. Jacobus believes that "[b]oth men and women are sexually misformed. The men go into death with erections" (61). This obscure statement becomes ironic in the light of later events where Jacobus blurs the line between sexual and warfare excitement, between war and sexual metaphors. Their dances are apparently inspired by the "sexual preliminaries of a dove" and represent "two modes of sexuality, the one priestly and ecstatic, the other luxurious and urbane" (86). There is no confirmation of Jacobus's 'knowledge' and all such interpretations are shown as projections or fantasies: "Nothing would have relieved me more than . . . the dancers to drop their pantomime and cavort in an honest sexual frenzy culminating in mass coitus" (86).<sup>132</sup>

A similar sense of superiority results from his readings of life "without polity" in an African village. Jacobus's expectations of the visit to one include "the gray-bearded chieftain . . . demonstration of firearms, murmurs of awe . . . the feast . . .

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<sup>132</sup> Such focus on sexuality is evident elsewhere: "Having mastered the trick of forcing the testicles back into the body, their men were noted for fleetness of foot. Their women, like those of ancient Egypt, were affected with a noticeable protrusion of *labia minora*, but, knowing no better, regarded it as no blemish" (117-118).

murder foiled . . . ritual dismemberment . . . victory, and amusing but tedious reign as a tribal demi-god” (65-66). The real visit disappoints due to the lack of “feeling for ceremony” and “only the most perfunctory reverence for authority” (72). The chieftain is dying, the air is “thick with flies and stank of urine” (72). The lack of concern of his tribe and the images of filth are presented as a physical proof of European superiority (72).

Jacobus's readings concerning psychology and culture see Christianity as the dividing line between Europeans and Hottentots “locked into the present” with no conception of linear time (57). Their superficial acceptance of Christianity reduces salvation to protection against slaughter and holy days to days of debauchery. According to Jacobus: the Hottentot will “gladly sing your hymns if it means they can spend the rest of Sunday stuffing themselves on your food” (57). The Bushman, on the other hand, is “a wild animal with an animal’s soul” whose ruthlessness leaves them undeserving of human respect: “Heartless as baboons they are, and the only way to treat them is as beasts” (58).<sup>133</sup> Jacobus describes ways of “hunting” the Bushmen suggesting an attitude of “no softness:” “A bullet is too good for a Bushmen” (60). The settlers' treatment of them goes unquestioned; the story of a trap, presented in the language of game-hunting, is thus purely informative:

The gun . . . had . . . blown the face off a male Bushman and wounded a female so badly that she could not move; there was even a third blood spoor leading

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<sup>133</sup> The other parts of the novella continue such 'othering' by describing African eating habits which cannot be “dignified with the name of religion” (112-113) and cruelty to animals: “From the living flesh of a wounded animal the morbid area would be gouged with a blunt stone knife. The haunch of a stolen ox would be hacked off and eaten before the beast agonized eyes” (114). Elsewhere, Cape Hottentots are referred to as “the most helpless, the most wretched of the human race” (117), “Material enough for a book” (118).

off into the hills which he did not follow . . . He strung the male up from a tree and mounted the female on a pole and left them as warnings (58).

Contact with European culture makes the African a “false creature” proficient “in how to placate you . . . telling you what he thinks you want to hear” (65). 'Domestication' deprives them of 'savage' masculinity: “Put him in Christian clothes and he begins to cringe, his shoulders bend, his eyes shift, he cannot keep still in your presence but must incessantly twitch” (65).

Sexually and mentally immature, Africans are repeatedly read as childish. Jacobus's believes his servants see him as their “father”<sup>134</sup> and themselves as children who “would have died without [him]” (64). During the first meeting with the tribe, their childishness is consciously mentioned: “Was I dealing with adults?” (67) and the evidence for this reading is provided by the description of their behaviour: “All around his alert men took up the cry. “Presents, presents!” they clamoured, and one thrust his way forward and began a little dance in front of my horse . . . “Presents!” he sang, “We want presents!” (68). Jacobus's lecture on hospitality fails to influence these “little slave-boys” (69): “The irony and moralism of forensic oratory . . . were quite alien to Hottentot sensibility. They did not flare into action, nor indeed did my speech receive any reply” (71). This encounter begins Jacobus's experiences in the village which he enters “full of the dangerous euphoria of a man who has made up his mind” (71). Unlike the Africans, Jacobus presents himself as a container with a mysterious centre.

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<sup>134</sup> And “god” (71).

## Reading Oneself

If Dawn's and Jacobus's bodies underlie their actions, Jacobus's self-reading presents him as Dawn's opposite in his active search for sentient experience. Indeed, self-reading outside the binary self-other pair is possible only through the experience of pleasure and pain. In the first instance, Jacobus is a 'Renaissance' man of the senses: "I have always enjoyed watching coitus, whether of animals or of slaves. Nothing human is alien to me" (86).<sup>135</sup> His exploration of the land parallels his explorations of local women, who "spoil one for one's own kind." Like the frontier, their surface selves allow for exploration, give power, and carry no responsibility (61). While Dutch women have "an aura of property" and bring "not only so many pounds of white flesh but also so many morgen of land . . . and then an army of fathers and mothers and brothers" African women are seen as perfect sex-slaves:

a wild Bushman girl is tied into nothing . . . She has seen you kill the men who represented power to her . . . like dogs. You have become Power itself now and she nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away . . . Her response to you is absolutely congruent with your will. (61)

Such women, and their desire ("pegged out waiting for [his] pleasure"), represent the freedom, power and pleasures of the frontier, the "something for nothing" away from the constraints of civilisation or the property and kinship relations.

On the other hand, self-reading is possible in pain. Fever and the loss of consciousness bring "the flexings of the soul's wings" and the transcendent experience

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<sup>135</sup> Here, Jacobus invokes P. Terentius Afer's (Terence's) "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" from his *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*).



of “inhabit[ing] the past” (77). Jacobus relives his past, meditates “upon the acres of new ground [he] had eaten up with [his] eyes . . . upon the deaths [he] had presided over,” enters the souls of animals and “repossesses” the inanimate world. His meditations on reality and himself employ the dichotomy of a container and a surface:

How then . . . 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 . . .) (78).

While the last image evokes the earlier “secret buried within” that cannot “be touched” (75), its lack of specificity invites reading Jacobus as having a hidden core and thus meaning more than he does literally, on the surface. Jacobus's search for sentient experience is a search of a copula with external reality that would prove the substantiality of his experience. As in *Foe*, the suggestion of insubstantiality invites interpretation due to its ambiguity: there is the self-reflexive irony of being a literary character, the unfulfilled craving of bodily experience, but also the suggestion of insignificance in the larger colonial enterprise. Jacobus's meditations on reality and dreams, and his description of himself as trapped in the “effete topos of dreaming oneself and the world” (78) foreground textuality, but the narrative soon returns to the body by suggesting a bodily solution to Jacobus's problem of the connection with reality. His vision destroys the “sense of boundaries” between the inside and the outside (“What is there that is not me?” (78)).<sup>136</sup> Because visual objectification deprives the object of its identity, his gaze can be seen as colonial: the land becomes him,

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<sup>136</sup> As he claims, “the eyes have power. The eyes are free, they reach out to the horizon all around. Nothing is hidden from the eyes” (78-79).

he encloses the land he crosses. Thus external reality is created by his vision and he becomes a container, a “sac with a black core full of images and a gun” (79).<sup>137</sup>

Substantiality and the bodily connection with reality is provided by the gun. In the physical sense, the weapon is a body extension equated with the penis,<sup>138</sup> but because “the need for it is metaphysical rather than physical” (80) the weapon overcomes the “loneliness” and “isolation” by standing for “the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself” and saving its owner from “the fear that all life is within us” (79). Death provides the “evidence” of a “dying and therefore a living world” and of the existence of outside reality:

The death of the hare is the logic of salvation. For either he was living out there and is dying into a world of objects, and I am content; or he was living within me and would not die within me . . . The hare dies to keep my soul from merging with the world. (79-80)

Counting is akin to killing or naming in taming the wild. If “[t]he wild is one because it is boundless” (80), number and its organizing capacity renders it finite and controlled: “Every wild creature I kill crosses the boundary between wilderness and number . . . I have presided over the becoming number of ten thousand creatures” (80).

Lacking guns and the ability to count, Africans do not control nature: they are part of it. This state is to change with the meeting of the two cultures: the gun “will kill them in large numbers” and the “yearning for it will alienate them from the wilderness” (80). Devoid of the metaphorical phallus, they are neither true enemies nor true men: their “grow[ing] into manhood” remains a visual illusion (80). Jacobus's

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<sup>137</sup> Dawn similarly describes his core as “black” (48).

<sup>138</sup> In the attack on Jacobus, his 'sexually immature' attackers “do not have guns” (80). The weapon offers “an ideal form of the life of penetration” (81) of both African bodies and the African land.

dialectics of master and slave presents the colonial encounter and a battle for the ownership of history as an attempt to reduce the 'container' of the enemy to a 'surface' of textual history. An African is thus a representative

of that out there which my eye once enfolded and ingested and which now promises to enfold, ingest, and project me through itself as a speck on a field which we may call annihilation or alternatively history. He threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term. Such is the material basis of the malady of the master's soul (81).<sup>139</sup>

The parallels between the gun and penis, the land and the female body become more pronounced when, tired of hunting, Jacobus finds a different way to “initiate [him]self into the desert” as a way of enacting “every possible copula” (95). His failed attempt at masturbation with the soil, the “ur-act” that ends in “helpless urination” (95) clearly equates the land with the body and presents every such copula as one-sided self-gratification: “I don't like accomplices, God, I want to be alone” (95-96).

### **Being Read: Humiliation**

Jacobus's reasons for cruelty lie in the humiliation of his body. The first humiliation is the exhausting and undignified illness. This tamer of the wild is unable to tame his body: whatever he eats is quickly evacuated “in a furious gush” (74), “heroically,” (75) “in acid gusts” (84) or “fouling [his] bed” (75). This loss of control and the need of assistance reverse the previous order. Equalised by the “Hottentot

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<sup>139</sup> Compare with Michael K's 'refusal' to be a term in the Medical Officer's history. The idea of the textualization of the body and embodying a text is also navigation between the images of surfaces and containers. This is what happens with Dawn's reading of *Vogue* (a surface text treated as a corporeal container) and of his wife (a container body read as a two-dimensional surface text).

sickness,” he begins to signify the body and nature (76). The illness installs the Hottentot in power over the helpless 'master': his lodging in one of the “menstruation huts” determines his status as an unclean and feminised other.<sup>140</sup> His unwelcome appearance in the village ends in a humiliating retreat: “My buttocks grated on each other but I could not afford a wrong gesture . . . I had an attack of vertigo, this time from the enraged blood that flooded my head” (85).

The 'taming' power of vision proves useless in the context of his illness: “I imagined the swelling in my buttock as a bulb shooting pustular roots into my fertile flesh.” Vision has to give way to the touch that allows objectification: “It had grown sensitive to pressure, but to gentle finger-stroking it still yielded a pleasant itch” (83). The boil foregrounds embodiment but also introduces 'otherness' within the body. Such otherness acquires a life of its own: “The oiliest wisp of wool in Klawer’s gentlest hand could no longer wring from it a tremor of pleasure. Instead there began a faint throbbing, a little heart in time with my big heart” (84).

The scene depicting the “lancing” of the boil evokes an act of aggressive anal masturbation; its erotic language clearly foregrounds painful pleasure. The earlier meditations on suicide as involving an impossible alterity and a separation into subject and object (79) are reenacted when the body is both the agent of pain and its victim, the weapon and the target. Extremes of pain and pleasure lead to a carnal relief which, it is suggested, is also a relief for the soul:

I gathered the pus-knob between the knuckles of my thumbs and readied myself for violation. With growing might I pressed, bearing down with a full fury, more or less, allowing for posture, of an adult male in the pride of his

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<sup>140</sup> His companions there are grotesquely other: a noseless woman and a child without nose and ears, with their skins peeling to reveal “a pink inner self in poor imitation of European colouring” (83).

years, through climax after climax of pain and even through the first consolations of failure . . . The skin must have been weakened by my exertions; for at once, with exquisite surprise, I heard, or if not heard felt in my eardrums, the tissues give way and bathe my fingers in a spurt and then a steady dribble of wet warmth. My body relaxed, and while I continued to milk the fistula with my right hand I could afford to bring my left hand up to the sense-organs of my face for the indulgences of inhalation and scrutiny. Such must be the gratification of the damned. (89)

In this convoluted relation between the self and the other within, the “whispers” of the children stealing his clothes are almost taken as the voice of illumination.

Jacobus's major humiliation begins with a fight during which, among “whirling limbs” he finds himself “with a mouth full of hair and a human ear” with “nothing to do but survive” (90). The text suggest sexual violence in depicting Jacobus as “subjected to indignities” with his attackers “waiting for another opening” before subjecting him to the “final degradation” (90). Heretofore read as sexually passive and impotent, the Hottentot youth threaten to reverse this order by their 'masculine', active role that feminises passive Jacobus:

Naked and filthy I knelt in the middle of the ring with my face in my hands, stifling my sobs in the memory of who I was . . . Bodies fell upon me, I was suffocated and pinned to the ground. Ants, *ants raped* from their nest, enraged and bewildered, their little pincers scything and their bodies bulging with acid, descended between my spread buttocks, on to my tender anus, on to my weeping rose, my nobly laden testicles (90, emphasis added).

Although directly unmentioned, rape is nevertheless suggested.<sup>141</sup> The humiliation consists in forced sameness: being feminised by 'effeminate' Africans, infantilised by children and “Africanised” by being deprived of his gun. In this instance, Jacobus's

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<sup>141</sup> “I ground pitifully with the never hitherto exerted muscles of my perineum and achieved nothing” (91).

psychological survival depends on moving from being treated as a surface on which the enemy impresses meanings to the understanding of himself as a container: “I withdrew inside myself and in my womb of ice totted up the profit and the loss” (91).<sup>142</sup> This sameness is also denied (“I am among you, but I am not of you”) or wilfully misread: “I had not failed, I had not died, therefore I had won” (92).

This forced objectification promises a new self-reading:

With what new eyes of knowledge, I wondered, would I see myself when I saw myself, now that I had been violated by the cackling heathen. Would I know myself better? Around my forearms and neck were rings of demarcation between the rough red-brown skin of myself the invader of the wilderness and slayer of elephants and myself the Hottentots’ patient victim. (97)

Where his previous longing for visual representation of his buttocks left a gap between the objective and subjective dimensions of the body, here vision incorporates the wound in wholeness and regains control over the objectified parts. Such meditations on the body waver between seeing the body as a container and as a surface:

It had fallen on my shame, a judicious point of attack; but it had been baffled from the beginning, in a body which partook too of the labyrinth, by the continuity of my exterior with the interior surface of my digestive track. The male body has no inner space. (96)

While Jacobus feels violated (“They had violated my privacy, all my privacies, from the privacy of my property to the privacy of my body”), he denies the previously suggested rape: “The Hottentots knew nothing of penetration. For penetration you need blue eyes . . . Their failure to enter more deeply into me had disappointed me” (96-97). This confirms assumed racial superiority, but presents the attack as akin to the

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<sup>142</sup> Such metaphors appear elsewhere: “There had been legs, metaphorical legs, and much else too, that I had been prepared to lose,” “In the blindest alley of the labyrinth of my self I had hidden myself away, abandoning mile after mile of defences” (96).

Vietnamese refusal of recognition. The Hottentot failure to enter “more deeply” is thus read as the lack of acknowledgement:

Why had they not killed me? . . . Was I to understand the desultory attentions paid 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? . . . To these people to whom life was nothing but a sequence of accidents had I not been simply another accident? Was there nothing to be done to make them take me more seriously? (97-98)

The humiliation is partly dispelled by the reinterpretation of the Namaqua as “not true savages”: “Even I knew more about savagery than they” (98). After considering various ways in which his story might develop and sharing Dawn's frustration with story-telling, Jacobus immerses himself in “bloodlust and anarchy whose story would fill another book” (99).<sup>143</sup> Aggression, as Dawn imagined, confers masculinity on the killer: Jacobus feels himself filled out “once more to a man’s stature” (99), the feeling that culminates during his revenge.

### **Revenge**

The revenge begins with a sermon presenting Jacobus's enemies as “nonentities swept away on the tide of history,” functioning as a term in his (100). Various referring to them as surfaces with no independent meaning, he also despairs of seeing them as containers without substance: the “undifferentiated plenum . . . the void dressed up as being” (101). Like the Vietnamese in Dawn's story, their lack of substantiality and independent signification is the reason for punishment:

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<sup>143</sup> While Dawn finds “spin[ning] motels . . . into long, dense paragraphs” difficult (37), Jacobus fears the difficulty of “translat[ing] [him]self soberly across the told tale . . . in the shortest possible time” (99).

There was nothing that could be impressed on these bodies, nothing that could be torn from them or forced through their orifices, that would be commensurate with the desolate infinity of my power over them. They could die summarily or in the most excruciating pain, I could leave them to be picked by the vultures, and they would be forgotten in a week. I was undergoing nothing less than a failure of imagination before the void. I was sick at heart. (102).

This part of the novel is filled, as Jacobus wishes, with “decorum.” The first shot of the kind Jacobus has “always admired” (100), kills a girl, a “pretty child,” exhilarates: “I will not fail you, beautiful death, I vowed.” Despite the time of day (“midday executions lacking the poignancy of a firing squad in a rosy dawn” (101)), the aesthetization of death is prominent: “Fill in the morning smoke rising straight in the air, the first flies making for the corpse, and you have the tableau” (100). The tableau comprises religious references (“Golgotha” (102), the last supper (103)), descriptions of the rape of children and executions, in which Jacobus marvels at the insubstantiality of the enemy bodies (“The shot sounded as minor as a shot fired into the sand. Whatever happened in the pap inside his head left his eyes crossed” (104)) but mostly experiences profound boredom.

The killings are meticulously described with Jacobus rejecting vulgarity and striving for the beauty, precision and poetic quality of his descriptions. His elegant and restrained language renders executions an almost religious rite, the fulfilment of a duty made sublime. This being Coetzee’s first novel, it represents his early approach towards the depiction of violence. Images of barbarity are described in painstaking detail. Such representations will later give way (as they do in Elizabeth Costello's thinking) to the moral, and artistic problematization of representing suffering, to



suggesting rather than representing it, with a continuous meditation on the moral status of such representations.

The act of colonial cruelty forming the larger historical process is suggested as having its inspiration in the body and its humiliation. While the cause of Jacobus's evil is unknown, the text suggests an interpretation by presenting Jacobus's recollection of how, as a child, he was taught to "dispose of wounded birds" (105), by breaking their necks. The significance of this passage for understanding Jacobus is unclear and the problems inherent in reading his behaviour as a result of childhood experience are consciously referenced when Jacobus provides an explanatory passage "if any expiation explanation palinode be needed," claiming that nothing he killed was "of inestimable value" (106). His role of an "explorer" is to "open what is closed," to expose and "bring light to what is dark," and, if exploration and reading are impossible, to "clear it out of the way." The former is consistent with the traditional metaphorical understanding of truth and knowledge as exposure, laying bare, analysed by Blakey Vermeule (109).<sup>144</sup> That latter is depicted in his narrative: the emptiness of the African bodies would render "skirt[ing]" a betrayal of his mission. Their unreadability is read as a void: an emptiness that cannot be endowed with meaning and as with Dawn's Vietnamese, the reason for their death: "I know with certainty that their life held nothing . . . They died in a storm of terror, understanding nothing. They were the people of limited intellect and people of limited being" (106).

The text suggests Jacobus re-establishes his link with outside reality through killing and recovers his masculinity through the weapon. It invites the reading of the

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<sup>144</sup> Vermeule links this to the Enlightenment metaphors of dissection. I think it could be extrapolated on torture and mutilation and thus be useful in the analysis of Coetzee's imagery.

body as inspiring a 'historical' event and as shielding the mystery of Jacobus's evil. Allegorical interpretation is staged consciously: "Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality" (106). In his own reading, Jacobus sees himself as standing for patriotic sacrifice and a religious calling: He goes on to suggest what he symbolizes: the patriotic "sacrifice" ("for myself and my countrymen, who exist, and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished" (106)) and a religious and historical calling ("Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they die, through me? God's judgement is . . . incomprehensible . . . I am a tool in the hands of history" (106)).<sup>145</sup> Both of these interpretations may obviously be incorrect.

Jacobus also consciously meditates on his embodiment: he is "afraid" of death, "project[s] [himself]" into the day "when the undertaker's understudy will slit [him] open and pluck from their tidy bed the organs of [his] inner self [he] [has] so long cherished" and wonders about the afterlife of his body: "does he throw them to the economic pigs?" (106). Such a fear is alleviated by the split into subject and object initially occasioned by the body and maintained by language: given that the world without him is "inconceivable," death becomes a story told to "frighten [himself], to make [his] blankets more cosy" (107). Language exists here as the extension of the life of the body: like Mrs Curren, Jacobus feels safe as long as he narrates. The navigation between the language and the body renders Jacobus either a language construct: a narrating self foregrounding its constructedness, or primarily the mortal body. The

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<sup>145</sup> This necessity overrides his stated natural impulses: "No more than any other man do I enjoy killing" (106).

promise of a resolution to this dichotomy is suggested and quickly undercut by a mundane admission of having “other things to think about” (107). Both visions of Jacobus are invited in his ambiguous last words: “I too can attain and inhabit a point of view from which . . . I can be seen to be superfluous . . . when the day comes you will find that whether I am alive or dead, whether I ever lived or was never born, has never been of real concern to me” (107).

The Afterword and the Deposition continue to waver between the body and language by textualising Jacobus's body and attempting to discover the bodily truth in written sources. The previous meditations on Jacobus's vision are continued here when his “keen hunter's eye” is credited with discovering, naming “differentiating and bringing into existence” previously unknown world beings (116). As an explorer he is likened to a “god” who creates “civilization in fact, *ab ovo*” (116, 118).<sup>146</sup>

The documents at the end pursue and mock the pursuit of bodily truth in history writing. On the one hand, the historical text moves towards the resurrection of the body; it concentrates on “bodily” traces of Jacobus's expedition: “faeces dotted . . . over a broad area” or a rope “eaten by a hyena on August 22.” It lists “dead hair,” “mucus and blood,” “rotten teeth, calculus, phlegm, vomit” and other ephemeral “relics” whose “atomic constituents are still of course among us” (119). On the other hand, history writing moves away from the body towards language, it mistranslates the body into a “meaning” which does not do justice to individual bodily experience. Thus

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<sup>146</sup> He is godly only in this creationist sense. The narrator calls him: “a humble man who did not play God” and who was “unlikely to have tortured his animals” (101).

many aspects of Jacobus's life become “an historical irrelevance” and belong to “anecdote, the evening by the hearth-fire” (120-121).

Both 'The Vietnam Project' and 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' make such bodily “irrelevance” an object of scrutiny. They are interested in a personal history of the body rather than the universal meaning of history and politics. This shift from the universal to the individual foregrounds the experience of embodiment and pain that underlie historical events. Coetzee's interest in history has a frail human body at its centre, is inspired by it and forms a part of a larger project of elaborating on human corporeality in all its incarnations.

## **Part II: *The Age of Iron***

### **The End**

“It was like living in an allegory” (84)

While *Dusklands* deals with the beginnings of colonisation, *Age of Iron*, the story of a dying body and “the soul it houses” is the story of the end. While *Dusklands* deals with masculinity and links the conquest of the feminine land with male desire, *Age of Iron* investigates femininity linking a dying female body with the decaying country. While the story is “of a body” (170), it is also a meditation on history and politics. Abstract, universal ideas, are presented here through Mrs Curren’s experience of embodiment suggesting a figurative meaning of her pain and illness. Just as in *Dusklands*, the general is presented from the perspective of the individual body, while

the individual body has political significance and bears the consequences of the universal.

### **Part I: Mrs Curren, her body, her land**

The equation of the dying body and deteriorating country is made in the first paragraph of the novel and “in the space of an hour” in Mrs Curren's life (4). The garden, her daughter's former playground, is “a dead place, waste,” inhabited by a “derelict.” The homeless are now “part of life” (6), “hang[ing] around the parking lots . . . drinking under the flyover, eating out of refuse cans” (3). Represented as agents of contagion, they themselves “do not sicken”: “Warmed from within by alcohol. The contagions and infections in their blood consumed in liquid flame” (4). The images of these “scavengers . . . whose number never dwindles” (4) are paired with the news of Mrs Curren's cancer diagnosis. In contrast to *Dusklands*, where the male protagonists discipline their bodies, Mrs Curren's reaction is acceptance reminiscent of the Annunciation: “the news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused” (3).<sup>147</sup> These two processes of decay inspire her letter, which is “not a baring of my heart. It is a baring of something, but not of my heart” (13).

The two main social groups of her country are given contrasting bodily descriptions. Young black South Africans are represented by “roaming gangs . . . the sullen-mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the prison-house is already beginning to close” (6). Equally little sympathy is felt for their white

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<sup>147</sup> Similarly, her letter must “resist the craving to share [her] death” (5).

counterparts, “spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons” in the world of “[s]wimming lessons, riding lessons, ballet lessons . . . lives passed within walled gardens guarded by bulldogs.” In contrast to 'iron' black bodies, theirs are “soft”: “children of paradise, blond, innocent, shining with angelic light, soft as *putti* . . . drenched in honey . . . Slumberous . . . bliss-filled, abstracted” (6-7). A similar emphasis on the body characterises her descriptions of the authorities: she feels a visceral “disgrace” at living under their power, “under their meaty bellies, their full bladders,” like “kneeling and being urinated on” (9).

Mrs. Curren's political position is ambiguous: critical of apartheid, she realises her longing for the past refers to the world to which “[she] alone could look back with nostalgia” (63), a past of “the middle-classes, the comfortable classes” spent “roaming the country-side from beauty-spot to beauty-spot, bringing the afternoon to a close with tea and scones and strawberry jam and cream in a tea-room with a nice view, preferably westward over the sea” (63). Contrasted with that of her domestic's children, her childhood is remembered as “long sun-struck afternoons, the . . . avenues of eucalyptus, the quiet rustle of water in roadside furrows, the lulling of doves.” It was a “childhood of sleep, prelude to what was meant to be a life without trouble and a smooth passage to Nirvana” (85). Her growing consciousness and the acceptance of shame turns this paradise into an image of limbo:

If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld. White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our colour, the colour of limbo . . . *In limine primo*: on the threshold of death, the threshold of life. Creatures thrown up by the sea, stalled on the sands, undecided, indecisive, neither hot nor cold, neither fish nor fowl. (85)

Her liminal position makes her criticism of the violence in townships ambiguous: it could be read as a rational disagreement with enlisting children in armed combat, or as expressing an unconscious fear of a threat to her status.

Much of the text is devoted to the exploration of pain. Mrs Curren renders it as “hurling itself . . . like a dog, sinking its teeth in my back” (9). Her initial acceptance is mixed with the hatred of her body:

I am capable of putting a hand on the bread-board and chopping it off without a second thought. What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hands and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things. And these legs, these clumsy, ugly stilts: why should I have to carry them with me everywhere? (11).

The split into mental subject and corporeal object underlies her seeing the mind as independent of, and alienated from, the body. At the same time, she is aware this may not be true: “We sicken before we die so that we will be weaned from our body . . . Yet this first life, this life on earth, on the body of earth – will there, can there ever be a better?” (11-12). Her house, a metonymic extension of her body undergoes the same process: it is a dying place, “a site without human past; to spirits . . . to angels, of no interest” (13).

This understanding of the mind as a non-physical 'core' allows to control pain by projecting it outside of her container: “It is not I who am in pain, I say to myself: the one in pain is someone else, some body else who shares this bed with me. So, by a trick, I hold it off, keep it elsewhere.” This is often unsuccessful, as pain undermines such dualism, reduces her humanity to the body and leaves her “tricks” to be “swept away like the dikes of Zeeland” (120). Pain can also be controlled by medication, but that symptomatically annuls her consciousness. The return to consciousness is the

return to “the real thing” of painful embodiment (126) and the life devoid of action: “again and again I am back, from the belly of the whale disgorged. A miracle each time, unacknowledged, uncelebrated, unwelcome. Morning after morning I am disgorged, cast up on the shore, given another chance. And what do I do with it?” (126-127). The losing and regaining of painful consciousness is rendered by images of immersion: “Lie . . . on the sands waiting for the night tide to return, to encircle me, to bear me back into the belly of darkness. Not properly born: a liminal creature, unable to breathe in water, that lacks the courage to leave the sea behind and become a dweller on land” (127). Drugged dream visions bring mysterious words that invite allegorical readings: (“Are they anagrams? They look like anagrams. But for what, and in what language?” (126)) and end in ambiguous visions of mass destruction and “immers[ion]”: “a hell into which I plummet when I close my eyes” (126).

The two sources of pleasure in her life are experienced through the senses. The beauty of nature fills her with hunger: “the hunger of the eyes that I feel, such hunger that I am loth even to blink . . . I am hungry with love of this world” (16) and moves her 'core': “decent sobbing . . . long wails without articulation, . . . emptyings of the heart” (17). The other is music existing in a “closed universe,” “enclosing ” the world. Unaffected by politics it is “[t]he one border they cannot close . . . the border upwards, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky. Where I am due to travel. Where no passports are called for” (20). Not playing – her mistakes are “grown by now into the bone, never to be corrected” – she finds solace in music's permanence (“the real music . . . does not die” (21)). This permanence contrasts with the physical body; music is “pure spirit” born in a container of a repulsive body: an



“unlikely temple” (21). Her visions of the afterlife include a hotel lobby filled with music where “without pain” or “incident” the elderly listen to “the heavenly unending music, waiting for nothing, paging idly though the store of memories” (22).

In contrast with the permanence of music the ephemeral body brings only pain. It is not shareable: the doctor's “we” is professional politeness (“But not he: I” (23)). The hope that “in this one case, my case there may have been a mistake” is understood as the hopelessness of being faced with a death sentence: “They plead with the firing-squad, they weep, they joke, they offer bribes, they offer everything they possess: the rings off their fingers, the clothes off their backs” (23). The diagnosis similarly positions her against a “blank wall: death” (23). Pain shrinks the world to the size of the body and becomes the one undeniable fact in life: “Death is the only truth left” (23). Keeping her awake at night (24), it induces visions of the past rendering her a creature of the past: “A dodo: the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying” (25) or an archaeological fossil (21).

The disintegration of the body in disease is seen as a consequence of years of moral corruption.<sup>148</sup> Where moral corruption is structured as ugliness, the physical and the metaphysical are treated as one: “How ugly we are growing, from being unable to think well of ourselves! Even the beauty queens look irritable. Ugliness: what is it but

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<sup>148</sup> She openly admits her historical guilt, although she is a passive witness: “A crime was committed long ago . . . I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it.” Such crime has a price “to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented.” Mrs Curren uses container metaphor to describe her complicity: “Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. I raged at times against the men who did the dirty work . . . but I accepted too that . . . they lived inside me” (149-150). The shame evolves, according to Mrs Curren, into cancer: “I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (132). There is a constant invitation to allegory in presenting her disease as having a reason, interpretation, or meaning beyond itself.

the soul showing through the flesh?” (121). Mrs Curren sees expressions fossilising into facial features: “A thickening of the membrane between the world and the self inside, a thickening become thickness” (116). Their bodies show the figurative closing of the eyes to moral dimension of existence. This “evolution backwards” could be seen as a reversal of the colonial process started with Jacobus’s sight which incorporated and possessed all that he saw.

The disease caused by ugliness and shame evolve into a disease that is matched by the disease crippling the state.<sup>149</sup> Like her disease, politics causes pain, “gloom and nausea” (25). Where ‘uninvited’ illness results in death of the body, the uninvited authorities (“Legitimacy they no longer trouble to claim”) produce “decrees like hammer-blows: death, death, death” (25-26). Mrs Curren sees the evil emanating from their male bodies, theatrically displayed in a “ritual manifestation”: “thanatophany: showing us our death. *Viva la muerte!* their cry, their threat. Death to the young. Death to life” (26). She only “half-attend[s]” to the world outside her pain, but what is outside is invited to be read as mirroring the inside: a similar disintegration takes place in the public and private sphere (36).

The first, bodily, link between the two ethnic worlds is seen watching Florence's husband on a chicken farm, “splashed with blood” next to a bin full of heads: “it was not inconceivable that some of the bodies I had stuffed with breadcrumbs and egg-yolk and sage and rubbed with oil and garlic had been held, at the last, between the legs of this man, the father of Florence’s children” (38, 39).

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<sup>149</sup> Mrs Curren often almost equates the two: “Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that one is beyond one's term. This country too . . . time for an end” (59).

Captivated by the sight of mechanical killing, Mrs Curren sees the physical world underlying and supporting her own: “I thought of all the men across the breadth of South Africa who, while I sat gazing out of the window, were killing chickens, moving earth, barrowful upon barrowful; of all the women sorting oranges, sewing buttonholes . . . A universe of labour” (41).

Her primary contact with this 'other' South Africa is through Florence's unreadable body and, vicariously, through Florence's experience of her son's death. Florence's refusal to condemn violence – “I cannot tell these children what to do” (36) – is read by Mrs Curren as irresponsible, but it provides access to a physical reality absent in official language:

Of trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspapers say nothing. In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks . . . What I know about events in Guguletu depends solely on what Florence tells me and what I can learn by standing on the balcony and peering north-east: namely, that Guguletu is not burning today . . . (36)

Political differences between the two women surface with their different interpretations of Vercueil. Florence's hostility – “he is rubbish. He is good for nothing” (44) – suggests reading him in terms of his usefulness in political struggle, as is perhaps Bheki's teasing: “*They* are making you into a dog! . . . Drunkard!” (41, emphasis added). Mrs Curren's defence (43) ambiguously stems either from an apolitical interpretation of Vercueil or her opposition to the means to the end: “If this is how the new guardians of the people conduct themselves, Lord spare us from them” (42).

Discussions with Florence, which ostensibly concern private matters, reveal further differences in the public sphere. Mrs Curren's concern with bad behaviour or irresponsible parenting applies to both private and public spheres:

You are showing Bheki and his friends that they can raise their hands against their elders with impunity. That is a mistake . . . you admire your son's generation because they are afraid of nothing. Be careful: they may start by being careless of their own lives and end by being careless of everyone else's. (45-46)

Florence's responses present historical reasons behind such behaviour ("It is the whites who made them so cruel!") and express pride in the new generation "like iron" (46).

While Florence sees in the "age of iron" the time of people not broken by the hardships of existence, Mrs Curren sees the militarization of the young. Her rejection of the new age again reflects either a threatened privileged position or an ethical response to the violence preached. She is, however, aware of the cycles of history:

What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite? Did we not have the Voortrekkers . . . grim-faced tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland? . . . Are there not still white zealots preaching the old regime . . . a regime of death, to children too young to tie their own shoelaces? (46-47).

A similar disagreement concerns Bheki's rejection of education. His claims that schools forces him to "fit into the apartheid system" is dismissed as naïve: "Apartheid is not going to die tomorrow or the next day. He is ruining his future" (61-62).

These two separate worlds are brought together by the experience of the body. The police-provoked accident initially presents the political discrepancy revealed in different attitudes to dealing with the authorities (57, 60). Soon, the focus is on Mrs Curren's perception of the mutilated body: the "raw" palms, the skin which "hung in

strips” (57) and its hypnotising effect: “the flood would not stop . . . Blood flowed in a sheet into the boy’s eyes and made his hair glisten . . . it was everywhere. I did not know blood could be so dark, so thick, so heavy” (57). The “dark” blood is reminiscent of a visit to a hospital where her daughter's trivial cut contrasts with a “torrent of black blood”: “Blood on the floor, blood on the benches. What did our timid thimbleful count for beside this torrent of black blood?” (58). The experience uncovered a different lived histories of whites and blacks in the “country prodigal of blood” (58).

These meditations combine into a vision of blood transcending the boundaries of race, and suggesting sameness in embodiment, the brotherhood of suffering:

It was blood . . . like yours and mine . . . I stared at it, fascinated, afraid, drawn into a veritable stupor of staring . . . Because blood is precious, more precious than gold and diamonds. Because blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together: lent, not given: held in common, in trust, to be preserved: seeming to live in us, but only seeming, for in truth we live in it. (58)

The novel wavers between the problematisation of difference and suggestions of sameness. The sameness suggested here might exist on a fundamental level that allows for difference to be introduced by societal structures. At the core, Mrs Curren suggests that the embodiment, corporeality, and the reality of pain and mutilation, transgress such constructed boundaries. However, this is negotiated with the foregrounding of difference: “never before had I seen anything . . . so black. Perhaps it was an effect of the skin . . . velvet dark, over which it ran; but even on my hands it seemed both darker and more glaring than blood ought to be” (58). Such difference is foregrounded in a vision of the afterlife:

A sea of blood, come back all together: is that how it will be at the end of days?  
. . . A body of blood. Of all mankind? No: in a place apart, in a mud-walled  
dam in the Karoo with barbed wire around it and the sun blazing down, the  
blood of the Afrikaners and their tribute-bearers, still, stagnant. (58-59)

The experience underlies Mrs Curren's political consciousness allowing for the  
sympathy with the victims of state violence and for the emotional, if not intellectual,  
sympathy for their cause.

Some identification with the victims is suggested during a hospital visit where  
Mrs Curren sees elderly patients, her "secret brothers," in a place "where [she]  
belong[s]," (62) described by Florence as a "waiting-room for the funeral" (70):

I was tired, my hip ached, my heart was thumping . . . But there was more to it  
than that. I was seeing too many sick old people and too suddenly. They  
oppressed and intimidated me. Black and white, men and women, they shuffled  
about the corridors, watching each other covetously, eyeing me as I  
approached, catching unerringly on me the smell of death. (64)

Such intimations of mortality remain as visceral, and inexpressible in language, as her  
attitude to the boy: "There is something stupid about him . . . deliberately stupid,  
obstructive, intractable. He is one of those boys whose voices deepen too early, who  
by the age of twelve have left their childhood behind and turned brutal, knowing" (71-  
72). At the same time, Mrs Curren experiences the failure of language: her attempt to  
tell the boy something that cannot wait (emphasised in its urgency by her clutching his  
hand) does not result in communication: "My words fell off him like dead leaves the  
moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old  
woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white" (72-73). While her  
ambiguous appeal to individuality might signify various ideas, none of them breaks his

“wall of resistance” (72): “Though his eyes were open, he did not see; what I said he did not hear” (72). The impenetrability of the interlocutor reduces her language to mere sounds, foregrounding the racial, class and generational barriers: “He knew and he did not listen, as he had never listened to any of his teachers, but had sat like a stone in the classroom, impervious to words, waiting for the bell to ring” (73). A similar failure marks her complaint to the police: she is denied language as a party not “directly affected” (78). Her shame (“Not for them: for myself” (78)) is soon accepted as fate: “Perhaps I should simply accept that that is how one must live from now on: in a state of shame” (78).

The gap between herself and the boy stretches also along gender lines. While Mrs Curren might see in him a “child playing on a bicycle,” the suggested masculine modes of readings would emphasise the 'mystique' of war whereby the blood “ooz[ing] from the raw flesh” functions as a romantic symbol: “Would these count on the roll as honourable wounds, wounds of war?” (61). Such position is repeatedly rejected. Bheki's “comrades” putting “childhood behind them” becoming “little puritans, despising laughter, despising play” (114) misuse their bodies for political goals, allowing them to be annexed by political discourse of violence. Such mystique of war is thus a “mask” which, at the moment of Bheki's death, “must have dropped in sheer surprise when it broke upon him in that last instant that the stone-throwing and shooting was not a game after all” (115). Such “mystique of death” (148) is seen as a masculine construction that is repeatedly referred to through images of surface and depth: “War is never what it pretends to be. Scratch the surface and you will find,

invariably, old men sending young men in the name of some abstraction or other” (149).

The major step in Mrs Curren’s political development comes after the visit to Guguletu. The guide, Thabane, forces her to reassess her relationship with the regime. In addition, his question (“What sort of crime is it that you see? What is its name?” (90)), uncovers for Mrs Curren the discrepancy between physical suffering and language which fails to do justice to bodily reality: “I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth . . . To speak of this . . . you would need the tongue of a god” (91). Again her language represents truth as residing in the container of the body, and the body as capable of producing its own language. Because the images of destruction parallel Mrs Curren's attack of ill health the texts suggests identification of the bodily with the political. Her cancer and the authorities both 'produce' death.

The “massive, solid presence” of Bheki's dead body (75) inspires thoughts of complicity. Her new knowledge is expressed as illness (shivering), “contagion” (97) or paralysis “with shame” (115) but also as the lack of previous blindness (“now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” (94-95)). The political is equated with the body when, talking of the state, Mrs Curren gestures towards her body: “I am not indifferent to this... this war. How can I be? . . . ‘It lives inside me and I live inside it’ (95). Her exchange with the soldiers is similarly marked by the failure of language and the “speaking” of the body itself: “I had hoped the words I needed would just come, but they did not. I held out my hands, palms upward. I am bereft, my hands said, bereft



of speech” (96-97). Such body language is misunderstood: the colour of her skin makes her the enemy in Guguletu, just as it makes her the victim for the soldiers.

Another attempt at communicating bodily what her words fail to express again equates female suffering with the suffering country:

What did the old lady want? What she wanted was to bare something to them, whatever there was that might be bared at this time, in this place. What she wanted, before they got rid of her, was to bring out a scar, a hurt, to force it upon them, to make them see it with their own eyes: a scar, any scar, the scar of all this suffering, but in the end my scar, since our own scars are the only scars we can carry with us. (97-98)

The mastectomy scar becomes the site where the literally personal meets the metaphorically political. As in *Dusklands*, the *Age of Iron* presents the land as feminine and ruled by the masculine forces of oppression: “[h]uge bull-testicles pressing down on their wives, their children” (26).<sup>150</sup> Conversely, the destruction of the land has personal parallels in the removal of the breast. The body image allows for the structuring of the political in terms of the personal and the personal in terms of the political and historical. Political upheaval, degeneration and decay are somatised and metaphorically rendered through Mrs Curren’s illness, while the illness itself invites interpretation as a sign of the political. In another conversation with the police Mrs Curren reads her cancer politically: “‘Where is the pain?’ . . . ‘In my heart . . . I have cancer of the heart . . . It pains me all the time . . . I caught it by drinking from the cup of bitterness . . . You will probably catch it too one day. It is hard to escape’” (142).

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<sup>150</sup> The regime is repeatedly referred to as male. Consistent with this is reading the police search of her house as rape: “The search a mere pretext. The purpose the touching, the fingering. The spirit malevolent. Like rape: a way of filthyng a woman” (154). This passage (a reversed image of Dostoevsky’s arousing search of his landlady’s flat) blurs the line between the private and the public as does the police’s refusal to return her papers: “This is not private, Mrs Curren. You know that. Nothing is private any more” (157).

Planned suicide, an act of alterity within the self (109),<sup>151</sup> is to precipitate the inevitable but also offers the hope of meaning when death is to take place in front of the government buildings, “the house of shame” (104).<sup>152</sup> Such death might not meet the conditions of atonement as well as slow death (129), but is also prone to misreadings:

These public shows, these manifestations – this is the point of the story – how can one ever be sure what they stand for? An old woman sets herself on fire, for instance. Why? Because she has been driven mad? Because she is in despair? Because she has cancer? (105).

Mrs Curren sees Florence as the only interpreter whose assessment might render such death significant: “If Florence were passing by, with Hope and Beauty on her back, would she be impressed by the spectacle?” (129). At the same time, she imagines – and fears – that Florence would pass by, unreadable and uncaring: “From the goddess comes no call, no signal. Her eye is open and is blank” (164).

The reasons to “go through with it” are equally unclear.<sup>153</sup> Her “Yes-no” that “has never been allowed into the dictionaries” and that “defeats every man” is suggested as a female language (“every woman knows what it means” (106)) that contrasts with the determination of Dawn and Jacobus but does not allow clear reading.<sup>154</sup> The guilt and the possibility for atonement are both suggested and rejected,

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<sup>151</sup> Other Coetzee's characters share this assessment. In Jacobus's words: “we know that no man ever yet hated his own flesh, that flesh will not kill itself, that every suicide is a declaration of the otherness of killer and victim” (79-80).

<sup>152</sup> “*How easy to give meaning to one's life, I think with surprise*” (129).

<sup>153</sup> The same expression is used by the white soldier in *Guguletu* (98). It creates another instance of metaphorical similarity between the destruction of Mrs Curren's body and the violence committed on South Africans.

<sup>154</sup> The narrative suggestion is that, lacking self-doubt and investigations of inner motives (Dawn's narcissistic “analysis” notwithstanding), their role to exploit, conquer and colonize the feminine predisposes them to be fathers of apartheid: I want to rage against the men who have created these

as is Mrs Curren's pursuit of death and "slid[ing] back" from the final step (109). She is locked in the vicious circle of shame: "there is a shame to that private knowledge . . . so warm, so intimate, so comforting that it brings more shame flooding with it" (109).

Images of other's bodies recur in her thinking. Black bodies are presented as heavy, with "heavy blood" like a "bucket of lead" (114), in contrast to "thin-blooded" white South Africans (47). She is weighed down by Bheki's "dead weight," "lying on top of [her]" (113). The reason for her planned self-immolation ("I would burn well") contrasts with the persistence of black bodies: "these people will not burn . . . It would be like trying to burn figures of pig-iron or lead. They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subsided they would still be there, heavy as ever" (114). Bodies "bobbing just under the surface" (114) invoke a similar image in *Waiting* . . . (162-163) and equate the body with the land:

when I walk upon this land . . . I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass . . . waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig-iron floating under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return. (115)

Mrs Curren's confused self-questioning ("Mrs Curren: nine letters, anagram for what?" (158)) eventually leads to the telephone communication with Guguletu in which personal loyalty implies revolutionary collaboration. John's spirit remains with her "more clearly, more piercingly" than Bheki before: "He is with me or I am with him: him or the trace of him" (159). Her waiting for death is, however, less spectacular than his raising a pistol to "fire the one shot he will have the time to fire into the heart

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times" (107). That is consistent with identifying the architects of apartheid as male (26) but is simultaneously questioned when power is described as a more universal contagion: "Power is power, after all. It invades. That is its nature" (107).

of the light” (159). Waiting for death (“on the river-bank awaiting my turn” (164)) Mrs Curren refuses to go to the hospital and submit herself to medicated “floating” (167), being “drowned” (165), and thus erasing the sense of moral dimension of her pain. The visions of Beauty and Florence, of clouds, “the dust of Borodino” (170) and anagrams, return. The end is palpable: “I will draw a veil soon. This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses” (170).<sup>155</sup> Yet it is the story of a body as much as it is of the soul; the story of a body as much as it is the story of a land. Dying without conviction Mrs Curren does not achieve more than decency: “the ground of all ethics” (180). She does not achieve abstract heroism (embodied in her speech by ancient sculptures of male bodies (151). Her “marked,” imperfect body is to such ideals what her decency is to abstract heroism: “something smaller, blinder, closer to the ground” (152, 155).

### **Mrs Curren: the body and language**

Mrs Curren and her daughter, it is suggested, could not be closer (“A daughter. Flesh of my flesh. You” (10)). Mrs Curren believes they used to communicate bodily: their embrace had a “true” and “secret” meaning: “the meaning never spoken” (5). Mrs Curren realises the one-sidedness nature of their relationship. In the craving for her daughter’s touch, she admits the desire to be mothered, to “creep into her own

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<sup>155</sup> Mrs Curren uses another image of surface and depth when she expresses her, never definite, view on the mind/body problem: “We do not stare when the soul leaves the body, but veil our eyes with tears or cover them with our hands. We do not stare at scars, which are places where the soul has struggled to leave and been forced back, closed up, sewn in” (180).

mother's lap and be comforted" (17). In pain, such regression to a "child in a long white dress and straw hat" (37) in need of consolation is frequent: "I want to be held to someone's bosom, to Florence's, to yours, to anyone's, and told that it will be all right" (37).<sup>156</sup> Her true wish is bodily contact: "When the chill is from the north-west, from your quarter, I stand a long time sniffing, concentrating my attention in the hope that across ten thousand miles of land and sea some breath will reach me of the milkiness you still carry with you" (5). The written word is a poor substitute for such bodily communication and Mrs Curren dreams of unmediated physical contact: "In another world I would not need words. I would appear on your doorstep . . . and that would be the end of words: I would embrace you and be embraced. But in this world, in this time, I must reach out to you in words" (8). The verbal substitute often needs embodiment to be comprehensible. Hearing "gratitude," Mrs Curren feels the sign to be "dense, dark, mysterious," and only metaphorical embodiment allows the word to be "felt": "Slowly, like a pomegranate, my heart bursts with gratitude; like a fruit splitting open to reveal the seeds of love" (51). Mrs Curren sees communication as proximity of the two bodies: "It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain" (95). Similarly, the letter is addressed to her daughter as enclosed in the container of her body: "to me; to you in me" (5).

On the one hand, motherhood alleviates suffering and provides strength: "I have brought a child into the world, I have seen her to womanhood, I have seen her

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<sup>156</sup> Elsewhere she sees herself having "child's arms" (47).

safely to a new life: that I have done, that can never be taken from me. That thought is the pillar I cling to when the storms hit me” (66). On the other, the lack of symmetry in the relations between the two women leaves Mrs Curren feeling abandoned: “Dear Mother . . . look down on me, stretch forth your hand! . . . Come to me!” (50). Pregnancy and disease are often juxtaposed (“For twenty years I have not bled. The sickness that eats at me is dry, bloodless, slow and cold” (59)) and the contrast between these two pregnancies is matched by two visions of childhood: pastoral past and the grotesque childhood of the new age.

The valuation of the mother-daughter bond masks deeper resentment. Mrs Curren’s refusal to be honest about her condition is rationalised by an appeal to the Age of Iron: “The comfort, the love should flow forward, not backward. That is a rule, another of the iron rules. When an old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid” (67). The touch of nurses who “renew a touch that has been broken,” is the only bodily contact left: “It is their hands above all that I find myself craving. The touch of hands. Why else do we hire them, these girls, these children, if not to touch, to stroke, in that brisk way of theirs, flesh that has grown old and unlovable?” (67).

The significance of the mother-daughter bond is suggested in the mystery of Mrs Curren's mother's childhood experience of camping. The invitation to figurative reading is made through references to the story's meaningfulness and its power to define Mrs Curren: “If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we came from, then this is my story. That is the story I choose, or the story that has chosen me” (110). The meaning of the story is wilfully ambiguous: Mrs Curren would not be able to find the precise spot as “desire, which one may well call love, is

gone from [her]” and the “resurrection eternal out of the earth” is no longer possible (111).

Marginalised as a woman, Mrs Curren's is a middle voice: between white, masculine, hegemonic discourse and the muteness of the black population. She calls this rhetorical position that of the castrated perpetrator: “I am like a man who has been castrated” (111). At other times, this position is inanimate: “I have intimations older than any memory, unshakeable, that once upon a time I was alive . . . From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I” (100). The image of herself as a doll “without substance” (101) is consistent with her seeing herself as an empty container and with the craving of corporeal substance: “I cling . . . to her herself, to her body, to my birth from her body into the world. In blood and milk I drank her body and came to life” (101). Being “stolen” separates the remembered bliss of childhood from the doll-like later life.

The meditation on substantiality is taken further in the reading of a family photograph: “I am on my feet; I appear to be reaching towards the camera; my mother, kneeling behind me, restrains me . . . Standing to one side . . . is my brother Paul, his cap at a jaunty angle” (101). This simple description seems to conceal deeper meanings suggesting absence in the apparent presence and a sinister mystery behind the happy façade. The image ceases to be of a happy childhood and provokes thoughts on her brother's death and the “mistake” he had committed. What precisely the “mistake” is the reader never learns. Whether the absence is merely the absence of contact with South African reality is unclear although plausible when Mrs Curren refers to the labour of black South Africans unrepresented in the photograph:

Who clipped the hollyhocks? . . . Was it my grandfather who got up at four in the icy morning to open the sluice and lead water into the garden? If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who are the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in? (102).

Mrs Curren foregrounds what is hidden (“*Dies irae, dies illa* when the absent shall be present and the present absent”) and the picture no longer shows “who were in the garden frame that day, but who were not there” (102). Such an acknowledgement of “hidden” history, however, not straightforward: “Am I struggling against the reins in order to strike the camera out of the hands of whoever holds it before it is too late? And who holds the camera? Whose formless shadow leans toward my mother and her two offspring across the tilled bed?” (103). Who the “shadow” is, what their intentions are, and whether there is any link between this vision and the “mistake” Paul made are all questions that remain unanswered. The mysterious figure could equally be the never mentioned father, someone who took the picture, someone who made Mrs Curren into a doll and infected her with the disease of shame. Again the trivial scene contrasts with its suggested significance: “To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease that eats me out from inside. Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light” (103). She sees the picture as a document of the erasure of black labour, the moment of recognition of moral corruption that will kill her seventy years later, and the moment of her infection that turns into a disease “[g]nawing the socket of my hip, gnawing my backbone, beginning to gnaw at my knees” (103).



Mrs Curren contrasts the body and language: her death is the “foe of writing” as her writing is “the foe of death,” an attempt to keep it “at arm’s length” (106). The physicality of writing contrasts with the disembodied, and dishonest, telephone conversations (118). Writing is a means of “sav[ing] herself” (124) although soon the object of her “maternal” love becomes not her daughter but John (125). Mrs Curren’s resentment of the daughter is tied to her inability to love him: “Not wanting to love him, how true can I say my love is for you? For love is not like hunger. Love is never sated, stilled. When one loves, one loves more. The more I love you, the more I ought to love him. The less I love him, the less, perhaps, I love you” (125). This resentment increases with the failure of Mrs Curren’s language to reach her daughter and to translate her own body into language. Instead of “the blood-tug of daughter to mother” she realises that her letter grows “more abstract, more abstracted, the kind of letter one writes from the stars . . . disembodied, crystalline, bloodless” (125). While the letter stems from her body (it is reminiscent of menstruation and pregnancy: when read it is to “take on flesh” (119)), her “bleeding on the paper” is “thin”: “I am written out, bled dry” (126).

In the moments of language’s failure Mrs Curren realises her metaphors express the desire for her daughter’s presence. The drugged visions allow the body to speak: “Borodino: an anagram for *Come back* in some language or other. Diconal: *I call*. Words vomited up from the belly of the whale, misshapen, mysterious. Daughter” (128). Mrs Curren attempts to love the unlovable John: “As a hen that loses its chicks will take in a duckling, oblivious of the yellow fur, the black beak, and teach it to take sand-baths, peck at worms” (130). Her nagging of him is seen as both oppressive

("Talk had weighed down the generation of his grandparents and the generation of his parents. Lies, promises, blandishments, threats: they had walked stooped under the weight of all the talk" (132)) but simultaneously protective, attempting to preserve the feminine in the boy against the corrupting masculinist power.<sup>157</sup> Her words to him escape binary classification ("They are not Yes, they are not No") and stem from her body: "What is living inside me is something else, another word" (133). Mrs Curren's argument comes not only from the gendered perspective of her female body but, given the land is equated with female body, her preaching positions her, as in Dawn's myth, as mother earth shielding the son. The source of evil, as in *Dusklands*, is suggested to be the over-valuation of masculinity for which Mrs Curren finds little biological basis: "you would find it hard to tell the difference between boy and girl. Every baby has the same puffy-looking fold between the legs. The spout, the tendril that is said to mark out the boy is no great thing, really" (133-134). Politically problematic (coming from, however reluctant, an oppressor) this assertion of lack of difference is paradoxically grounded in the difference of the female body and its experience: female experience is used here to preach sameness from the core of difference. It advocates a universal humanity devoid of stereotypically "masculine" ways of thinking, which *Dusklands* situates in a subject position in relation to a passive feminine land that can be objectified and appropriated.

Such masculinity is evident in the "metaphysics of the weapon," one of the aggressive "icy, exclusive, death-driven male constructions" (137). John's death is

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<sup>157</sup> The men "with strong arms" is both a biological, and – due to the polysemic "arms" – a political category. The same polysemy is used in the *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

described in an almost erotic language that combines the elements of nascent masculinity, sexual gratification, and aggressive heroism into a male rite of passage:

in Florence's room, in the growing dark, the boy, lying on his back with the bomb or whatever it is in his hand, his eyes wide open, not veiled now but clear: thinking . . . Envisioning the moment of glory when he will arise, fully himself at last, erect, powerful, transfigured. When the fiery flower will unfold, when the pillar of smoke will rise. The bomb of his chest like a talisman: as Christopher Columbus lay in the dark of his cabin, holding the compass to his chest, the mystic instrument that would guide him to the Indies, the Isles of the Blest. Troops of maidens with bared breasts singing to him, opening their arms, as he wades to them through the shallows holding before him the needle that never wavers, that points forever in one direction, to the future. (137-138)<sup>158</sup>

The estrangement from her daughter is represented by her attitude to emigration, to pain, and finally, by two mothering styles. A photograph of her American grandsons wearing lifejackets "like waterwings of old" (178) breeds hostility becoming an almost colonial symbol of the taming of the wild: "A recreation area, you call it on the back of the photograph. The lake tamed, the forest tamed, renamed" (178). There is a distance between the childhood of John and that of his "cousins." Their fear of drowning becomes the fear of life for which Mrs Curren rejects them (179) suggesting she has more in common with her "adopted" family. The deaths of Bheki and John, paradoxically referred to as as "life" contrast with the lives of her grandsons described as "already dead" (179).<sup>159</sup>

In her last moments, Mrs Curren attempts to "call [her daughter] up to say goodbye" but realises the link is broken: "I whispered your name. 'My daughter, my

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<sup>158</sup> The language is more explicit when she describes his "pistol," that was "his and Bheki's great secret, that was going to make men of them": "The barrel of the pistol is between his knees; he strokes it up and down" (159).

<sup>159</sup> "Life is biting the dust. Or: life is drowning. Falling through water, to the floor" (179). The contrast between the two childhoods is the contrast between the two immersions: feared (in the US) and as metaphorically experienced (in South Africa).

child,' I whispered into the darkness; but all that appeared to me was a photograph: a picture of you, not you" (180). The body has been replaced by the figure, its representation. The last hope is that her love is not rejected, that in a maze of doubt there exists a primordial relation between a mother and a child (181). The final expression of her belief in love is the last time Mrs Curren mentions her daughter. She promises to "release [her] soon from this rope of words" (181) and proceeds to describe what is perhaps her own death.

### **Mrs Curren and the relation to the Other**

In the relationship between Mrs Curren and Vercueil the 'feminine' acceptance contrasts to the 'masculine' modes of Dawn or Jacobus even though it is driven by an attempt at reading. Such an attempt is problematic as it involves making him an object of knowledge and translating his "otherness" into part of the same, but his refusal to participate in this undertaking is eventually respected. Despite the suggestion that Mrs Curren knows something about his past, Vercueil remains unknown and closed in his physicality.

Vercueil's mysteriousness concerns even his name "Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil . . . I have never come across such a name before" (34). He is initially treated as the unclean other: "One of the homeless for who August, month of rains, is the worst month. Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette's, his jaw agape. An unsavoury smell about him: urine, sweet wine, mouldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean" (3). His "unhealthy" body is fascinating (6). The timing

of his arrival endows him with religious significance: “A visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days” (3). While she orders him to leave the garden, Mrs Curren reads more into the event: “Two things . . . in the space of an hour: the news, long dreaded, and this reconnaissance, this other annunciation” (4). Like Gabriel, he announces to Mrs Curren her cancerous pregnancy.

His arrogance and indifference make him a difficult object of charity (7). Her attempts at conversation are always rejected: “He did something that shocked me. With a straight look, the first direct look he has given me, he spat a gob of spit, thick, yellow, streaked with brown from the coffee, on to the concrete beside my foot” (7). If the irony of Mrs Curren’s ‘pregnancy’ lies in the deadly nature of breast cancer, this adopted son, often referred to as a child, rejects yet uses her mothering (7,10).<sup>160</sup>

The religious significances ascribed to him invite readings which are, in turn, permanently undercut by the mundane. “Not an angel, certainly” he is often seen as an “insect . . . emerging from behind the skirting-boards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs” (12). His body is positively non-angelic: “The worst . . . smell comes from his . . . feet. He needs socks. He needs new shoes. He needs a bath” (17). His blood is “strange . . . Like honey on ashes” (43).<sup>161</sup> While the sense of smell plays an important part in her perceptions (carrying the detectable “smell of death” herself) her acceptance of Vercueil is sentient: “I am even getting used to the smell, I thought” (64). Nevertheless, Mrs Curren continues in her quest for understanding: she takes him

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<sup>160</sup> More important than his childishness is the mystery behind his disability which Mrs Curren attempts to solve. He cannot move three fingers on his right hand: “Thumb and forefinger stood out; the other three fingers curled into the palm” (10). He nods when asked whether this was due to an accident, but it is “the kind of nod that committed him to nothing” (10).

<sup>161</sup> A similar expression, “ashes in honey,” appears in the *Waiting for the Barbarians* where it is used to represent the sexual union between the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl (36).

for rides, attempts to converse (16). Sometimes she describes him “like a husband giving a driving lessons” (17); most of the time, however, his presence is unbearable.

Her attempts to employ Vercueil in the garden are not “trying to turn [him] into what [he is] not,” but the realisation that, in contemporary South Africa, “we can’t proceed on the basis of charity” (18).<sup>162</sup> Hopeful for true bodily communication, Mrs Curren resorts to embodied “false etymologies” which trace an abstract concept to the body part (*caritas* to heart) which is metaphorically the seat of sensation underlying the virtue in question (20) yet she fails to convince Vercueil of anything. The “celestial music” provides an (illusion of) physical connection with Vercueil: “Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound?” (22). Such a ‘connection’ is not a verbal exchange but a physical union of two bodies, its dignity undercut by the mundane suggestion that Vercueil might not be listening: “It was nearly dark. Against the garage wall the man was squatting, smoking, the point of his cigarette glowing. Perhaps he saw me, perhaps not. Together we listened. At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love” (27). Such visions of connection are presented as coming from the “outside” (“it came unbidden”), but the invitation to allegory is annulled by embodying this spiritual union in an image of copulating insects: “ravished . . . tail to tail” (27). Despite his unreliability, Vercueil is entrusted with sending the letter to Mrs Curren's daughter: “These are private papers, private letters. They are my daughter’s inheritance. They are all I can give her, all she will accept, coming from this country. I don’t want them

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<sup>162</sup> “[b]ecause those who accept charity despise it, while those who give give with a despairing heart. What is the point of charity when it does not come from heart to heart?” (18-19).

opened and read by anyone else” (28). Vercueil never conclusively agrees to send it: he “shift[s] uncomfortably,” and his quiet admission cannot be taken at face value.

Vercueil is read sometimes like a child, sometimes like a husband, sometimes like an angel messenger, sometimes as simply a derelict homeless man. None of these “define” him, while he himself refuses talk of himself. Their contact relies more on the unnameable sensations and visions. In all his incarnations, the unspeakable body assumes various interpretations but has one function:

we could set up a house, the two of us, after a fashion, I upstairs, he downstairs, for this last little while. So that there will be someone at hand in the nights. For that is, after all, what one wants in the end: someone to be there, to call to in the dark. Mother, or whoever is prepared to stand in for mother. (77).

Treated as an angel, he is often read as an angel of death. At other times, he is “[n]o Odysseus, no Hermes, perhaps not even the messenger. A circler-around. A ditherer, despite the weatherworn front” (128). Mrs Curren's attempts at reading are all abortive. The unreadable Vercueil can be made to signify anything, but he thwarts all readings, eludes her interpretations and is never integrated into Mrs Curren's scheme. However, this unreadable man is the person in whom Mrs Curren trusts with her “breath of trust” (122).

The idea of entrusting Vercueil with sending the letters is therefore not only simply meant to treat him as a messenger to form a link with her daughter. In its essence, it is also a test aimed at uncovering how much humanity remains in South Africa, where the position assumed by Mrs Curren (trusting the Other at a time of perpetual hatred) may be even more important than whether the letter reaches its destination. “Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him” says Mrs Curren. Her

actions are like “trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul” (119).

This paradoxical trust in the untrustworthy, accepting the one rejected by all in the society, is the most difficult kind of trust:

Easy to give alms to the orphaned, the destitute, the hungry. Harder to give alms to the bitter-hearted (I think of Florence). But the alms I give Vercueil are hardest of all. What I give he does not forgive me for giving. No charity in him, no forgiveness . . . Without his forgiveness I give without charity, serve without love. Rain falling on barren soil. (119-120)

There is no rational explanation for trusting Vercueil and Mrs Curren finds none. Yet trust seems to be to her one of the most important factors in human conduct, and when all other links with humanity have been broken, it is the trust in someone who should not be trusted that is to her one of the last humane impulses. Vercueil is a figurative mother to nurse Mrs Curren, and is to become a figurative child to carry her message when she is dead.

With the progression of her disease, Mrs Curren finds him also a brother in degradation. Their lives are degrading “not only to us but to the idea we have of ourselves, of humankind. People lying in dark bedrooms, in their own mess, helpless. People lying in hedges in the rain. You will not understand this . . . Vercueil will” (128). She still sees him as an angel who protects her (“When would the time come when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders?” (146)) and equally an agent of death (“Will this be how the story ends: with being carried in strong arms across the sands, through the shallows, past the breakers, into the darker depths?” (146)), the latter role both invited and rejected by her silent, and promptly denied, agreement to be strangled (169). In her dreams she sees herself taught by him to swim, with him either guarding her or leading her to death by immersion in water



oily perhaps with the oil of the last rites (153).<sup>163</sup> To him she admits her confusion, her call for peace which deprives her of a voice (“voice that is no voice” (149)). In the last stages of her life they begin sharing a bed: his dirty feet and “dry” locust-like body threaten to drown in the depths of the sea (173), and he becomes witness to her pain: “the look people have when they are rapt in lovemaking: brutal, predatory. He does not like that look, he turns his eyes away” (175).

While Vercueil's sincerity loses importance (“A mariner’s story. Do I believe it? Verily, I do not care” (171)), Mrs Curren's readings waver between suspicions of mystery and unspoken identity within him, and the acceptance of him as literal:

Another challenge issued, another intimation that I know. I am like a woman with a husband who keeps a mistress on the sly, scolding him, coaxing him to come clean. But my hints pass him by. He is not hiding anything. His ignorance is real. His ignorance, his innocence.

‘There is something that won’t come, isn’t there?’ I said. ‘Why don’t you just speak and see where the words take you?’

But he was at a threshold he could not cross. He stood baulked, wordless, hiding behind the cigarette smoke, narrowing his eyes so that I should not see in. (177)

Such suggestions of deeper meaning are never verbalised. Moreover, they are undermined by Mrs Curren's doubt and her returns to the mundane.

Such mundane meditations revolve around Vercueil's masculinity: “He is dry. His drink is not water but fire. Perhaps that is why I cannot imagine children of his: because his semen would be dry, dry and brown, like pollen or like the dust of this country” (179-180). Vercueil's sterility is more than physical: “He does not know how to love. I speak not of the motions of the soul but of something simpler. Her does not

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<sup>163</sup> Elsewhere, his “seduction” of Mrs Curren “into death” uses the surface / depth imagery: drunk, Mrs Curren experiences “a curtain, a cloud,” “a veil” that covers “everything” grow less substantial (113).

know . . . what zips and buttons and clasps to expect. Does not know what goes where. Does not know how to do what he has to do” (180). Mrs Curren sees his sexual naivety to apply equally to death: “The nearer the end comes, the more faithful he is. Yet still I have to guide his hand . . . he has no more conception of death than a virgin has of sex. But the same curiosity” (180). The last plea to her daughter is a plea for him: “no need to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet know how to fly” (181). In the end, Mrs Curren's “Is it time?” refers equally to death and to sex. The ambiguity invites sexual reading as time for Vercueil to act and for Mrs Curren to “guide his hand.” On such an ambiguous note, the novel finishes:

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtain parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had. (181)<sup>164</sup>

Where Jacobus embodied virility and signified beginnings, Vercueil embodies a slow dissolution without future. Where *Dusklands* ends with the promise of a new, however disastrous, era (Dawn's new life after therapy, South Africa's future), the *Age of Iron*, ends with no hope. In these two works, the masculine and the feminine experience differ in their attitude to language, to the body, to the Other, to ethics and politics. All these are grounded in the experience of the body with its pain, disease, and potential for experiencing and inflicting violence. Bodies provide a conceptual metaphorical framework in which, and through which, all those abstract notions are understood.

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<sup>164</sup> A further ambiguity is, of course, offered by the narrator describing her death in the past tense.

## Chapter 4

### Metaphor and Fiction: The Perversion of Substantiality.

#### *Foe and Master of Petersburg*

This chapter concentrates on Coetzee's use of the body image in presenting embodiment underlying two canonical textual works. The analysis will concentrate on the relationship of embodiment and textuality, and the contrast between the body and language as depicted in the two characters striving to translate their embodied experience into language. Their attempts are complicated by the suggested difference between the truth of the body and the nature of language, but also by the status of 'truth' in fiction. Both *Foe* and the *Master of Petersburg* suggest the impossibility of translating the body into language, both suggest painful embodiment at the core of textual culture, and both invite allegorical readings by their open-ended and wilfully ambiguous nature as much as by their self-conscious discussion of metaphor. Both invite allegorical reading by presenting the body as the unspeakable seat of the truth, and language as misleading and violent.

#### ***Foe: Literary Reading***

*Foe* begins with the description of the body. Susan's pain (hands "blistered," back "burnt,") deprives her of humanity: she becomes "like a flower of the sea . . . an anemone . . . a jellyfish" before her life begins anew in water carrying her "by the

waves . . . onto the beach” (5). Her new life consists in reading and being read, defining and being defined. Her readings of *Cruso* suggest the misleading nature of language. Her readings of *Friday*, in the absence of language, waver between endowing him with depth and impressing meanings onto his surface. Her self-reading contrasts with *Foe's*: the two versions of one story uncover language's power either to expose what is hidden or to misrepresent. The ambiguous results of these readings and interpretations lead to the main trends of critical commentary which rely on the support for one of the pair of propositions. Thus *Cruso*, a colonial patriarch, has received more attention than *Cruso* guarding the body against the metaphorical violence in language. *Foe's* deceptions and mistranslations in reading and writing *Susan* are analysed more prominently than the competing interpretations of *Susan* as deceitful in her narrative. Readings of *Susan's* relationship to *Friday* similarly diverge: from seeing her instrumentally using his body to considering their allegiance. The ambiguities of the final immersion scene provide grounds for further divisions.

### **Deceit in language**

*Susan's* initial relationship with *Cruso* is submissive. At the start, animalised by exhaustion, she feels herself looked at “as if [she] were a fish cast up by the waves” rather than “an unfortunate fellow-creature” (9). Her descriptions imply his superiority: she views him as the “king of this tiny realm;” he “rule[s]” his “island kingdom” (14, 13, 11). Her introduction involves “present[ing]” herself to *Cruso* and becoming “his second subject” (11). Any possible irony is undercut by her admiration: “One evening, seeing him . . . staring out to sea . . . I thought: He is a truly kingly

figure; he is the true king of his island” (37-38). With time, however, the island is described as “no more belong[ing] to Cruso than to the King of Portugal or . . . Friday or the cannibals of Africa” (26) and Susan's submission grows into a relationship of “brother and sister, or host and guest, or master and servant, or whatever it was we had been” (30).

Such a confusion of roles results from the unreadability of Cruso's body and his language. His control over the two realms invites reading as an allegory of patriarchal oppression. His unreadability is first suggested in the clash between his body and his language, when his behaviour (smile) stands at variance with his words (the story of Friday's mutilation). Given Susan's refusal to examine Friday's mouth, she lives with an uncertainty exacerbated by Cruso's multiple interpretations:

Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy . . . Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday's wails of grief . . . Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story . . . Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took . . . How will we ever know the truth? (23).

Susan's suspiciousness is overwhelming (“the words uttering themselves” (37)) and is never dispelled. The explanations for Friday's obedience (“He has known no other master. He follows me in all things”) or the suggestion that he is better off “under a lenient master” than “in Brazil, under the planter's lash, or in Africa, where the forests teem with cannibals” (24) are never fully trusted.

Cruso's body is that of “yet another mutineer,” in a “jerkin, and drawers to below his knees . . . a tall cap rising in a cone . . . made of pelts . . . and a stout pair of sandals” (8). However, the simplicity of the ageing body with a “great head of tawny

hair,” a beard “never cut” and hands “sinewy, rough-skinned . . . toil-hardened” is complicated by story-telling inconsistencies:

one day, he would say his father had been a wealthy merchant whose counting-house he had quit in search of adventure. But the next day he would tell me he had been a poor lad of no family who had shipped as a cabin boy and been captured by the Moors . . . and escaped . . . to the New World. Sometimes he would say he had dwelt on his island the past fifteen years, he and Friday, none but they having been spared when their ship went down . . . So in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling. (12)

Where some of these histories are confirmed by a “bodily” proof (“the mark of the branding iron” used by the Moors), such confirmation is undermined by his responses to Susan's questions during a spell of illness (“in fever as in drunkenness the truth speaks itself willy-nilly” (12)).

Narrative inconsistencies are coupled with chosen silences: Susan never understands why Crusoe does not keep a journal, use a calendar, build a ship or recover his tools (“heathenish inventions” (32)). His terraces, a physical “journal without words” (Penner 115), is prone to misreading: “[O]f the walls they will say, These are the cannibal walls, the ruins of a cannibal city, from the golden age of the cannibals. For who will believe they were built by one man and a slave, in the hope that one day a seafarer would come with a sack of corn for them to sow?” (54)). His answers are unfailingly enigmatic (“not every man who bears the mark of a castaway is a castaway at heart” (33)).

Crusoe's control of language extends to control of the symbolic order. The laws of the island are read by Susan, and many critics, as patriarchal. Law “establishes a fundamental limit” by “designating certain things taboo” (Valente 167), and Crusoe's

first rule is a restriction of language: “[t]his is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words” (21). His control of the female voice is accompanied by control of her body: “Cruso gave me his knife and warned me not to venture from his castle; for the apes, he said, would not be as wary of a woman as they were of him and Friday. I wondered at this: was woman, to an ape, a different species from a man? Nevertheless, I prudently obeyed, and stayed at home, and rested” (15). His control over her mobility is foregrounded by the refusal to provide Susan with shoes.<sup>165</sup> Sexual difference also influences the division of labour: shoe-making is described as a ‘masculine’ occupation, essentially different from the triviality of embroidery.

Susan presents herself as threatening Cruso's position: “[after] years of unquestioned and solitary mastery, he sees his realm invaded and has tasks set upon him by a woman” (25). The enforced control of her language (“keep[ing] a tighter reign on [her] tongue” (25)) and captivity at home lead Susan to find a ‘room of her own’: “a hollow in the rocks where I could lie sheltered from the wind and gaze out to sea . . . my private retreat, the one place reserved for me on an island owned by another” (26). Critical readings of *Foe's* as representing the “metaphorical alignment of women and colonized subjects as victims of patriarchal oppression which has deprived both groups of their natural language” (Dovey 356) rely on a metaphorical reading of Susan's silence as parallel to the literal muteness of Friday. Such an allegorical reading is first facilitated by the suggestive notions of the denial of “voice”:

there was nothing to talk of save the weather. Cruso had no stories to tell of the life he had lived as a trader and planter before the shipwreck. He did not care how I came to be in Bahia or what I did there. When I spoke of England and of

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<sup>165</sup> “When Cruso returned he knew at once I had been exploring, and burst out in a passion. “While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct!” he cried.”

all the things I intended to see and do when I was rescued, he seemed not to hear me. It was as though he wished his story to begin with his arrival on the island, and mine to begin with my arrival, and the story of us together to end on the island too. (34-35)

While feminist readings are partly invited by repeated references to voice, body, hysteria or rooms, Dovey's "alignment" of women and colonised subjects is undermined later when Susan realizes the violence in language and, by extension, the possible benevolence of Cruso's silence:

I tell myself that I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But what is the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveowner. (60-61)

The text thus suggests Dovey's "alignment" only to undermine it by the suggestion of another alignment between Foe and Susan relative to Friday.

The co-existence of the notions of body, language, need and desire also lends itself easily to a psychoanalytic reading. Desire in Lacan, in Zupančič's view, has "the structure of the signifying order, of language and its inherent differentiation;" it is metonymic and never fully satisfied. At the same time, "the occurrence of desire is correlative with the desire of the signifying order, which is broader than the realm of laws and prohibitions" (Zupančič 175). Susan's desire to leave the island is correlative with her desire for words, first in conversations with Cruso, and later in attempts to be "saved literarily, in and by her own narrative" (Jolly 7). For Lacan, speech, stemming from desire, requires "the response of the other . . . in the view of what will be" (*Function* 299). Cruso's failure to respond, represented as metaphorical mutilation of



Susan and the subjection of her body to his laws, offers no future resolution. His laws are openly described as circumscribing desires: “Laws are made for one purpose only . . . to hold us in check when our desires grow immoderate. As long as our desires are moderate we have no need of laws.” Susan's “immoderate” desire (“It burns me night and day, I can think of nothing else”) is denied expression (“I do not wish to hear of your desire”) in a gesture suggesting a lack of future (“It does not concern the island, it is not a matter of the island” (36)). In the convoluted relationship between the literal and the metaphorical Susan's desire to shake the foundations of the island is structured as an earthquake: “When I lay to sleep that night I seemed to feel the earth sway beneath me. I told myself it was a memory of the rocking of the ship coming back unbidden. But it was not so: it was the rocking of the island itself as it floated on the sea” (26). The event is read as a metaphor (“a sign”) but then Susan offers a mundane interpretation in the logic of the two-way movement (“becoming an island-dweller”) (26).

Departure from the island is rendered as her triumph: “as if a spell of Crusoe's gaze on the waters had been broken” (38). His death is precipitated by a reversal of roles: “He was a prisoner, and I, despite myself, his gaoler” (43).<sup>166</sup> Her victory is the culmination of the battle between the sexes and the triumph of female desire over the patriarchal order:

Do tall women who rise out of the sea dismay you? Do they seem like exiled queens come to reclaim the islands men have stolen from them? . . . Nevertheless, did Crusoe in his way and do you in your way believe I came to claim dominion over you, and is that why you were wary of me? (86)

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<sup>166</sup> Contrary to what Dick Penner claims in his political reading of Crusoe's final moments, Crusoe does not give up his island “passively” (Penner 124): “It took four men to master him” (*Foe* 39).

### **The unreadability of the body**

The problems with misleading language do not disappear when Susan reads a silent body. Mute Friday is African, “a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers” (6), and possibly a cannibal.<sup>167</sup> He initially regards her, in her projective interpretations, as “he would a seal or a porpoise thrown up by the waves . . . that could be cut up for food,” and his gestures are interpreted unambiguously: “[H]e is trying my flesh” (6). Her fear of being devoured becomes obsessive when she learns that Friday was a cannibal “whom [Cruso] had saved from being devoured by other cannibals” (12). His metaphorical otherness, exacerbated by speechlessness is reflected in animal metaphors used to describe him:<sup>168</sup> his hair is “fuzzy wool” (5); he smells of “fish, and of sheepswool” (6), and his feet are “horny” (106). He is variously a “dog” (21, 32, 37, 55, 80), a “worm” (119), a “beast” or an “animal” (32, 45, 70), a gelded “stallion” (98) and a “horse” (42), a fish (24, 60), a “cat” (27, 77), an “ass” (37), a “toad” (57), a “whale[]” or a “spider[]” (59). His animality (and slavery) is confirmed when Susan ascends the hill “riding on his back.”

However, Friday is not “an imbecile incapable of speech” (22); his dumbness is a result of his mutilation which metonymically defines him. His story is a constant source of fear and fascination: “I began to look on him . . . with the horror we reserve for the mutilated” (24). The “horror” silences her and leads to compulsive rituals

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<sup>167</sup> Many critics have noted the “racial difference between Crusoe’s and [Coetzee’s] Friday” (Spivak, 169). But while Dominic Head claims that “Coetzee’s Friday is pointedly black,” on their first encounter Susan describes his skin as “not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust” (6).

<sup>168</sup> For Chomsky language (or at least linguistic recursion, centre-embedding and computational ability) distinguishes human from non-human animals.

aimed at warding off the phobic fear: “I caught myself flinching when he came near, or holding my breath so as not to have to smell him. Behind his back I wiped the utensils his hands had touched” (24). For Newman, this reaction is one of “pollution anxiety” in which Friday is positioned as a “social outsider, as a member of a racial minority, physically handicapped, sexually ambiguous, and an eater of the ultimate in unclean foods” (Newman 98). While Susan's fear can be variously read, the text highlights the turning of the victim into a perpetrator combined with identification (“the movements of the tongue in *my own* mouth”).

These processes can gesture towards a reading in Lacanian terms. In the Imaginary realm “the visible world is the ego’s mirror, and reflected in it are the ego’s dreams of identity” (Bowie 198). Throughout the subject's life “the original identificatory procedures which brought the ego into being are repeated and reinforced by the individual in his relationship with the external world of people and things” (199). While Susan defines herself in opposition to Friday, her ego still depends on the visual relationship with her and others' bodies. Her fears of Friday's mutilation could easily be unconsciously active “imagos of the mutilated body.” These, according to Lacan “represent the defective vectors of aggressive intentions, which they provide with an efficacy that might be called magical.” These are “the images of castration, mutilation, devouring, bursting open of the body” (*Aggressivity* 13). Their reappearance in adult life is common:

The fragmented body manifests itself regularly in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs, represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions . . . [This] kind of image crops up constantly in dreams, especially

at the point when analysis appears to be turning its attention on the most fundamental, most archaic fixations. (qtd. in Benvenuto 57)

Although Susan exhibits normal identification and “identifies with the image of the human form, that [she] shares with other human beings” (qtd. in Benvenuto 58) there are other elements of the text that invite a Lacanian reading, just as the repeated references to voice, desire and rooms invite feminist interpretations. For example, Coetzee presents something akin to Lacanian transivitism in the reversal of roles in which Friday becomes the agent of mutilation and Susan his victim.<sup>169</sup> Such identification could be read literally (if Susan is read as a prostitute) or metaphorically, if her mutilation is figurative. In the latter case the equation of the mutilated tongue and castration (“secret . . . as some other mutilations are hidden by clothing”) equates Friday's literal silence with Susan's gendered silencing in literature.

Elsewhere Susan claims that “where there is blood there is fascination” (105) and further theorises her “horror” for “the mutilated”:

Because they put us in mind of what we would rather forget: how easily, at the stroke of a sword or knife, wholeness and beauty are forever undone? Perhaps. But toward you I feel a deeper revulsion. I could not put out of the mind the softness of the tongue, its softness and wetness, and the fact that it does not live in the light; also how helpless it is before the knife once the barrier of teeth has been passed. (85)

The previous suggestions that equated structuring speech with the body and the lack of a tongue with castration further invite the common reading of Susan as soon to be “castrated” in language. This is represented by this description of the tongue with its

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<sup>169</sup> “The child who strikes another says that he has been struck; the child who sees another fall, cries. Similarly, it is by means of the identification with the other that he sees the whole gamut of . . . display [‘parade’], whose structural ambivalence is clearly revealed in his behaviour, the slave being identified with despot, the actor with the spectator, the seduced with the seducer” (qtd. in Benvenuto 58).

suggestion of female sex organs: “softness,” “wetness,” “does not live in the light,” “the barrier.” The unseen organ provides Susan with a cornucopia of readings: arguments against the slave-traders' guilt, speculations about the instruments employed, as well as ideas about the details: was the tongue removed, or was it “merely split, with a cut as neat as a surgeon's, that drew little blood yet made speech afterward impossible. Or let us say the sinews that move the tongue were cut and not the tongue itself, the sinews at the base of the tongue” (84-85). At the same time, Friday's body is the more repulsive for its mystery.

In Dovey's Lacanian analysis, Friday is a simple metaphor: a “figure of essential Otherness . . . the means of representing women's otherness to men and to men's language” (358). Her reading presents him as “the phallus for Susan Barton as a woman writer . . . a fetishized substitute phallus which allows her to elude the fact of her own castration in language” (374). Such a view takes 'literal' muteness in the novel and supplants this with the figurative 'muteness' of Susan. The 'literal' suggestion of Friday's castration is matched by a symmetrical and figurative “castration in language,” whose metaphoricity relies on the Lacanian understanding of language. While both Susan and Friday are alien to the narratives of the Empire, it is unclear where Dovey finds the justification for her statement that Susan manages to “elude . . . castration” thanks to Friday (374). While he might be owned in a “phallic” manner (offering the promise of rendering her story publishable, shifting unwanted attention from her past), he is ineffective in stopping Foe from (mis)reading her story. Such a reading is made possible by Friday's silence, the prominence afforded his body, and the constant suggestions of his 'meaning'. These are maintained by the container

metaphor in which meaning is seen to reside within him. Where he was initially treated as an animal surface, he is now endowed with inner life when Susan witnesses his “fishing”:

After paddling out some hundred yards from the [rock] shelf into the thickest of the seaweed, he reached into a bag that hung about his neck and brought out handfuls of white flakes which he began to scatter over the water. At first I thought this was bait to lure the fish to him; but no, when he had strewn all his flakes he turned his log-boat under and steered it back to the ledge, where he landed it with great difficulty through the swell.

At various points Susan suspects this to be a ritual: either votive (“offering to the god of the waves to cause the fish to run plentifully, or . . . such superstitious observance” (31)) or commemorative. The second reading, more common in critical literature, is partly undermined by the later revelation that the ship sank elsewhere, in “part of the coast [Susan] had never visited,” although this undermining could itself be further undermined in a variety of ways (Cruso's lie, Friday's memory or conscious decision). The mystery, however, allows for rethinking Friday as a container. Matched with the common metaphor of truth as existing within a container, Susan, to some degree, equates the “inside” with the “true”: “the casting of petals was the first sign [Susan] had, that a spirit or soul – call it what you will – stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior” (32).

The intimacy of the “exterior” (with its metaphorical “writing” in the form of mutilation) combined with its persistent silence lies behind Susan's interpretative passion. However, her attempts to read Friday's body depend on his ability to signify. Her initial wish is to teach him speech by “gesturing with hands or by setting out pebbles in shapes standing for words” (56). The process, hampered by Quine's

inscrutability of reference (“is it truly a spoon to him, or a mere thing – I do not know”) is continued with the hope of “engraving” an idea in his mind that can later be activated (“whenever his eye falls upon a spoon” (57)). This educational process relies on seeing language as reflecting conceptual ideas. Thus, teaching proves problematic: Susan fears that after “years of speechlessness the very notion of speech may be lost to him” and that Friday needs an idea to see in her something more than “chattering to [herself] as a magpie or an ape . . . for the pleasure of hearing the noise” (57).

Susan's own story depends on reading Friday: with the assumption of his inside, her story's kernel now rests inside Friday and needs recovering:

On the island, I accepted the fact that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue, as I accepted the fact that I should never learn how the apes crossed the sea. But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost. (67)

Initially, she strives for immediacy and physicality in communication making “the air around him thick with words,” building “a bridge of words”:

which, when one day it is grown sturdy enough, he may cross to the time before Crusoe, the time before he lost his tongue, when he lived immersed in the prattle of words as unthinking as fish in water; from where he may by steps return, as far as he is able, to the world of words in which you, Mr Foe, and I, and other people live. (60)

The lessons now resort to pictorial representations of events in the search for “truth.”

Notwithstanding the complications of the definition of truth employed, truth is assumed to be positioned inside and visible in the stirrings of the body: “Of course, Friday might not know the meaning of the word *truth* I reasoned; nevertheless, if my

picture stirred some recollection of the truth, surely a cloud would pass over his gaze; for are the eyes not rightly called the mirrors of the soul?" (68). However, as with gestures and objects, pictures too prove problematic. The pictorial representation depends too much on its specificities:

Are Moors all tall, and clad in white burnouses? Perhaps the Moor gave orders to a trusty slave to cut out the tongues of the captives . . . And even if it was a Moor who cut out his tongue, his Moor was likely to an inch taller than mine, or an inch shorter; wore black or blue, not white; was bearded, not clean-shaven; had a straight knife, not a curved one; and so forth.

A further complication is introduced by the ambiguities of the picture, which "might also be taken to show Cruso as a beneficent father putting a lump of fish into the mouth of child Friday" (68-69), and of Friday's reaction: if "Friday's gaze indeed became troubled, might that not be because I came striding out of the house, demanding that he look at pictures, something I had never done before?" (68). Read as human he is now also subject to cultural specificity:

Who, after all, was to say he did not lose his tongue at the age when boy-children among the Jews are cut; and if so, how could he remember the loss? Who was to say there do not exist entire tribes in Africa among whom the men are mute and speech is reserved to women? Why should it not be so? The world is more various than we ever give it credit for – that is one of the lessons I was taught by Bahia. Why should such tribes not exist, and procreate, and flourish, and be content? (69)

Susan's difficulties foreground the problems of communication and language.

The conflation of the tongue with language and with the dancing body implies the possibility of metaphorically structuring the body as language and language as the body. Such a reading receives attention when Susan attempts to read Friday's movements. Wearing Foe's wigs and robes Friday dances "holding out his arms and



spinning in a circle, his eyes shut, hour after hour, never growing fatigued or dizzy” (82). Reading the body as language might be misleading, for while the suggestion of Friday as container is maintained, the solipsism of his dance excludes the possibility of communication: “In the grip of his dancing he is not himself. He is beyond human reach. I call his name and am ignored, I put out a hand and am brushed aside” (92).<sup>170</sup>

As a container Friday is also feared for his possibly dangerous inside:<sup>171</sup>

I shiver when I watch Friday dancing in the kitchen, with his robes whirling about him and the wig flapping on his head, and his eyes shut and his thoughts far away, not on the island, you may be sure, not on the pleasures of digging and carrying, but on the time before, when he was a savage among the savages. Is it not only the matter of time before the new Friday whom Cruso created is sloughed off and the old Friday of the cannibal forests returns? (94-95)<sup>172</sup>

Friday's dance prompts another fear and the metonymic equation of the lack of tongue and castration:

From that night on I had continually to fear that evidence of a yet more hideous mutilation might be thrust upon my sight . . . The whirling robe was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday's shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them. I saw and believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he put in his hand in the wound. (118-120)

Such mutilation is suggested by but also undermined both by the invocation of Thomas and the hint that much of what is said about Friday involves “employing a figure”

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<sup>170</sup> The suggestion of body as source of transcendence returns when Susan takes to dancing. She “returns” with “an intimation that I had been far away, that I had seen wondrous sights. Where am I? I asked myself . . . what I had seen in my trance, whatever it had been - I could summon back nothing distinct, yet felt a glow of after-memory, . . . that - had been a message (but from whom?) to tell me there were other lives open to me than this one . . .” (103-104.).

<sup>171</sup> There is no evidence, apart from Cruso's words, that Friday is a cannibal, or a “devourer of the dead.” It is only projection to assume that he knows a “warm living woman . . . make[s] a better meal than the cold stiff corpse of a child” (106).

<sup>172</sup> A similar hope is offered by music: “As long as I have music in common with Friday, perhaps he and I will need no language” (96-97).

(119). The suggestion of some yet unreadable body language (Friday as a bell)<sup>173</sup> invites reading Friday's body despite its escaping the binary categories of male / female (his castration is never certain), human / animal, slave / free, speaking / mute.

At the same time, Susan wavers between reading him as a surface and a container. As a surface, he is too easily imprinted with the interpreter's meaning: "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal" (122). According to Foe, "as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish" (148). As a container contained in Susan's story, he is a "puzzle or a hole in the narrative . . . a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button" (121). When treated as two-dimensional surface Friday's actions lack participation in signification; they are presented as lack of engagement with the depth. His petal ritual is thus "sliding" on the "very skin of death" and remaining "safe" despite "the *kraken*" in the depths with "arms as thick as a man's thigh and many yards long, and a beak like an eagle's" (140). By contrast, on Foe's advice, Susan and the author are to read "the unspoken" and enter "the heart" and "eye" of the story. The existence of Friday's container content is assumed if any "true" meaning is to be uncovered: instead of "sail[ing] across the surface and com[ing] ashore none the wiser," their plan is to dive into "the great mouth . . . that stood open to devour him," to "open Friday's mouth and see what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear" (141-142).

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<sup>173</sup> Similarly, the narrator of the *Master of Petersburg* refers to Pavel's body as endowed with a "bell-voice" and to Dostoevsky's as a "cracked bell" (*Master* 111, 141).

Despite earlier failures, Susan becomes persuaded Friday can signify by “hold[ing] a stick of charcoal, between his toes, or between his teeth, like the beggars on the Strand” for “no one is so deprived that he cannot write” (143-144). Her conversation with Foe on the primacy of writing over speech invites a third type of theoretical reading in Derrida's terms: her belief that “letters are mirrors of words,” is countered with the idea that “[w]riting is not doomed to be the shadow of speech” (142), that “God’s writing stands as an instance of writing without speech” and that “speech is but a means through which the speech is uttered . . . not the word itself” (143). Friday's inability or unwillingness gives rise to another hypothesis: “Could it be that somewhere within him he was laughing at my attempts to bring him nearer to a state of speech?” This is soon undermined, albeit through an imperfect method: “Somewhere in the deepest recess of those black pupils was there a spark of mockery? I could not see it” (146). His later “writing” similarly invites and denies allegorical readings: “open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes” (147). The image of Friday sitting “with Foe’s robes on and Foe’s wig, filthy as a bird’s nest, on his head,” with “his hand, poised over Foe’s papers” holding “a quill with a drop of black ink glistening at its tip” (155) might be a mockery of writing, but irony soon gives way to a suggestions of meaning when the rows of letter o are read as a “beginning”: “Tomorrow you must teach him *a*.” In the literal sense, of course, Friday is doing nothing more than drawing circles. The centrality of this image in the novel and the suggestion that his behaviour *may* be something more and may involve signification is another open invitation to interpretation. Thus Penner sees the marks as referring to the “expletive O’s” of Defoe’s Friday who used them “in

exultation,” “dejection,” “excitement” and “reverence” or as signifying “a zero, leaving Friday balanced on a pinpoint of time somewhere between the exultation of Defoe’s Friday’s “O! O! O!” and Samuel Beckett’s favourite quotation from Democritus “Nothing is more real than nothing” (Penner 123-124). Newman adds her own allegory in a bold claim purporting to uncover authorial intention: “Coetzee’s point is, of course, that o (omega) is not the beginning but an end” (Newman 102). Kossew relies on both homophony and homomorphy in her interpretation mixing the literal with invited metaphorical:

[there] appears to be some correspondence between these circular o’s and eyes (possibly narrative “I’s”) and the “hole” or gap in the story which is Friday’s silence. It is also possible to read those o’s as signs of completion, as Friday’s alter/native system of language which has its own referentiality and which refuses to be colonized by other systems. (Kossew 162)

Dominic Head discusses Gräbe’s suggestion that walking eyes “probably [refer] to his roaming of the English countryside in the company of his would-be “mistress”” and implying that Friday “might have his own particular focalization of “voyages” undertaken under the guise of some assumed “worthy” objective, like trying to undo the injustices of slavehood or exploring the concept of a different kind of voyage as a metaphor for writing.” He also considers Hena Maes-Jelinek’s allegorical reading of the eyes as signifying “the stare of Friday’s victimized people . . . the history of repression” (Head 122). He agrees with Jelinek, for walking eyes “convey not only the displacement of the enslaved and the colonized, but also the sense of bearing witness” (123). Dovey resorts to Coetzee’s theoretical work on Achetberg, where he speaks of the “search of a masculine *I* for the hole in the house of the feminine *you* . . . the

danger of *naming* the *you*” and his footnote citing Monique Wittig on “the intervals” that men “have not been able to fill with their words of proprietors and possessors,” gaps which are not “a continuation of *their* discourse” and “the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and overthrow them” (qtd. in Dovey 380-381).<sup>174</sup> Dovey claims that “it is impossible to inscribe this hole intentionally, without at the same time filling it up with phallic discourse. All that is possible is a theoretical gesture, which . . . is accomplished via the figure of Friday,” her own interpretation writes Friday into a psychoanalytic and feminist narrative external to his life (381). Spivak correctly observes that Friday's letters can be anything and “there is a structural possibility that they are nothing” (*Theory* 171-172). Their “nothingness” is an overdetermined space wherein the container metaphor, coupled with suggestions of meaning and signification, invites allegorical interpretations. The possible interpretations are both invited by the text and rejected when Foe refers to their theoretical discussion as “cavil over words . . . a dispute we know to be endless” (150).

### **Truth or fiction**

The four parts of *Foe* correspond, according to Gallagher to four stages in the history of the novel. Part One has an “oral quality; it appears to be an unmediated record of a voice speaking in the first person” suggesting “the origins of English literature in the oral tradition and the apparently artless renditions of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*” (Gallagher 186). The conflation of “oral” and

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<sup>174</sup> Coetzee explains further: “The O, the circle, the hole are symbols of that which the male authoritarian discourse cannot appropriate.” See Atwell (*Doubling* 404).

“unmediated” implies reading Susan's words as true, and her portrayals in Defoe's novel as mediated and thus untrue. However, I would like to suggest that Part One is already mediated more than is commonly acknowledged: while Gallagher correctly points out that paragraphs begin, but do not end, with quotation marks, she overlooks mediatedness in Susan's reference to some previous, and otherwise unmentioned, communication with Foe: “the stranger (who was of course the Cruso I told you of) gazed at me” (9). In her further adventures, from the “the epistolary narrative” (Gallegher 187) of Part Two and realist novel of Part Three, Susan remains the narrator whose story is ascribed the value of an original account. Foe's novels are uniformly read as mercilessly appropriating her story and turning it into a patriarchal lie. Little is made of the suggestion of Susan's death aboard the Portuguese ship in Part 4 of the novel or the ambiguous possibility that she “might as well have dreamed [the island] in a snug bed in Chichester” (40). While her reliability is sometimes questioned (Spivak notes that “By everyday common sense, Susan Barton’s credibility or sanity . . . would be thrown into doubt,” while Penner maintains from Part Two on “it is impossible to tell whether the events Barton relates really “happen” or if they are dreamed or imagined” (117)), in critical literature hers is still taken to be the “true” account whose “silencing” receives allegorical, and often political reading pertaining to real-life events.

Susan's arrival on the island begins with self-definition: “Let me tell you my story . . . for I am sure you are wondering who I am and how I come to be here” (10). Carefully introducing herself twice she narrates the abduction of her daughter and her

life in Bahia: “I lived in lodgings, and took in sewing, and searched, and waited, but saw no trace of my child.” Travelling back, she survives a mutiny on a merchantman:

Bursting into the captain’s cabin they slew him heartlessly even while he pleaded for his life. Those of their fellows who were not with them they clapped in irons. They put me in a boat with the captain’s corpse beside me, and set us adrift . . . All morning, while the ship drew away . . . I rowed with the dead captain at my feet. My palms were blistered – see! – but I dared not rest . . . The rest you know. (10-11)

Unstated are the reasons for being in the captain's cabin in a “petticoat (which was all [she] had escaped with)” (5). Unstated, although suggested later, is her relationship to the captain: “A hand was exploring my body. So befuddled was I that I thought myself still aboard the ship, in the Portuguese captain’s bed. But then I turned and saw [Cruso]” (29). She is unclear about “all the insults done me on board ship” (10) and her stated ignorance of the mutineers' motives assumes the form of an aphorism: “those whom we have abused we customarily grow to hate, and wish never to lay eyes on them again” (10-11). While Gallagher views this as proof that Susan “shows little concern for the victims of oppression, implying in her account of the mutiny that she had joined the captain in abusing the crew” (181), it is equally applicable to her as the victim of the unspoken “insults.”

It is clear from this brief account that Susan’s accounts of her life and her definitions in the social sphere are selective and misleading. Her knowledge of Cruso might be more extensive than openly stated: “is there not someone you have forgotten in Brazil? Is there not a sister awaiting your return on your Brazilian estates, and a faithful steward keeping the accounts? Can we not go *back* to your sister in Brazil, and

sleep in hammocks side by side under the great Brazilian sky full of stars?” (44).<sup>175</sup> Such intertextual references to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* might be taken to undermine the reliability of her account. She fears “gossip” that could discredit her (“Did they truly think of me as Cruso’s wife, or had tales already reached them – the sailors’ haunts are full of gossip – of the Englishwoman from Bahia marooned in the Atlantic by Portuguese mutineers?”), attempts to control how she is perceived (“Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress?”), and simultaneously asserts her truthfulness: “Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso’s bed, and closed Cruso’s eyes, and it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island” (45). Any literary alteration of her self-reading (“a dash of colour . . . here and there”) is rejected: “I will not have any lies told” (42).

Given the inclusion of Friday inside Susan's story, one cannot be successfully defined and told without the other. Since neither she, nor Friday possesses the ability to write, their definition, in turn, depends on Foe's mediation which, it is suggested, will render them as characters in his novels.<sup>176</sup> Subaltern in relation to him, they do not have “the vocabulary that will get a hearing in institutional locations of power” and need “the mediating commentary of someone more at home in discourse” (Spivak 2195). For Dovey, Foe functions as the Lacanian *sujet suppose de savoir* “whose response, it is hoped will constitute the truth of the speaking subject” (Dovey 342).

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<sup>175</sup> In a conversation with Foe she adds what she cannot know in light of her stated knowledge: “my daughter is no longer in Bahia, but is gone into the interior, into a world so vast and so strange I can hardly conceive it, a world of plains and plantations such as the one Cruso left behind, where the ant is emperor and everything is turned on its head” (123).

<sup>176</sup> As Newman notes, Susan presents herself to Mr Foe as a “figure of fortune” (48), invoking *Roxana*’s subtitle, *The Fortunate Mistress*.



Such reading is invited by structuring him with entailments typically associated with psychoanalysts: he is unknown and unreadable (it is unclear if he reads, let alone answers, Susan's letters),<sup>177</sup> powerful and discreet (“had heard many confessions and [is] reputed a very secret man” (48)) and capable of what is impossible otherwise (“how can we live if we do not believe we know who we are, and who we have been?” (130)). Where metaphorical entailments overlap, it is possible to read Foe as a therapist and Susan's narration as transference, waiting to be “defined” and made alive. For Gallagher “[w]ithout her story, Susan feels insubstantial, suspended, incomplete, trapped in a world of things and events without . . . meaning,” she “needs her story to be told in order to take shape as a human being” (175). Her hastening of Foe (*Foe* 63) is used both to give her existence and to liberate her from suffering (63, 66), but also to satisfy her vanity: she wants to be “The Female Castaway” (67), to be “famous” (58), and “see heads turn in the street and hear folk whisper “There goes Susan Barton the castaway” (125).

Susan's writing is explicitly driven by bodily desire (“without desire how is it possible to make a story?”) but stops at Friday's surface: “I ask myself what the past historians of the castaway state have done – whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies” (88). She wishes the story both to “give the substance of truth” but also to “please its readers” (63). Such pleasing risks mistranslation, and Susan projects her anxieties on Foe despairing of the lack of events on the island (53-54). Despite

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<sup>177</sup> Some letters are never sent: “To whom am I writing? I blot the pages and toss them out of the window. Let who will read them” (64); “I write my letters, I seal them, I drop them in the box. One day when we are departed you will tip them out and glance through them” (72); “In the letters you did not read” (117).

stemming from the body and concerning the body, Susan's language never touches the core, the "substance." Such non-substantiality of language is coupled by the lack of viscerally experienced substantiality. This remains unexpressed but is believed to be expressible:

When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true story of Cruso . . . Yet I was as much a body as Cruso. I ate and drank, I woke and slept, I longed . . . Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth . . . (51)

The body eludes language and, if it is expressed, is rejected as untrue. The story of abandoning her daughter is rejected not only as discrediting her but also as "essentially" masculinist: "Do you think women drop children and forget them as snakes lay eggs? Only a man could entertain such a fancy" (75).<sup>178</sup> She craves expression of her female body while she metaphorically thinks of writing in terms of masculinity, invoking Gilbert and Gubar's equivalence of the pen and penis: "I sat at your bureau . . . and took out a clean sheet of paper and dipped pen in your ink – your pen, your ink, I know, but somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it, as though growing out of my hand" (66).

Such a position could easily be read as post-Lacanian and feminist. Susan does not accept her lack and is driven by a desire for "bodily unity, wholeness, perfect autonomy" (Luepitz 226). But such an understanding of a craving for phallic substantiality and signification in psychoanalysis relies on a model of the mind as a container, a "substance endowed with qualities . . . a fixed shape possessing

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<sup>178</sup> It is also rejected as contrived and fictional: "It is only in books that children are stolen by gipsies. You must think of a better story!" (78).

dimensions . . . a container awaiting the multifarious contents that experience provides” rather than a “series of events within language” (Bowie 76). Susan's position could be seen as a refusal to be a Lacanian subject: “essentially no-thing . . . a lacking subject who has lost . . . her being” (Homer 71). Any such reading has as its foundation the metaphorical alignment of the body and language in Lacan.<sup>179</sup>

Similarly, the rejection of the daughter and the denials of her past vocation easily lend themselves to allegorizing feminist readings: the rejection of feminine social roles. They could be variously read as nostalgia for “a form of self-present speech” which reflects “feminist desire for an auto-affective language” (Dovey 353) or a new, gender-specific potential “overwritten by the predominantly male-determined attributes of her racial identity, namely her inheritance of and admiration for the masculine traditions of writing and colonization” (Jolly 138-139). Such readings also rely on structurings of language in terms of the body.

Such easy readings are complicated by Susan's own words. While Susan's cross-dressing and insistence that “Bahia is not part of my story” (114) might be read as feminist, Foe's writing does not silence her past:

the Portuguese are a very jealous race . . . A woman who goes abroad freely is thought a whore. I was thought a whore. But there are so many whores there, or, as I prefer to call them, free women, that I was not daunted. In the cool of the evening the free women of Bahia don their finest clothes, put hoops of gold about their necks and golden bracelets on their arms and ornaments of gold in their hair, and walk the streets . . . (114-115)

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<sup>179</sup> On the connection between language and the body in Lacan see Colette Soler, “The Body in the Teaching of Jacques Lacan” (1995). Such metaphorical alignment also allows one to talk of symbolic “castration in language.”

Susan's rejection of Foe's definition (117) is motivated by the promise of deciphering Friday's mutilation. Her silence is therefore unlike Friday's: "by choice . . . I say so little of [Bahia]. The story I want to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right . . . The silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence" (120-122). While she accuses his reading of sensationalism (she does not want to be "one of those thieves or highwaymen of [his] who gabble a confession and are then whipped off to Tyburn and eternal silence, leaving [him] to make of their stories whatever is [his] fancy"), her self-definitions might rely on deception: "It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father to my story" (123). Of course any interpretation depends on the reading of "amend": the popularity of readings emphasising Susan's forced silencing suggests the tendency to read it as "correct" rather than as "alter." Indeed her moral "that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force" might equally apply to correction as to alteration (124).

Similar ambiguity stems from various uses of 'substantial'. Used initially as "true" and opposed to fictitious, it is later used to mean "of a body." Foe's suggestion that terms like "slave" or "laundryman" applied to Friday "are mere names [which] do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body" (121-122), produces an unexpected reply bridging the non-fictionality implied in the question with the bodily truth of the answer: "I could return in every respect to the life of a substantial body, the life you recommend. But such a life is abject, it is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body" (126). When she presents herself as the muse who "comes .

. . . and touches [writers] with secret fire, after which their pens, that have been dry, flow”<sup>180</sup> her “courting” (“a game in which each word has a second meaning” (79)) is hoped to create a substantial story. Her substance is imagined as a container with a specific content (“If I were as obliging as you wish me to be . . . if I were like a bottle bobbing on the waves with a scrap of paper inside . . . a mere receptacle ready to accommodate whatever story is stuffed in me, surely you would . . . say to yourself, “This is not a woman but a house of words, hollow, without substance?” (130-131). But such insistence on substantiality (“I am not a story”) is not accompanied by the wish to express her substantial history: “[T]o no one, not even to you do I owe the proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world . . . I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling the story according to her own desire.” (131).

With the blurring of material reality and discourse, distinctions of the body and language crumble:

In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now my life grows to be a story and there is nothing my own left to me. I thought I was speaking myself [...]. But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you? Who are you? (133)

Susan accepts her daughter (whose “appearances, or apparitions, or whatever they were disturbed me less now that I knew her better” (136)) and is seduced by Foe in an act that is her last attempt to “father[.]” her story and Foe's attempt to suck the story out of her. The act thus consists in literal blood-sucking (Foe's “manner of preying on the

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<sup>180</sup> A similar comparison between a brush and a penis is made by Elizabeth Costello (148).

living”), Susan's “fathering” (‘active’ position) and her feminising of Foe in her language (“wife,” “mistress”):

‘Permit me,’ I whispered – ‘there is a privilege that comes with the first night, that I claim as mine’. So I coaxed him till he lay beneath me. Then I drew off my shirt and straddled him (which he did not seem easy with, in a woman). ‘This is the manner of the muse when she visits her poets,’ I whispered, and felt some of the listlessness go out of my limbs. (139-140).

Getting paid the following morning (“sixpence . . . no great payment for a visit from the Muse” (145)) reduces her to the role of a prostitute and finally immortalises her as an adventuress in Defoe's novel. The ambiguity of Susan's self-reading depends on whether one reads her story as true or false, and on whether one sees her as helping Friday or holding him captive to her “desire to have our story told,” treating him as “one of the wild Indians whom explorers bring back with them . . . to show that they have truly been to Americas” (150-151).

These ambiguities are taken further in the last part of the novel narrated by an unnamed and ungendered narrator. This narrator has received various metaphorical readings including the identification of the narrator with the historical Coetzee (Gardam), with abstract “poetic imagination” (Dongohue) or with Susan Barton herself (Post).<sup>181</sup> Kossew finds the last one unlikely because of the use of the third person in relation to Barton's body. In fact, it is not only her body: opening Friday's mouth, the narrator hears “as *she said*, the roar of waves in a seashell . . . the sounds of the island” (154), referring us back to Susan's earlier words: “It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the

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<sup>181</sup> Kossew provides (after Robert M. Post) a useful summary of critical positions dealing with the unnamed narrator, (Post 143-154, qtd in Kossew 172). A similar approach can be found in Nina Auerbach (36-38).

ear” (142). While that might suggest Foe as the diver, Susan partly undermines this reading by passingly claiming Friday in her story as “a figuring (or prefiguring) of another diver” (142).

In the first “dive” the narrator's words echo the words of the previous parts. The description of Foe's house (“the staircase is dark and mean” (153)) repeats Susan's description: (“The staircase was dark and mean” (113)).<sup>182</sup> Friday's hair is “indeed like lambswool” (154). The sleeping bodies of the characters are textualised “dry as paper” (153). The sound of Friday's mouth is “the faintest faraway roar . . . the roar of waves in a seashell,” “the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird,” and other “sounds of the island” (154). These repetitions tend to a textual dispersal of the narrator.

The second entrance to the house takes place in contemporary London: “above head-height, a plaque is bolted to the wall. *Daniel Defoe, Author*, are the words, white on blue, and then more writing, too small to read” (155)). Susan's daughter body “light as straw” lies on the landing, her mother in bed with Foe, “her head in the crook of his arm” (155) suggestive of her submission. Friday's body bears the imprint of his story: “[a]bout his neck – I had not observed this before – is a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain” (155).<sup>183</sup> On the side lies Barton's manuscript beginning with the full address: “‘Dear Mr Foe,’ At last I could row no further” (155).

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<sup>182</sup> Later, the narrator's “it is not a country bath-house” (156) rephrases the earlier idea of an afterlife as a “bath-house . . . any Sunday in the country” (114).

<sup>183</sup> Rosemary Jolly links this scar with Susan's declaration of Friday's freedom, “worn like a chain around his neck” (*Colonization* 11). In her footnote she notes that: “The marks left by this “chain” reappear in the “unnamed” narrative that concludes the novel” and adds that “Atwell remarks upon the fact that in the final section Friday has “a scar on his neck . . . unobserved before in the novel.” (15) I would like to add that if it is unobserved, it is nevertheless suggested, for, upon deciding that the ship

The third dive begins, like Susan's, with slipping overboard “with a sigh, making barely a splash.” Caught in seaweed, the narrator dives deeper among Friday’s petals and reaches the dirty cabin of the shipwreck, the water “still and dead, the same water as yesterday, as last year, as three hundred years ago” (157). Newman correctly points out that it is a “composite wreck composed in equal parts of Crusoe’s original ship, Friday’s slaveship, the mutineers’ ship which marooned Susan, and the rescue ship” (Newman 100). Susan and the captain both died and now “fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands, puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, float like stars against the low roof.” Friday with “woolly hair” is asked “what is this ship?” (157). The bodily answer cannot be understood:

He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

Such purposeful silence once more invites an allegorical reading. Penner makes Friday “a symbol of the inexpressible psychic damage absorbed by blacks under racist conditions” (Penner 124). He also quotes Francis King seeing in Friday “that bedrock of the individual personality to which no novelist, however piercing his intuition, can ever hope to tunnel deep enough to reach” (127). For Newman, the scene stands for “the immersion in history, as death, dirt, decay,” while the touch overcomes “a taboo

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from which Friday escaped was a slaveship Foe tells Susan: “Well then, picture the hundreds of his fellow-slaves – or their skeletons – still chained in the wreck” (141).



on mutilation” (102). Benita Parry's views this image as “signalling [Friday's] location on the fringes of the phallogentric social order, whose dominance through [his] speechlessness and asexuality [he] evade[s]” (153). For Head, the “voicing” of “silence” is “an extraordinary literary gesture”: “This ‘slow stream’ is interrupted, indicating its irresistible historical necessity . . . It is an unvoiced history which is acknowledged, a silence with moral compulsion that, itself, silences the authorial figure who is obliged to cease his narrative in its presence (126). For Williams, “Friday embodies the world of self-absorption without self-consciousness; without the Cartesian split of self and other, Friday has no desire and hence no stories” (qtd. in Gallagher 181). Invoking this view, Gallagher refuses to see Friday as representing silencing “because of race, gender, and class” (181). Coetzee's role is to speak “as a writer who is an appalled representative of humanity, who hesitates to take upon himself the mantle of moral authority, even as he tries to criticize injustice and promote freedom” (191). Such a promotion of freedom like an innumerable number of other causes, relies on a critical “voicing” of the silence and following in the footsteps of Susan and Foe. Such readings are led by the text to assume “meaning” and, when various meanings are rejected (as was feminism in favour of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis in favour of postcolonialism) and such rejections are undermined by the ambiguous final vision, any positive interpretation relies on the assumption that the body functions as the figure of “truth.” For Jolly, such allegorisation “violates the body by translating it into a term in a representative scheme. This denies the substantiality of the body and effectively effaces the body from the text” (*Colonization* 8). Jolly's suggests that in the final stage “authors in / of the story . . . have relinquished their

attempts to dominate and thus violate their subjects, and have given themselves over to a narrative that is willing to confront the other . . . whose body it – as a narrative – has always been unable to master completely” (145). Such a reading assumes the allegorical potential of the body without endowing it with specific interpretation. What I would like to add is that such allegorical potential exists precisely because of shared entailments of truth and the body, allowing one to be seen as represented by the other or, understood as containers, enclosed within containers and within the other. Further, while many critical discourses rely on alignments of language and the body, these, in turn, depend on shared metaphorical entailments of language understood as meaning existing in a container (as in conduit metaphor) and the body as a container for the true meaning of a person. The partial equation of the body and truth allows the body, in Coetzee's own words, to “confront” “the endlessness of . . . scepticism”:

Friday is mute. But Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt . . . Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons . . . but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (*Doubling* 248).

## *Master of Petersburg*

Metaphors – what nonsense!  
There is death, only death.  
Death is a metaphor for nothing. (118)

But he knows too that as long as he tries by  
cunning to distinguish things that are things from  
things that are signs he will not be saved. (83)

The description of a dream near the start of *Master of Petersburg* bears striking resemblance to the ending of *Foe* and expresses the same sentiment:

During a night a dream comes to him. He is swimming underwater. The light is blue and dim. He banks and glides easily, gracefully; his hat seems to have gone, but in his black suit he feels like a turtle, a great old turtle in its natural element. Above him is a ripple of movement, but here at the bottom the water is still. He swims through patches of weed; slack fingers of watergrass brush his fins, if that is what they are.

He knows what he is in search of. As he swims he sometimes opens his mouth and gives what he thinks of as a cry or call. With each cry or call water enters his mouth; each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water. He grows more and more ponderous, till his breastbone is brushing the silt of the river-bed.

Pavel is lying on his back. His eyes are closed. His hair, wafted by the current, is soft as a baby's.

From his turtle-throat he gives a last cry, which seems to him more like a bark, and plunges toward the boy. He wants to kiss the face; but when he touches his hard lips to it, he is not sure he is not biting.

This is when he wakes. (17-18)

The recurrent image of submersion coincides with suggestions of body language and bodily truth.<sup>184</sup> Thus at one point in *The Master of Petersburg* when Dostoevsky despairs of his inability to reach the truth concerning his son's death, he feels that

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<sup>184</sup> Images of submersion (of diving, drowning or recovering what is sunk) recur in the novel. Pavel is lost "at sea . . . overboard" (78), his voice exists "under the waters," pleading in the "deep dark," at the "bottom of the waters" (111).

“somewhere inside him truth has lost its way.”<sup>185</sup> This implies “truth” as existing within the bodily container: “in the labyrinth of his brain, but also in the labyrinth of his body – veins, bones, intestines, organs – a tiny child is wandering, searching for the light, searching to emerge” (126). Dostoevsky shares Susan Barton’s belief in embodied truth as the ultimate certainty and unquestionable reality, but also the belief in the possibility of giving voice to an otherwise silent body.<sup>186</sup>

The two passages are symptomatic of problems I would like to examine in relation to the novel. The ambiguity of the kiss in the first suggests further ambiguities: a divergence of interpretations and Dostoevsky's complex feelings towards Pavel. The second suggests the truth of the body, and the gap between the bodily fact and language interpretations. It anticipates the bodily, rather than intellectual nature of the search and the container metaphor which underlies it. Both passages suggest the quest ends in failure.

The method is bodily, most intensive and productive in sexual liaisons and epileptic fits). However, the results and part of the evidence is linguistic: the process is hindered by the incompatibility of language and body reality. The details of Pavel's death, his relationships with Anna and Matryona, Nechaev and his circle, as well as his possession are never clear. The search is conducted by an elderly epileptic, sexually perverse and deeply spiritual Dostoevsky using his body as tool for discovering the truth, and his language as a means for expressing it. While his body searches, feels and strives to resurrect Pavel, his writing is a betrayal of that mission. The result of the

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<sup>185</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, Vintage, London: 2004.

<sup>186</sup> He hopes Pavel will speak through him: “find his way to my high-bone and pipe to me from there” (126).

bodily search, and the bodily betrayal, are ultimately textualised – in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*: where ambiguities were introduced by the polysemy of “substantial” in *Foe*, here they stem from “perversion” and “possession” where Dostoevsky's implied perversion, among other things, produces the figurative perversion of truth in a literary narrative bearing little resemblance to Pavel's life.

### **The bodily search: Anna and Matryona**

The novel begins in October 1869, around the time Dostoevsky started work on *The Possessed*. It immediately concentrates on the body. The “first thing” Dostoevsky does in Pavel's room (3) gestures towards Pavel's body: “He kneels and puts his nose to the pillow; but he can smell nothing but soap and sun” (3). He is more successful with his son's suit: “He presses his forehead to it. Faintly the smell of his son comes to him. He breathes in deeply, again and again, thinking: his ghost, entering me” (3-4). This first “contact” produces a flicker of hope for a more permanent one. He often finds himself “with the white suit on his lap, breathing softly, trying to lose himself, trying to evoke a spirit that can surely not yet have left these surroundings” (12). The ritual begins with smelling: “He sniffs the armpits and the smell comes clearly: not that of a child but of another man, fullgrown. He inhales it again and again. How many breathes before it fades?” (18-19)). It develops into wearing the suit which becomes the source of ambiguous visions: “He has a vision of Petersburg . . . under the pitiless stars. Written in a scroll across the heavens is a word in Hebrew characters. He cannot

read the word but knows it is a condemnation, a curse” (19).<sup>187</sup> Sitting in the room “that is and is not his,” holding the suit “[h]e feels the cord of love that goes from his heart to his son’s as physically as if it were a rope” (23).<sup>188</sup> However, what initially seems to be an innocent expression of fatherly grief soon acquires a sexual dimension: “looking in the mirror, he sees only a seedy imposture and, beyond that, something surreptitious and obscene . . . that belongs behind the locked doors and curtained windows of rooms where men in wigs and skirts bare their rumps to be flogged” (71).

With a similar intimation of perversion, the preceding scene presents an adult version of his childhood habit of “spy[ing] on visitors to the household and trespass[ing] surreptitiously on their privacy” (71). Going through Anna’s possessions he finds a picture of her dead husband and “deliberately smudges the glass, leaving his thumbprint over the face of the dead man” (71). In the *Age of Iron* the search of Mrs Curren’s flat is perceived as “the touching, the fingering . . . Like rape: a way of filthying a woman” (154). Here, shown from the perspective of the searcher, it again suggests sexual motivation. While Dostoevsky has “associated [“this weakness”] *till now* with a refusal to accept limits to what he is permitted to know . . . and thus with his vocation” (71, emphasis added), he now recognises the cause of his actions: “He is in thrall to a spirit of petty evil and knows it. The truth is, rummaging like this through Anna Sergeyevna’s possessions while she is out gives him a voluptuous quiver of pleasure” (71). The juxtaposition of these two scenes introduces the question of Dostoevsky’s sexuality (which blurs the “normal” with the transgressive) and foregrounds the interpretation compulsion, his tendency to interpret and reinterpret his

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<sup>187</sup> Other visions variously employ biblical imagery (54).

<sup>188</sup> Such an emotional “cord” exists between Michael K and the land (*Life* 66, 109).

actions which makes him forever elusive to the reader and to himself: the act of donning the white suit can be an expression of grief, an expression of transgressive sexuality, both or, depending on how much Dostoevsky interprets it, an expression of something entirely different. Thus sexuality and interpretation coexist in a sexual rivalry blurred with love for the son, the love for Anna and an instrumental use of her, affection for her child and his perverse interest in the child's sexuality.

This ambiguity is evident from the start in Dostoevsky's relations with Anna. Initially "motherly" and "reassuring" (10), her body is also arousing: "he would like to lay his head on her breast and feel those fingers stroke his hair" (10). This craving for touch is presented as an effect of bereavement: "The innocence of hands, ever-renewed. A memory comes back to him: the touch of a hand, intimate in the dark" (10). However, it quickly develops into "acute" and "fiery" desire: "he wants to . . . drag her behind the gatekeeper's hut, lift her dress, couple with her" (11). The ambiguity of his feelings invites interpretation as does the setting for the scene (Pavel's grave): what might be rivalry between father and son could also be the affirmation of life: "exultation . . . a brag flung in the face of death: Us you do not have!" (11).

Anna functions as the source of knowledge about Pavel's life in Petersburg. More than that, her body offers the promise of resurrecting Pavel. Their first intercourse is still in the spirit of mourning: Anna has "not done this before"; her hands "are cold and trembling" (55); she wears and kisses a crucifix and later admits the act was the result of pity (59). The second time she "becomes like a dead thing in his arms" and the mourning aspect is clearer: "In the act there is nothing he can call

pleasure or even sensation. It is as though they are making love through a sheet, a tattered sheet of his grief” (56). But her body still seems to lead to Pavel:

At the moment of climax he plunges back into sleep as into a lake. As he sinks Pavel rises to meet him. His son’s face is contorted in despair: his lungs are bursting, he knows he is dying, he knows he is past hope, he calls to his father because that is the last thing left he can do, the last thing in the world. He calls out in a strangled rush of words. This is the vision in its ugly extremity that rushes at him out of the vortex of darkness into which he is descending inside the woman’s body. It bursts upon him, possesses him, speeds on. (56)

The physical and spiritual experience is repeated on the second night: “Again, through her, he passes into darkness and into the waters where his son floats among the other drowned” (58). This loving “connection” to his son, however, is undermined by suggestions of sexual rivalry: “The children against those who are not children, those old enough to recognize in their lovemaking the first foretaste of death.” But this “foretaste of death” is itself ambiguous: “playing with death” and “a play of resurrection” (63).

The desire for transcendence offered by Anna's body (“his limbs will be loosened and the spirit released, the spirit that at present seems knotted to his body” (127)) is undermined by less spiritual feelings: pornographic fantasies of being depicted in a picture from his “erotica” collection (131).<sup>189</sup> However, this undermining of spirituality is never final: Anna's crossing of the 'shadow line', “the line that his wife has yet to come to” – in other words, her proximity to death, maintains the spiritual undertones of her role as a guide to Pavel (133). Thus sexual desire for this

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<sup>189</sup> Anna's body provides ample material for meditations on embodiment and its possible figurative meanings: “Is such a woman marked by abandon . . . that does not care where it leads, to pleasure or to pain, that uses the sensual body only as a vehicle, and only because we cannot live disembodied? Is there a form of lovemaking she stands for in which bodies press against and into and through each other into a darkness in which nothing can be heard but the flapping of bedsheets like wings?” (85).



“passionate, greedy” woman coexists with the spiritual: “I was sure you would conduct me to Pavel” (133, 223). Dostoevsky's search implies treating Anna's body as a container. When he loses interest in the “recklessness” of their lovemaking and the way she “give[s] herself so unreservedly to the erotic,” the change has as its basis of his reading her as surface: “Sensations that on their first night together were taking place deep within her body seem to be migrating towards the surface . . . in the manner of so many other women he has known” (230).<sup>190</sup> Such two-dimensionality offers no depth and implies straightforward readability. At the same time, however, the spiritual hope of resurrection<sup>191</sup> develops into ideas of demonic possession: in her “climax” (when the “soul is twisted out of the body”) she “tosses her head . . . grits her teeth,” pronounces the devil’s name and “blasphem[ously]” talks of the “birth of the saviour” (230-231, 225).

Anna's ambiguous accusation “you use me as a route to my child” rests on the notion of evil that might imply both religious and sexual possession:

You are in the grip of something quite beyond me. You seem to be here but you are not really here. I was ready to help you . . . I was ready to try. But now it is costing me too much. It is wearing me down. I would never have gone so far if I weren't afraid you would use Matryosha in the same way. (231-232)

Dostoevsky's impulse to discuss Matryona immediately after sex (or mentioning her out of context) suggests “using.” On the one hand, he feels a “terrible malice . . . toward living children,” a desire to “pluck [a newborn babe] from its mother’s arms

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<sup>190</sup> This reading of Anna as surface replaces reading her as a container: “It is as if at her core she were on fire” (56). “The women he is used to are not without and intensity of their own, but it is an intensity all of skin and nerves. Their sensations are intense, electric, immediate, of the surface. Whereas with her he goes into a body that bleeds, a visceral body whose sensations occur deep within itself” (133).

<sup>191</sup> Earlier, Anna is described as “conductress of souls” (139).

and dash it against a rock” (9), a “rage against everyone who is alive when his child is dead . . . most of all against this girl, whom for her very presence he would like to tear limb from limb” (16). His feelings are contradictory: “an urge to protect her, an urge to lash out at her because she is alive” (23). Soon he gives way to the impulse of searching for Pavel within her. This initially consists in subjecting her to intimidating moments of silence, “an outrageous demand” (23), but it develops into an interest in her body: Dostoevsky “cannot fail to notice [her] budding breasts” and “something passes between them from which he flinches as though pierced by a red-hot wire” (28). Seeing her asleep with Anna he has a visceral sensation that she is “watching him” even as he “ascertains” she is asleep. His second approach confirms his suspicions:

Again he has the uncanny feeling that Matryona is watching him . . . He is not mistaken: he is staring into open, unblinking eyes. A chill runs through him . . . She is awake and has been awake all the time; thumb in mouth, she has been watching his every motion with unremitting vigilance. As he peers, holding his breath, the corners of her mouth seem to curve faintly upward in a victorious, bat-like grin. And the arm too, extended loosely over her mother, is like a wing. (58)

This alleged lack of innocence is restated later when Matryona finds them in bed: “her mother, wild-haired, fast asleep . . . and he, in the act of opening his eyes on the grave child at the door. An apparition that could very well be a dream. But he knows it is not. She sees all, she knows all” (232-233).

Freud suggests that in *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky wrote what he repressed in real life.<sup>192</sup> In *The Master of Petersburg* Matryona's rape is figurative and textual,

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<sup>192</sup> See Freud (*Dostoevsky*).

although Dostoevsky's sexual interest in her is repeatedly suggested.<sup>193</sup> Its first, textual, part takes place in his bed and consists in “the rhythms of storytelling” (72). He “turns the screw” (72); he “feels no mercy” and wants to “forc[e] the words upon her” (73). Narrating the story of Maria Lebyatkin and her imaginary fiancé he presents Pavel as a saviour, buying the white suit, pretending to be her sweetheart, giving everyone “a lesson in chivalry” by saving her from disgrace (74). This innocence is destroyed by the sadistic element: beaten by her brother, Maria thinks the world is “a place where you get beaten” (72), and that God is indifferent to human suffering (75). Smiling “an ugly, crooked . . . smile” (75) Dostoevsky gets closer to Matryona’s body:

She is defeated. She has no more questions. Now she is ready, he thinks. He pats the bed beside him. Hanging her head, she slides closer. He folds her within the circle of his arm; he can feel her trembling. He strokes her hair, her temples. At last she gives way and, pressing herself against him, balling her fists under her chin, sobs freely. (75-76)

Matryona offers a link to Pavel through the suggestion of her sexuality. One of Dostoevsky's visions presents Pavel’s semen: “the seed that for a while went on living in the body after the breathing had stopped, not yet knowing it would never find issue” (76). In another vision Dostoevsky remembers a statue he saw in a museum: “the Indian god Shiva lying on his back, blue and dead, and riding on him the figure of a terrible goddess, many-armed, wide-mouthed, staring-eyed, ecstatic – riding him, drawing the divine seed out of him” (76). These two images combine when Shiva becomes Matryona: “[h]e has no difficulty in imagining this child in her ecstasy” (76). If the physical “violation” by story is insignificant (“the girl in the crook of his arm,

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<sup>193</sup> “It excites him intensely . . . that they should be doing such fiery, dangerous work with the child asleep in the next room” (56).

the five fingers on his hand, white and dumb, gripping his shoulder”) Dostoevsky's imaginary violation goes further: “she might as well be sprawled out naked” (76). His later meditation on sex with child prostitutes and their facial expressions is juxtaposed with images of Matryona subjected to the “piston-engine” rhythm of his storytelling and the careful inspection of her face during the narrative act (72).<sup>194</sup>

Thus, Dostoevsky's use of Anna's body is coupled with meditations on Matryona's: wondering whether Matryona can sleepwalk into his bedroom and find him in a state of “lust,” whether the “intimate smells” are passed “down from mother to daughter,” or whether “[l]oving the mother, is one destined to long for the daughter too?” (128). Objects of desire, they are also the inspiration of writing to “channel[] this disturbing excitement” (134). Dostoevsky imagines himself writing an anonymous novel, “[a] book of the night, in which every excess would be represented and no bounds respected,” “*Memoirs of a Russian Nobleman*. A book that she, Anna Sergeyevna, its true begetter, would never see” (134).<sup>195</sup> But while Anna inspires it, Matryona is at the core of the book. Dostoevsky self-reflexively imagines “a chapter in which the noble memorist reads aloud to the young daughter of his mistress a story of the seduction of a young girl in which he himself emerges . . . as having been the seducer”:

A story full of intimate detail and innuendo which by no means seduces the daughter but on the contrary frightens her and disturbs her sleep and makes her so doubtful of her own purity that three days later she gives herself up to him in

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<sup>194</sup> “something that goes beyond mere wincing, mere bearing of pain . . . the sudden wide-eyed look of a creature that begins to understand its life is in danger” (76-77).

<sup>195</sup> In *Foe* Susan Barton also wants to be not only the muse but the “begetter” (126) of the story. In both instances women are used for sexual gratification and, afterwards, if they beget a story it is not a story of their own choosing. Instead, snippets of their lives are interwoven in a narrative they would not accept.

despair, in the most shameful of ways, in a way of which no child could conceive were the history of her own seduction and surrender and the manner of its doing not deeply impressed on her beforehand. (134)

Their bodies inspire his writing: (“Is that what she is setting him free to do: to write a book of evil? And to what end? To liberate himself from evil or to cut himself off from good?” (134)) and in both instances Dostoevsky experiences it as a posthumous triumph over Pavel: “Poor child! The festival of the senses that would have been his inheritance stolen away from him! Lying in Pavel’s bed, he cannot refrain from a quiver of dark triumph” (135).

The question of Matryona's sexual innocence is linked to that of her political innocence; her knowledge of politics is equated with her knowledge of sexual matters. It is unclear whether she is “groomed for the harem” (217) or whether she is naturally a girl who “will do anything for [Nechaev]” (217) understanding the sexual undertones of the statement “perfectly well” (212). Such ambiguity extends further: her “hysterical” and “excited” state may result from her illness but might also be “a frenzy” of possession (165, 166, 168). Her “great excitement” (109) at the news of Ivanov’s murder might be innocent or the result of her possession by Nechaev. She actively helps him, knows the meaning of anarchist symbols, and incriminates Dostoevsky by using them (173).<sup>196</sup> Her charity towards Katri might stem from the recognition of sexual abuse (172). Similarly, her musings on death may not be based on “the precious memory of Pavel” (208) but a convoluted way of admitting her role in Katri's suicide. These ambiguities find reflection in the descriptions of her body:

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<sup>196</sup> Matryona's unreadability concerns her political consciousness and her sexual precociousness, both of which may be merely projected by Dostoevsky.

When she raises her eyes, he is enveloped in a glance that is at once shameless and derisive. She draws away from his hand, tossing her hair. 'No!' he says. The smile she wears is taunting, provocative. Then the spell passes and she is a child as before, confused, ashamed. (213)

Dostoevsky is not sure that what he witnessed really happened: whether the evil exists inside Matryona or whether it is projected on her surface.<sup>197</sup> The latter possibility is supported when he equates his epilepsy with "possession" (213).

### **The bodily search: Nechaev**

Nechaev's realm is the body. Described as living at the bodily limits of sentience, his cross-dressing and sexuality exacerbate the image. He has no interest in words: "Words are like the wind, here today, gone tomorrow. No one owns words" (200). Ready to forge Dostoevsky's signature, he knows that "[s]tudents will believe anything" (199). He has one bodily end: total revolution and language is always the means to a material end: "a crowd is not interested in fine points of authorship. A crowd has no intellect, only passions" (200).

For Dostoevsky, Nechaevism does not consist in ideas but in the spirit in the container of the body: "Nechaevism is not an idea. It despises ideas, it is outside ideas. It is a spirit, and Nechaev himself is not its embodiment but its host" (44). His followers follow his spirit "[p]erhaps because in young people there is something . . . to which the spirit in Nechaev calls" (46). As the spirit needs the body, the man and his actions are described with emphasis on the body: he is "a man of blood" (46).

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<sup>197</sup> Indeed, Matryona is sometimes presented as a surface on which meaning can be impressed: "Speak to Matryona . . . if he [Pavel] has left a mark behind it is on her" (142). This contrasts with reading her centre as possessed.

Similarly, the Nechaevites' domain is the body, and their characteristic feature is bodily transformation. Katri is variously described as a "fat girl" with a "deep voice," a "nun," a "wrestler" (90), "a warrior woman" (91), a "pig" (92), a "fat little boy" (101). She changes appearance by twitching her dress. Upon her arrest she moves "like a doll whose limbs are pulled by strings" (169), and "like a beast" (170).

In his first appearance, Nechaev is dressed as a woman. Dostoevsky registers "the blue of her eyes, the pallor of her skin" (94), the "rustle of her dress and a waft of lavender as she passes." With deep "trained" voice she looks like an opera singer (99): "heavily powdered" she is a "handsome creature" (100). Analysed closely, she is less than perfect: "Through the coat of powder, from the craters of the chin, he spies hairs that the razor did not catch. And the eyebrows are too thick over the bridge of the nose" (101). From their first encounter Dostoevsky is reluctantly but steadily drawn into Nechaev's power. By touching Dostoevsky's foot with his, Nechaev awakens a "disturbing excitement" (100). His abuse of Pavel ("a hanger-on, useful for running errands") and his rejection of his friendship ("Friendship is effeminate. We don't need friendship") can be read in the body: "The foot still rests against his, but now there is something inert about its pressure, inert and lumpish and threatening" (100).

His frenzy is perceived as religious: "Christ in his wrath . . . that is who he models himself on. The Christ of the Old Testament, the Christ who scourged the usurers of the temple" (111, 103). His bodily realm is a mixture of idealism and perversion:

This place is like a Spanish convent in the days of Loyola: well-born girls flagellating themselves, rolling about in ecstasies, foaming at the lips; or fasting, praying for hours on end to be taken into the arms of the Saviour.

Extremists all of them, sensualists hungering for the ecstasy of death – killing, dying, no matter which. And Pavel among them! (104-105)

Dostoevsky defines Nechaev bodily:

He does not act in the name of ideas. He acts when he feels action stirring in his body. He is a sensualist. He is an extremist of the senses. He wants to live in a body at the limits of sensation, at the limits of bodily knowledge. That is why he can say *everything is permitted* – or why he would say so if he were not so indifferent to explaining himself! (113-114)

At the same time, Dostoevsky's first lessons read Nechaev spiritually: “He calls himself a materialist. But that is just a fashionable jargon. The truth is, he has what the Greeks called a demon. It speaks to him. It is the source of his energy” (112-113). This reading of Nechaev also becomes a reading of Pavel: “The same demon must have been in Pavel, otherwise why would Pavel have responded to his call?” (113).

The knowledge offered by the Nechaevites concerns Pavel's body – more specifically, the nature of his death. Their words cannot be trusted: Nechaev never convinces Dostoevsky of his truthfulness, nor fully denies accusations of murder (119). Instead, he offers a physical link to Pavel by taking Dostoevsky atop a tower where he died. Physical proximity to the place of death metonymically implies closeness to Pavel's body and thus to the embodied “core” of his identity: “Between *here* and *there* an eternity of time, so much time that it is impossible for the mind to grasp it. Between *here* and *there* Pavel was alive, more alive than ever before. We live most intensely while we are falling – a truth that wrings the heart!” (121).<sup>198</sup>

Dostoevsky attempts to 'feel himself' into the body of his son or feel him within

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<sup>198</sup> Elsewhere he is fascinated by the “last fraction of the last instant of his fall” (20) and the thoughts that accompany the moment of death “too enormous to be borne.” They are imagined as illumination in the final extremity: “Pavel, falling, knew everything” (21), but remain inexpressible in his fiction.



himself.<sup>199</sup> He begins with the meditation on the word “belief”: “I believe in the body on the pavement . . . I believe in the blood and the bones. To gather up the broken body and embrace it: that is what it means to believe.” From this he arrives at an illumination:

‘I believe in resurrection,’ he says. The words come without premeditation . . . Speaking the words . . . he feels a quick joy, not so much at the words themselves as at the way they have come, spoken out of him as if by another. *Pavel!* . . . I believe in the resurrection of the body . . . (122)

This active voice speaking through his passive body is stronger than other accounts. The police account leads to his attempt to keep Pavel “in retrospect, out of [Nechaev’s] clutches” and to “the imperative” to “seek justice for his son.” Nechaev’s account demands a deeper reading of its author (124). Such a reading begins with the memory of a child rapist<sup>200</sup> and a hypothesis that his father’s evil might “explain Nechaev’s vengefulness” (125).

Their next meeting sees Dostoevsky display the passivity characteristic of their encounters. He is unable to stop Matryona from giving Nechaev the white suit as a disguise, he does not return insults and is powerless against having his money taken (157). Confronted by Nechaev’s body his language fails him: “Now it is his turn to take up the position of penniless virtue, Nechaev’s turn to bow his head and be scolded. But what he has to say? Nothing, nothing at all” (159). Nechaev’s knowledge about Pavel (“a sissy”) is imparted as contrasting with his own masculinity as when he

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<sup>199</sup> Such ‘feeling in’ relates to the body rather than soul: “the body of a hot-blooded young man . . . striking the earth . . . the rush of breath from the lungs, the crack of bones.” The physicality of a “body hitting the earth” is seen as “the measure of all things” (105).

<sup>200</sup> This memory is of reading his body: looking “intently into the face” and its result, the idea that “nothing in his heart has changed” (125).

puts his finger into the fire (161). His masculinity is also viewed through Matryona's bodily reactions. The result is that Dostoevsky feels himself rendered less masculine, unable to “compete with these young men who come from nowhere and vanish into nowhere breathing adventure and mystery” (161).

His passivity also results in his being talked into getting rid of Nechaev's old clothes. The bundle becomes “his” and he experiences himself as like “a girl with a stillborn baby, or a murderer with bloody a axe.” This act of collaboration also demonstrates the extent of Nechaev's power (162) even as it suggests Nechaev's guilt: “How easy for a woman to murder a man: lure him down an alley, accept his embrace against a wall . . . sink a hatpin into his heart . . . that leaves no blood, and only a pinprick of a wound” (163). Nechaev's power is immediately somatised as an epileptic fit within the container of Dostoevsky's body: “On all fours, raising his head, sniffing the air like a wild animal, he tries to concentrate his attention on the horizon inside himself. But if what is taking him over is a fit, it is taking over his senses too. His senses are as dull as his hands” (164).

Each of the four meetings with Nechaev follows a similar pattern: each foregrounds Nechaev's changing physicality, each offers snippets of “knowledge” about Pavel, and each suggests Dostoevsky's growing passivity. This is amplified in the he last meeting where Nechaev's accosts Dostoevsky in the street and takes control: “Side by side, like a reluctant dog and its master, they walk down Svechnoi Street” (175). Nechaev's agenda is again bodily: his plan is to introduce Dostoevsky to the truth through a “throng of smelly humanity” (177). The setting of their conversation provides further body imagery with the “pathos of three starving children” whose

mother sells herself to feed them (180). Barefoot, with unkempt hair and “rheumy, incurious eyes” (179), for Nechaev they embody the real Petersburg as “specimens of urban poverty” (182). One of them, “younger than Matryona” is “duller, more acquiescent” (182). This comparison leads Dostoevsky, almost inevitably, to the thought: “[h]as she already begun to say yes to men?” (182). This is the basis of his “modest proposal,” a bodily solution to poverty, rejected by Nechaev as a “depraved parable” (183).

The conversation between the two embodies Maximov's battle of sons and fathers as it simultaneously rejects such a reading. Nechaev's fury is directed at Dostoevsky's “generation” which “resent[s] it that the reins are passing into the hands of younger and stronger men who are going to make a better world” (187, 188). He accuses Dostoevsky of using the poor for financial benefit in fiction, and presents Dostoevsky's fiction as sentimentalising the poor: these children are not “three little angels on a brief visit to earth” (186), but are presented as desperate enough to eat Dostoevsky alive. Dostoevsky is, in turn, critical of Nechaev's zeal (“steal[ing] Easter from Jesus” (187)),<sup>201</sup> and the paradoxical desire to be betrayed.<sup>202</sup> His promise of suicide at thirty-five and rejection of fatherhood (“I am my own father now. I have made myself over” (194)) is read by Dostoevsky as a result of childhood experience: his vengeance a rebellion against father-figures, his thirst for blood as taking his

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<sup>201</sup> The comparison of Nechaev to Jesus follows several conversations in which Necheavites liken “treacherous” Dostoevsky to Judas (106). Another such comparison is made in Dostoevsky's words to Maximov: “The papers you are holding on to so jealously may as well be written in Aramaic” (46), and in his description of Nechaev as “a virgin like Jesus” (188). This is annulled when Nechaev, after Pontius Pilate, asks: “*Truth? What is the truth?*” (203).

<sup>202</sup> “Nechaev will not be satisfied till he is in the hands of the police, till he has tasted that too. So that his courage and his resolution can be put to the test . . . He will drag his broken limbs around, roaring, strong as a lion” (193).

father's stance (the desire to be feared and taken seriously) to the extreme (195). However, the suggestion of chastity exacerbates the queerness of his body situating it at extreme ends: the extremism of the senses and profound innocence.<sup>203</sup> The unreadability of the body renders the unreadability of Pavel: his sexuality and the rejection of his father are simultaneously suggested and problematised. Similarly, when the narrative suggests the generation struggle, it also undermines it. It is read as Dostoevsky's projection: "You think that because you and your father hated each other, the history of the world has to consist of nothing but fathers and sons against each other" (188). Instead, Nechaev proposes, revolution will signify "the end of everything old, including fathers and sons" and be "Year One. *Carte Blanche*" (189). In one delirious vision it suggests resurrecting Pavel through revolution. Throughout Dostoevsky seems willing to sometimes reject and sometimes to accept Nechaev's vision. His final kiss is similarly ambiguous: a fatherly expression of love may well be Judas's kiss of betrayal.

Nechaev's and Dostoevsky's readings of each other are never confirmed nor falsified. Dostoevsky strives to find Pavel everywhere and chases every single clue that may lead to him,<sup>204</sup> his efforts are continually thwarted by Nechaev himself or, to put it more literarily, Dostoevsky's efforts at uncovering the projected depth inside Nechaev, to find Pavel inside Nechaev, constantly crash against the surface of Nechaev's body. For it is the bodily surface that keeps getting in the way, making the

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<sup>203</sup> Nechaev is repeatedly referred to as sexually perverse (he cannot have a "natural connection with a woman"). He is thus a herald of new times in which "sensation will not come by the old means any longer" (114).

<sup>204</sup> A prime example here is the encounter with the dog and Ivanov, and the meditation on metaphors that accompanies these.

identification between Pavel and Nechaev impossible. Nechaev's behaviour is constantly "studied," "theatrical," epitomising "an age of acting . . . of disguise" (195). His cross-dressing surface is misleading, while his imagined depths escape language: "when was it last that words could be trusted to travel from heart to heart?" (195). In contrast, Dostoevsky thinks of Pavel as simple: "too much of a child, and too old-fashioned, to prosper in [this age]," a literary simpleton whose characters converse "in a funny, stammering, old-fashioned language of the heart" (196). Dostoevsky's faith in the good centre within Pavel's body derives from the latter's literary attempts at "project[ion]" of himself "into another breast" and contrasts with the importance of surface for Nechaev (196).

Dostoevsky and Nechaev also differ in their attitude to language. For the latter reading is a bourgeois "luxury," debilitating insofar as it prevents action, while "sit[ting] around arguing" merely dissipates energy (199). Instead, Nechaev believes in provoking the students to action, to a revolution that will level everyone in terms of bodily suffering: "if some are suffering, what justice is there till all are suffering?" (199-200). For Nechaev, true justice will only be achieved when "all are suffering," in other words, the term "suffering" will lose its meaning (and, consequently, suffering will cease to exist) when it will not be identifiable via its reference to its contradiction: non-suffering. The community united in pain, felt acutely by all, is Nechaev's idea of political justice. This bodily goal justifies all means ("everything is permitted" and draws on language's potential for "forgery" (200).

Nechaev argues for a “bodily” history that consists not in ideas (“in people’s minds”) but physical action (“in the streets”).<sup>205</sup> His thoughts are valued not as thoughts but as physical impulses: “I can think one thing at one minute and another thing at another and it won’t matter a pin as long as I *act*. The people *act*” (200). While such a worldview is rejected on moral grounds (“If you gamble on God’s mercy you will certainly be lost” (201)) it is inconsistent in its reliance on words (“We are on the brink of a new age where we are free to think any thought. There is nothing we can’t think! Surely you know that”) and on literature when Nechaev invokes Raskolnikov in support of his argument (201).<sup>206</sup> Dostoevsky is confused in his rejection of Nechaev (as Nechaev) and his simultaneous metonymic craving for him as the key to Pavel. Where Nechaev’s fallible logic equates the freedom to think with the freedom to act, further confusion results from Dostoevsky’s positioning himself between the bodily Nechaev and the textual Maximov. Dostoevsky wavers between the two, simultaneously trying to bridge the gap between language and the body in his search for Pavel, to keep the two separate in discussions with Maximov and Nechaev, and to translate the body and its desires into language in his fiction.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Indeed, although he initially only claims to be “of Russia,” his later implication equates his body and his spirit with Russia (202).

<sup>206</sup> At the same time, the rejection of Dostoevsky’s realm of language and authorship (“Who cares who actually writes the pamphlet?” (200)) is hypocritical since both are needed as a “means” of luring Dostoevsky into a collaboration that, metaphorically, “levels” the two men.

<sup>207</sup> Dostoevsky’s inconsistency surfaces in his conversation with Maximov when he claims that while his books are unlikely to “offend a child,” inspiration might be both offensive and bodily: “the heart has its dark places . . . One does not always know” (144). Similarly visceral is the effect caused by Pavel’s papers: the trembling and the heart “hammering unpleasantly” are reminiscent of the experience of reading forbidden books as a teenager: “terror of being caught red-handed (a terror delicious in itself), the same passionate engrossment” (148). The diary also breeds physical suffering: it presents Pavel as an orphan, renders Dostoevsky’s gloom, hatred and cruelty towards Isaev or the “the people,” his servants (150). The separation of the body and the text is therefore not complete.

Thus, if Anna's body proved a dead-end in the search for Pavel, Nechaev's body is even more misleading. Not only does he not lead to Pavel, his self-disclosures are ambiguous and return Dostoevsky to himself. The author finds himself "a fly in Nechaev's web," where even possible revenge (exchanging Nechaev for his confiscated passport) has perhaps been devised by Nechaev. There is a suggestion that in his reluctant seduction Dostoevsky approximates Pavel: "Was it the same with Pavel? Was *Pavel* in his deepest being a son of his stepfather, seducible by the voluptuous promise of being seduced?" (206). Thus he hopes Maximov will "swallow [Nechaev] whole and crush his bones and spit out the dry remnants," at the same time as he feels "acutest resentment" towards Maximov and his family (206, 207). While he agrees with Maximov's "[i]f there must be sons, better to father them at a distance, like a frog or a fish," his question "[h]ow much lower can [I] fall?" suggests a further fall in his attempts to read Pavel (207, 206).

### **The bodily search: Dostoevsky**

The search for Pavel also takes place in Dostoevsky's own body through the experience of epilepsy and ageing. The text invites allegorical readings of the body in the suggestions of the spiritual dimension of disease. The two-way movement in the case of epilepsy consists in building expectation of attacks and a repeated deferral of meaning.

As we saw earlier, Dostoevsky's fetishism relied on metonymy, but his own body offers the hope of direct communication. Thus Dostoevsky summons his son's spirit and feels it inside his body. The reader sees him "concentrating his gaze" on an

empty chair, “waiting for the darkness to thicken, to turn into another kind of darkness, a darkness of presence.” Language provides a direct connection with the immaterial: “Silently, he forms his lips over his son’s name, three times, four times. He is trying to cast a spell. But over whom: over a ghost or over himself?” He thinks of himself as Orpheus but with “[n]o flute, no lyre, just the word, the one word, over and over” (5). Awaiting illumination, the body is passive: it tries to give itself over to the voice.<sup>208</sup> Images of recovering Pavel from death are juxtaposed to visions of drowning and falling. Some images take the form of extended passages (17-18), some are a matter of phrasing, so frequent they are easily overlooked. Thus “[h]is head begins to swim” (5) suggests a submersion that can refer to confusion, epilepsy, or possession – or simply a stylistic idiosyncrasy. Such recurrent ambiguities match the ambiguous attitude to language displayed by Dostoevsky. Thus his hopes of summoning Pavel are shattered: his prayers are not answered. He also suffers from writer’s block. Bodily knowledge remains questionable or is inexpressible in language. Whether the final overcoming of the block and rendering “Pavel” in fiction unites the two men remains highly problematic.

Initially, the hope of communication is strong. He likens himself to the ageing dogs in the cemetery, packs of which are “waiting for the mourners to leave before they begin their digging” (7). Pavel's grave provides a metonymic link to him: the mound “has the volume and even the shape of a recumbent body”; its materiality allows contact (“rub[bing] his face in the wet earth, burrow[ing] his face into it”) even

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<sup>208</sup> The text wavers between presenting Dostoevsky's language as actively used, and Dostoevsky as a passive medium of language “surrendering to the words,” “going where they take him” (139). This unresolved dichotomy applies also to the final possession, and his final creation.



if the experience is “too sudden” and awakens no feelings (8, 9, 8). Its immediacy contrasts with the mediatedness of language: between the “boy who still lives in his memory” and “the name on the death certificate,” the “number on the stake” (8).<sup>209</sup> However, language does not do justice to the bodily event: the documentation of the event remains the “procedure of storing, numbering, encasing, transporting, burying” (8-9). Words mislead to the point where a stern promise of a return to the grave (11) never happens (22), but words continue to have emotional significance – as in his use of “my son” instead of “Pavel” and in his pain in response to Anna's use of the past tense (16).

Coetzee's Dostoevsky is Freud's Dostoevsky *à rebours*: Where Freud describes the identification between the writer and his murdered father,<sup>210</sup> Coetzee shows the father's identification with the son.<sup>211</sup> He feels himself his “mother and his father,” “everything . . . and more!” (16).<sup>212</sup> This “more” of direct identification makes the literal pain and death of one into the figurative pain and death of the other. Pavel's death for Matryona is “caused” by Dostoevsky: “death the reaper himself” with his “hideous bleeding mask” (14). But this agent of death is also a bearer of life: Pavel is a homunculus “egg” asleep within him (19). Bodily numbness is intertwined with the hope of a live spirit, an idea that “[p]oetry might bring his son back,” requiring merely “a sense of the poem” or “a sense of its music” (17). Such hopes are immediately questioned: he is “not a poet: more like a dog that has lost a bone, scratching here,

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<sup>209</sup> Similarly mediated is the original message informing him of Pavel's death: “*Mésaventure*. Maykov's code word. Suicide” (124).

<sup>210</sup> Freud (*Dostoevsky*). For a good analysis of Freudian inspiration of the *Master* see Rosen (*Freud*).

<sup>211</sup> “I am he . . . he is I” (53).

<sup>212</sup> Explicitly, he “cannot distinguish Pavel from himself”: they are “the same person; and that person is no more or less than a thought, Pavel thinking in him, he thinking in Pavel” (21).

scratching there” (17) and the voice may be that of the “demon that is taking him over” or “his own soul flailing its wings” in anticipation of his own death (16). Such literary fantasy does not bear rational scrutiny: Dostoevsky rejects the possibility of meeting his son in the afterlife (17). The “stirrings” of the body, which are at times presented as communication with Pavel or as spirit possession, are, at other times, merely symptoms of illness and old age. Half mourning his son, half mourning the inability to write, Dostoevsky lives in “utter blankness” bearing with it “insidious and deathly pleasure” (22). His world is “contracted,” limited to what is “within his breast” (22). Such solipsism is undercut by suggestions of the body's capacity for transcendence: visions appearing as preludes to a fit induce a feeling of something “on its way” that remains as yet inexpressible, “something whose name he is trying to avoid” (27). These epileptic fits invite interpretation as a mystical means of communication at the boundaries of consciousness.<sup>213</sup> However, while illness provides the hope of communication, it also turns mourning into a “lie” (52).<sup>214</sup> In both states Pavel is presented as existing within Dostoevsky's body but not representable in his language: “His son is inside him, a dead baby in an iron box in the frozen earth. He does not know how to resurrect the baby or – what comes to the same thing – lacks the will to do it” (52).

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<sup>213</sup> Dostoevsky's epilepsy serves as a bodily instinct warning of imminent danger (“a device, and the most childish of devices at that, for extricating himself from a fix” (31) at the police station), yet at the same time as it links the body and the mind, it also, through connotations with images of epileptics in Dostoevsky's fiction, links the body, the real life of the author with his creation; much of what happens to him in the novel is a replay of his work, which in turn might have been inspired by his life: “surely he has been here before . . . and had an attack or a fainting fit! But why is it that he recollects the episode only so dimly? And what has the recollection do with the smell of fresh paint?” (31). The juxtaposition of the textual and the bodily also takes place on the language level of metaphors in the novel.

<sup>214</sup> When Dostoevsky experiences “the clearest vision . . . of Pavel smiling at him,” it is immediately followed by a reference to his illness: “*Now there is sure to be a fit!* he thinks” (28).

When the repetitions of Pavel's name (a “charm”) invite the spirit of Nechaev, Dostoevsky feels “betrayed” (60). This betrayal consists in being deprived of his inner core (Pavel) and being left with the ageing, “offensive” body (66). The dissolution of his body influences Dostoevsky's mind (67-68). Joy and gloom are interwoven in their successive appearances (“The dawning sun is there not for itself but to undergo eclipse; joy shines out only to reveal what the annihilation of joy will be like” (68)) and both function as cognitive and affective expressions of a rapidly changing somatic state. The moments of confusion preceding epileptic fits, the text suggests, renew contact with the 'core' of his being, and only then, and through the body, the contact with Pavel is feasible.

Epileptic fits provide a lasting sense of confusion, anticipation and apprehension. When they arrive, detailed description and ambiguities in language suggest the status of an epiphany. The experience structures time as space (“minutes stretch before him like a dark passage down which he must scurry”) and produce dread: “a wave of terror . . . without object” (68). Waking up with “no idea where he is . . . who he is,” Dostoevsky is pure mind: “He is a wakefulness, a consciousness, that is all.” His thoughts are uttered by “consciousness, addressing itself, trying to quell its own panic” (69).<sup>215</sup> This picture is complicated when the same attack renders Dostoevsky a body: “A body falls vertically through space inside him. He is that body. There is a rush of air: he is the one who feels the rush. There is a throat choked with terror: it is his throat” (69). This contradiction remains unresolved. At the same time, there is an invitation for the reader to endow the scene with interpretation (the “fall,”

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<sup>215</sup> Pure consciousness devoid of the body is an ideal to which some Coetzee's characters (Dawn) aspire, while some crave being merely a body devoid of consciousness (Magda).

for example, is reminiscent of Pavel's final fall) but, in the typical two-way movement, such suggestions are soon undermined. The fits do not “provide illumination”: “They are not visitations. Far from it” (69). Dostoevsky rejects the spiritual interpretations of his illness – “mouthfuls of his life sucked out of him as if by a whirlwind that leaves behind not even a memory of darkness” (69) – but such rejections are themselves undercut by later suggestions of meaningfulness (“Just a dream, he thinks . . . For an instant he is allowed to believe. Then the truth bursts over him and overwhelms him” (71)).

Dostoevsky's aim is to hear the body speak its own story (126). This clearly delineated goal of making Pavel speak must also override corporeal fragility: the “inertia” of “growing old” and turning into a “man in a corner with nothing to do but pick over the pages of his losses” (124). The purity of this objective, however, is tainted by his emotional involvement and later by something “like the point of a nail just beginning to come through a shoe, that he cannot or does not care to define” (138). The something else turns out to be appearances not of Pavel but of creatures of the imagination. Thus, summoning Pavel as a child, in the “corner of the picture” he encounters “something that he thrusts away” (142):

what comes back instantly . . . is what he can only call a troll, a misshapen little creature, red-haired, red-bearded, no taller than a child of three or four . . . Who is this troll-creature? . . . With a shock it comes home to him. The cratered skin, the scars swelling hard and livid in the cold, the thin beard growing out of the pock-marks – it is Nechaev again, Nechaev grown small, Nechaev in Syberia haunting the beginnings of his son! What does the vision mean? (143)

This vision's suggestion of meaning invites a variety of interpretations: Dostoevsky's betrayal of his child, the replacing of absent father with Nechaev, the evil existing in

Pavel from the beginning. None of them are conclusively confirmed but all revolve around Nechaev.

With time Dostoevsky's body feels Pavel's presence (“[n]owhere and everywhere, torn and scattered like Orpheus.”) Against this, the fiction born from this body offers the promise of resurrection: “Port, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection, that is what I am called to be” (152-153). Giving voice consists in “waiting for [Pavel’s] ghost” (154) while reading his own degenerating body. He is not a “full man any longer” but “half a man” (192). Split in half, his diseased and perverse part encloses the healthy, strong and young one in its container. His “spells of dizziness and palpitations of the heart . . . exhaustion and irritability” become a prominent feature as if “the entire state in which he lives can be called a fit” (174). The medical condition is extrapolated to the outside world: the “maelstrom of Petersburg” (204), Russia and the historical moment. Slowly, however, Dostoevsky realises that “he has lost touch” with Pavel (204). His fall is imminent. In a prior conversation with Matryona Dostoevsky speculated whether the right word for seizure should be “possession,” now he sees his disease as a “mere presentiment of what is now happening, the quaking and dancing of the body a long-drawn prelude to a quaking of the soul” (213).

### **The textual search: The Fall**

The eventual “fall” of Dostoevsky links the body and language: either may be the cause, and either can be the effect. This linking of what is bodily and what is linguistic, what is a material sign and what is its meaning, appears first in relation to

Pavel's writing. The engagement with Pavel occurs *through* his language, where material writing is metonymically connected with the body. Dostoevsky accordingly wavers between the sign as metaphor and the materiality of the sign: his attention wanders “from the sense of the words to the words themselves, to the letters on the paper, to the trace in ink of the hand’s movements, the shadings left by the pressure of the fingers . . . he closes his eyes and touches his lips to the page” (216). The kissing of the paper is similar to fetishistic mourning in its metonymic function and further juxtaposes language and the body.

Dostoevsky's “fall” and suggested possession translates bodily pain into spiritual affliction: “He is sick and he knows the name of his sickness. Nechaev, voice of the age, calls it vengefulness, but a truer name, less grand, would be resentment.” (234). Pavel's physical fall structures the figurative fall of Dostoevsky, but this time both happen in the container of his body: “from being a body plunging into darkness he shall become a body within whose core a plunge into darkness is taking place, a body which contains its own falling and its own darkness” (234). This allows for living through the fall and “through the madness of our times” (235) in a way Pavel could not: “To live where Pavel died. To live in Russia and hear the voices of Russia murmuring within him. To hold it all within him: Russia, Pavel, death” (235). By becoming a mouthpiece for the surrounding madness Dostoevsky's body encloses Pavel, demons and epilepsy unable to tell them apart.<sup>216</sup> The “sordid infirmity” of the body engages with spiritual reflections on history, politics, religion or morality that are

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<sup>216</sup> His writing is finally that “of a madman – vileness, obscenity . . . untameable,” the bodily product of “madness . . . running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen and so to the page” (18). In this, he reminds us of Elizabeth Costello who does not distinguish between the voices that speak through her but is the secretary of whoever appoints her.

not literally communicable. The key term here is perversion, its polysemy referring both to sexuality and to the perversion of truth, the translation of facts into fiction. Writing is synonymous with both betrayal and perversion. While textual perversion merely distorts the facts (235), in Dostoevsky's case it relies on sexual perversion for its metaphorical definition: "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places" (236).

Possession alienates Dostoevsky from himself. He is unrecognisable to himself and finds himself accompanied by "someone in the room besides himself . . . if not . . . a full person then . . . a stick-figure, a scarecrow draped in an old suit, with a stuffed sugar-sack for a head and a kerchief across the mouth" (236).<sup>217</sup> The apparition leads to mental imbalance: he is "distracted, and irritated at himself for being distracted. The very spirit of irritation keeps the scarecrow perversely alive; its mute indifference to his irritation doubles his irritation" (236). When the figure reappears, its identity is unreadable:

What is the name? Is it Ivanov? Is this Ivanov come back, Ivanov the obscure, the forgotten? What was Ivanov's true name? Or is it Pavel? Who was the lodger who had this room before him? Who was P.A.I., owner of the suitcase? Did the P. stand for Pavel? Was Pavel Pavel's true name? If Pavel is called by a false name, will he ever come? (237)

The apparition does not resemble Pavel: its head is "slightly too large, larger than a human head ought to be," there is "something excessive" in its proportions.

Dostoevsky's language approximates the creature without fixing it with descriptive

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<sup>217</sup> His beard is described as "a curtain of bees" echoing the description of the barbarian girl's pubic hair in the Magistrate's dream (*Waiting* 14).

terms: his vocabulary and creature's qualities are similar to those used by Dostoevsky for the figure of Stavrogin in *The Possessed*.

The apparition stands as a mute body inviting both projections of depth and multiple interpretations. It motivates religious acceptance: "Is that what he must learn: that in God's eyes there is no difference between the two of them, Paul Isaev and Sergei Nechaev, sparrows of equal weight?" (238). It also invites Dostoevsky to rethink his attitude to Pavel. The son is either "within him, a child walled up in the crypt of his grief, weeping without cease" or is a vengeful man who should be let "loose in all his rage against the rule of fathers" (239). The bind is not a real choice but "a choice that is no choice" (239). Conflicting feelings (the "rule of fathers and the "thanklessness of sons") culminate in the description of the apparition where the boundaries between who is the father, who the son, who the creating power, who the creation, are blurred. Similar confusion applies to possession: it is unclear if Dostoevsky is the cause of evil or the temporary abode of the evil spirit (241).

Saving Pavel in writing coincides with the arrival of the apparition and breaks his writer's block. In his writing, however, appears a vision of child abuse, recognisable as a rough sketch for a scene later to be used in *The Possessed*:

Thus at last the time arrives and the hand that holds the pen begins to move. But the word it forms are not words of salvation. Instead, they tell of flies, or of a single black fly, buzzing against a closed windowpane. High summer in Petersburg, hot and clammy; from the street below, noise, music. In the room a child with brown eyes and straight fair hair lying naked beside a man . . . (241)

The apparition represents the non-representable and translates unacceptable desires into text. Possession leads to transgressive writing in which the text now possessed by



Dostoevsky perverts Pavel's story and his image. While language's triumph over the body may consist in representing what does not exist any more, such a triumph is also a betrayal insofar as it misrepresents Pavel. Dostoevsky's creation is fathered by him but also fathers him and "begins to write itself" (242).

Dostoevsky's text continues Pavel's story. He describes the lazy life, wandering through the landlady's flat, the smelling of her clothes, the photograph (this time spat on and polished). Pavel's or Stavrogin's transgression is Pavel's infecting the landlady's daughter with sexual knowledge. Initially, it amounts to leaving the door open, with the knowledge that "the child has crept in, has watched or listened" (244). It is "*creating a taste* in the child, as one creates a taste for unnatural foods, oysters or sweetbreads" (244) and forcing his mistress to blasphemy (something that "excites the girl unbearably") strengthening his belief in Svidrigailov's dictum: "Women like to be humiliated" (244). Dostoevsky's renaming of Matryona is a rectification of his earlier complaint regarding her name (14). The new name, Dusha, hints at Matryona's later role as Darya (Dusha) and her relationship with Stavrogin in the *Possessed* (246). Such renaming might signify possession but also perversion of translating life into fiction. A further perversion consists in translating fiction into life and abusing Matryona's innocence when his writing is left on the table for her to read. As in the earlier conversation about dying, Dostoevsky destroys her vision of goodness. Matryona the character, and Martyona the reader are left with no illusions as to Pavel's motivation for chivalry: "Why did I do it? For a joke. Summer in the country is so boring" (249).

Dostoevsky's writing is "enough" for "present purposes": "In a final version it would have to be fuller" (249). Dostoevsky's writing invites interpretation as a

figurative parallel of Pavel's fall, just as his figurative perversion of truth parallels his sexual perversion (“assault on the innocence of a child” (249)). The concepts of fall and perversion are not only literal or metaphorical, but also refer both to the body and to language. The movement between the body and the text registers the latter as the product of the former, but further it renders bodily loss of innocence as occasioned by language. Such confusion of deed and motive, reason and result, textuality and sexuality infuses the final “fall” with similar ambiguity. For his “assault,” Dostoevsky “expect[s] no forgiveness”: “he has crossed the threshold” (249). His transgression is an attempt to hear God: “Now God must speak, now God dare no longer remain silent. To corrupt a child is to force God. The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap, a trap to catch God” (249).

Such transgression changes him bodily and mentally and transforms his identity: “he is outside himself, perhaps outside his soul. Somewhere he stands and watches while he and God circle each other” (249). The fall is complete and involves not only those two agents but the whole universe: “Time is suspended, everything is suspended before the fall. *I have lost my place in my soul*, he thinks” (249). Once again, the the mind becomes the body: the corruption of the mind brings about the corruption of the body, but which is the cause and which the effect remains uncertain.

### **Master of Petersburg and Metaphor**

The novel deals with metaphor in two ways. First, it uses images of the body and language treating both sometimes as surfaces and sometimes as containers. In the

use of container metaphor it suggests depth that needs uncovering both by Dostoevsky and the reader.

Dostoevsky's speech is profoundly metaphorical: he is the container enclosing the body of Pavel, like a coffin or a womb (66, 76, 81). The somatic attacks of illness are repeatedly an "illumination" or "visitation" (69) that never arrives. Metaphorical thought is evident, and conscious, in his thinking:

He counts backwards to the day of Pavel's death, reaches twenty, loses track, starts again, loses track again . . . The steps, the days – they have something to do with each other. Each step another day subtracted from Pavel's sum. A counting up and a counting down proceeding at the same time – is that what is confusing him? (117-118)

Similarly ambiguous is his attitude to epilepsy where the promise of meaning offered by following the interpretative impulse is undercut in a two-way movement by a return to the mundane and the literal:

A metaphor, he tells himself, that is all it is – another word for a lapse of consciousness, a not-being here, an absence. Nothing new. The epileptic knows it all: the approach to the edge, the glance downward, the lurch of the soul, the thinking that thinks itself crazily over and over . . . He grips the rail tighter, shakes his head to chase away the dizziness. Metaphors – what nonsense! There is death, only death. Death is a metaphor for nothing. Death is death. I should never have agreed to come. (118)

Metaphors are a frequent subject of conversations. Dostoevsky's characterisation of Nechaevites as the "Baal" (44) is quickly rejected by Maximov: "Interesting. A metaphor, perhaps, and not entirely clear . . . I must ask myself, however, how practical is it to talk . . . about ideas going about in the land, as if ideas had arms and legs?" Yet soon his use of language ("we are not a contemplative order, we are of the investigative arm" (44)) contradicts his meaning and suggests the

inescapability of metaphor. When Dostoevsky accuses Maximov of misreading and fearing the contents of Pavel's papers ("as though the words might leap out from the page and strangle you" (46)), he also turns reading into a physical experience ("reading is being the arm and being the axe . . . reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering" (47)). Such reading is risky in its bodily aspect: Maximov's work is read as sublimation of his murderous tendencies: "look into yourself: is that your true wish? Do you not truly want to chop off his head and stamp your feet in his blood?" (47). Such reading of Maximov can be reversed to shed light on Dostoevsky's "literary" paedophilia as a substitute for what is not lived. While Dostoevsky's claim of his literal truthfulness ("I do not speak in riddles. Every word I use means what it says" (148)) serves the practical purpose of evading Maximov, it stands at variance with Dostoevsky's prior use of metaphor and the preoccupation with metaphors and figures. While he speaks, perhaps self-consciously, metaphorically, he elsewhere finds metaphors both to lead and hinder his hermeneutic endeavour.

The police are interested in textual evidence to the point where the bodily aim of their work (capturing Nechaev) is forgotten. Submerged in paperwork, they overlook the metaphoricity of their language: "We can't get moving until we have something in writing – something to get our teeth into, so to speak" (205). They "guard" language in their refusal to return the papers confiscated from Pavel's room since "in today's circumstances it is hard to know what "of a private nature" means any longer" (38). Pavel's short story – a private matter to Dostoevsky, a public affair to the police – has a bodily theme: it tells a story of a convict escaping prison in

Siberia, falling in love with a peasant girl, and killing a landowner for “forc[ing] his attentions on the girl” (40). Fleeing the scene, the young man takes his axe “the weapon of the Russian people, our means of defence and our means of revenge” (41). For Maximov, “the allusion could not be clearer” (41-42). It is proof of “how deeply he [Pavel] had fallen under the influence of the Nechaevites” (42). Such a reading is rejected as mistaking fiction for real life. A similar rejection takes place during Dostoevsky's conversation with Nechaev on the distinction between story and parable:

There are enough children in the cellars of Petersburg, and enough gentlemen on the streets with money in their pockets and a taste for young flesh, to bring prosperity to all the poor folk of the city. All that is required is a cool head. On the backs of their children the cellar-folk could be raised into the light of day. (183)

Elsewhere accused of reading Raskolnikov literally, Nechaev sees the idea as “a depraved parable” (183) against Dostoevsky's stated intention. Once again he is criticised for an apparent inability to read. The distinction between a parable and a story marks the distinction between metaphorical and literal uses of language. While Nechaev, according to Dostoevsky, confuses fiction with reality and takes metaphor for reality, his own “story” mocks Nechaev's idea of justice:

I don't speak in parables . . . This is not a parable: it is a story about children and their uses. With the aid of a child the streets of Petersburg could be rid of a bloodsucker, perhaps even a blood-sucking banker. And in due course the dead man's wife and children might be turned out on the streets too, thus bringing about a further measure of levelling. (183-184)

The rejection of figurative language, repeated in a conversation with Maximov (148), presents Dostoevsky as a literal reader. This allows for the rejection of Nechaev's metaphors and his actions: “When I look up into the heavens I see only the

stars” (185).<sup>218</sup> Such professed rejection of metaphors is undermined by Dostoevsky’s use of figurative language and by his preferred mode of reading, rendered as giving oneself up to the text, “feeling” oneself into characters and authors. Thus while Nechaev’s ideas on reading are ostensibly rejected (“You are mad, you don’t know how to read” (201)),<sup>219</sup> elsewhere Dostoevsky advocates precisely such an identificatory mode of reading (46-47). Both Maximov and Nechaev navigate from text to extra-textual reality: treating Raskolnikov as a call to arms and Pavel’s story as incriminating evidence. Dostoevsky’s rejection of such embodiment contradicts both his adherence to embodiment, and his stated literal use of language.

Another instance of metaphorical thinking consists in the conscious search for hidden meanings. In the case of Ivanov the voice calling Dostoevsky might be the “unhappy wail of a dog” but it is believed to signify Pavel (79). Consequently, it is not dismissed in its literal quality, but awakens the search for what is non-literal. This search is presented as hopeless; no call is to be disregarded: “Pavel will not be saved till he has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought the *least thing*, the beggarman . . . too, and much else he does not yet know of; and even then there will be no certainty” (82). This distinction between “things that are things” and “things that are signs” is a conscious deployment of metaphorical thinking contradicting a self-professed use of merely literal language:

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<sup>218</sup> Dostoevsky rejects Nechaev’s talk of “lines” between the Swiss banks and the poor of Petersburg: (“With a finger he traces a line from the floor at his feet . . . out through the dim window . . . The lines end here, but where do you think they begin?” (180)) and his mistaking of fiction for reality as when addresses the author: “The more I talk to you . . . the less I understand how you could have written about Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov was . . . alive” (186), “Surely you know that. You must know it – it’s what Raskolnikov said in your own book before he fell ill!” (201).

<sup>219</sup> Such rejection might be based on the incompleteness of Nechaevites’ interpretations: Elsewhere Katri invokes the Bible, but her knowledge of Jesus’s death is either partial or twisted to reflect their political goals (106-107).

He is waiting for a sign, and he is betting . . . that the dog is not the sign, is not a sign at all, is just a dog among many dogs howling in the night. But he knows too that as long as he tries by cunning to distinguish things that are things from things that are signs he will not be saved. (83)

The dog leads to Ivanov, an oracle or a spy, the “beginning of the unexpected” hoped to “take[]” him somewhere (88).<sup>220</sup> This promise, awaking the readerly expectation of later illumination is not realised: Ivanov's story does not lead to Pavel. His religious meditations might suggest the possibility of communication with Pavel, but this possibility is undercut when he is murdered.

Likened to gambling, this search is repeated in the presence of the apparition hoped to be Pavel, or at least speaking in his name. Dostoevsky's creation is both a story and a parable of the creative process. This is clear when the circularity of metaphorical thinking becomes the subject of the story: “*I should not have come. But the nots are beginning to collapse, just as happened with Ivanov. I should not be here therefore I should be here. I will see nothing else before I will see all.* What sickness is this, what sickness of reasoning?” (118). This vicious circle is an entrapment in language beyond which Dostoevsky wishes to step in the hope of bodily knowledge:

He is in the old labyrinth. It is the story of his gambling in another guise. He gambles because God does not speak. He gambles to make God speak. But to make God speak in the turn of a card is blasphemy. Only when God is silent does God speak. When God seems to speak God does not speak. (237)

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<sup>220</sup> Ivanov might be “playing the part of God’s angel – an angel by virtue of being no angel at all” (92).

Dostoevsky's failure to find Pavel is also the failure to understand his creation. The search for the non-metaphorical “true name”<sup>221</sup> that signifies the imagined substance within is doomed since communication, conceptual and linguistic, remains metaphorical.

The metaphorical nature of language and thought is the reason why Dostoevsky does not succeed in his endeavour. While the suitcase, the white suit and the snippets of information he has gathered will help in writing, the work itself will be a betrayal and perversion of what has truly happened. The father and son will be united in their fall, but once again, only metaphorically. Their death will be the literal death of the body (Pavel) and the figurative death of Dostoevsky's soul (238). The novel's double-movement thus wavers between the literal and the metaphorical. Finally, in Dostoevsky's world, “speaking in figures” is all that is possible (235). Metaphor entraps his language to the point where everything he expresses is transgressive:

Nothing he says is true, nothing is false, nothing is to be trusted, nothing to be dismissed. There is nothing to hold to, nothing to do but fall . . . Not a matter of fidelity at all. On the contrary, a matter of betrayal – betrayal of love first of all, and then of Pavel and the mother and child and everyone else. *Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use, to be gripped to him and fall with him. (235)<sup>222</sup>

This “turning” to another use in a parable (and the accompanying lack of fidelity) arises from the inescapability of metaphor in language and thought.

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<sup>221</sup> Such search relies on the distinction between false (figurative) and true (literal) words. As with things and signs (83) Dostoevsky has no method of distinguishing the two: “He will give home to any word, no matter how strange, no matter how stray, if there is a chance it is an anagram for Pavel” (141).

<sup>222</sup> In his despair, Dostoevsky resembles E Chantos of Elizabeth Costello trapped in the world of metaphor and allegory.



## Conclusion

The novel problematises the quest for truth. With its self-referentiality, its employment of metaphor (linguistic and conceptual), the bodily imagery that offers a promise of exploration of a projected “essence,” the repeated juxtaposition of surface and depth, descriptions of falling, drowning, or else digging and uncovering, it invites allegorization and, at the same time, constantly undermines it by showing its mediatedness. It consciously meditates on the interrelations between the body and language, the literal and the figurative. This leads to allegorical readings rejected *en masse* by Attridge. Dostoevsky's use of the fictionalised Pavel to tell Matryona that “[s]imple people can't tell the difference between dreams and the real thing” (248), speaks not just about Maria Lebyatkin but about Dostoevsky's own search for immediate meaning or about the readers of *Master of Petersburg* faced with the staged allegory.

## Conclusions

As Stephen Watson claims, “Coetzee wants to create what Barthes would have called a ‘writable’ text, one . . . which does not attempt to reduce the potentially multiple meanings, the ‘plurality’ of the text, by fixing one single meaning for it” (*Colonialism* 17-18). Derek Attridge analyses allegorical readings “varying in their specificity”: the general ones, whereby “the novels are said to represent the truths . . . of the human condition” and the specific ones, driven by the desire to “translate apparently distant locales and periods into the South Africa of the time of writing, and to treat fictional characters as representatives of . . . even particular individuals” (*Ethics* 32-33). This dissertation believes that there is a third one: a structural allegory, in which the open-ended nature of the body and its wide potential for allegorization render precisely the allegory Barthes had in mind, allegory which each reader can endow with meaning, and one never exhausted by the multiplicity of its interpretation. Indeed, this project could be continued to describe problems inherent in reading oneself, the question of ethics or the animal rights. All of these problems can be structured in terms of the body, and all seem to be based on similar conceptual metaphors that create the meaning of the texts.

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